

SOCRATIC IRONY*

‘Irony,’ says Quintilian, is that figure of speech or trope ‘in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood’ (*contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est*).¹ His formula has stood the test of time. It passes intact into Dr Johnson’s dictionary (‘mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words’ [1755]). It survives virtually intact in ours:

Irony is the use of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, [their] literal meaning (Webster’s).

Here is an example, as simple and banal as I can make it: a British visitor, landing in Los Angeles in the middle of a downpour, is heard to remark: ‘What fine weather you are having here.’ The weather is foul, he calls it ‘fine’, and has no trouble making himself understood to mean the contrary of what he says.

Why should we want to put such twists on words, making them mean something so different from their ‘literal’ – i.e. their established, commonly understood – sense that it could even be its opposite? What purpose could this serve? For one thing, humour. For another, mockery. Or, perhaps, both at once, as when Mae West explains why she is declining President Gerald Ford’s invitation to a state dinner at the White House: ‘It’s an awful long way to go for just one meal.’ The joke is *on* someone, a put-down made socially acceptable by being wreathed in a cerebral smile.

A third possible use of irony has been so little noticed² that there is no name for it. Let me identify it by ostension. Paul, normally a good student, is not doing well today. He stumbles through a tutorial, exasperating his tutor, who finally lets fly with, ‘Paul, you are positively brilliant today.’ Paul feels he is being consigned to the outer darkness. But what for? What has he done that is so bad? Has he been rambling and disorganized, loose and sloppy in his diction, ungrammatical, unsyntactical, ill-prepared, uninformed, confused, inconsistent, incoherent? For which sub-class of these failings is he being faulted? He hasn’t been told. He has been handed a riddle and left to solve it for himself. Though certainly not universal, this form of irony is not as rare as one might think. Only from its most artless forms, as in my first example, is it entirely absent. There is a touch of it in the second. Mae West puts us off teasingly from her reasons for turning down that gilt-edged invitation. She is implying: ‘If you are not an utter fool you’ll know this isn’t my real reason. Try guessing what that might be.’

When irony riddles it risks being misunderstood. At the extreme the hearer might

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¹ *Institutio Oratorica* 9.22.44. Much the same definition at 6.2.15 and 8.6.54.

² The samples in D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London, 1969), pp. 15–19, several of them perfect gems, include no pure specimen of this variety. Neither in this nor in that other excellent book, *The Rhetoric of Irony*, by Wayne C. Booth (Chicago, 1974) is this dimension of irony noticed, far less explored.

even miss the irony altogether. If Paul had been fatuously vain, sadly deficient in self-criticism, he could have seized on that remark to preen himself on the thought that he must have said *something* brilliant after all. If so, we would want to say that the deception occurred contrary to the speaker's intent. For if the tutor had meant to speak ironically he could not have meant to deceive. Those two intentions are at odds; in so far as the first is realized the second cannot be. That in fact there was no intention to deceive should be obvious in all three of my examples. And that this is not a contingent feature of these cases can be seen by referring back to the definition at the start. Just from that we can deduce that if the visitor had wanted to deceive someone – say, his wife back in London – that the weather just then was fine in L.A., he could not have done it by saying to her *ironically* over the phone, 'the weather is fine over here'. For to say this ironically is to say it intending that by 'fine' she should understand the contrary; if she did, she would not be deceived: the weather in L.A. was the contrary of 'fine' just then.

This is so basic that a further example may not be amiss. A crook comes by a ring whose stone he knows to be a fake, and he goes round saying to people he is trying to dupe, 'Can I interest you in a diamond ring?' To call this 'irony' would be to show one is all at sea about the meaning of the word. Our definition tells us why: to serve his fraud the literal sense of 'diamond' has to be the one he intends to convey. To see him using the word ironically we would have to conjure up circumstances in which he would have no such intention – say, telling his ten-year-old daughter with a tell-tale glint in his eye, 'Luv, can I interest you in a diamond ring?' Now suppose he had said this to her without that signal. Might we still call it 'irony'? We might, provided we were convinced he was not trying to fool her: she is ten, not five, old enough to know that if that trinket were a diamond ring it would be worth thousands and her father would not let it out of his sight. If we thought this is what he was about – testing her intelligence and good sense – we could still count it irony: a pure specimen of the riddling variety. It would not be disqualified as such if the little girl were to fail the test, for the remark had not been made with the intention to deceive. Similarly, the tutor might have said 'brilliant' well aware there was a chance Paul might miss the irony and mistake censure for praise – knowing this, and for good reasons of his own willing to take that chance.

Once this has sunk in we are in for a surprise when we go back to classical Greece and discover that the intention to deceive, so alien to our word for irony, is normal in its Greek ancestor *εἰρωνεία*, *εἴρων*, *εἰρωνεύομαι*.³ The difference is conspicuous in its first three uses in the surviving corpus of Attic texts – all three of them in Aristophanes. In *Wasps* 173, *ὥς εἰρωνικῶς* refers to Philocleon's lying to get his donkey out of the family compound to make a dicast out of him. In *Birds* 1210, it is applied to Iris for lying her way into the city of the birds. In *Clouds* 415, *εἴρων*, sandwiched in between two words for 'slippery', *μάσθλης*, *γλοιός*, figures 'in a catalogue of abusive terms against a man who is a tricky opponent in a lawsuit' (K. Dover, *ad loc.*).⁴ We meet more of the same in fourth-century usage. Demosthenes (I *Phil.* 7) uses it of citizens who prevaricate to evade irksome civic duty. Plato uses it in the *Laws* (901e) when prescribing penalties for heretics: the hypocritical ones he calls *τὸ εἰρωνικὸν εἶδος* of the class; for them he legislates death or worse; those equally wrong-headed but honestly outspoken are let off with confinement and

³ On *εἴρων* as *Schimpfwort* in its common use in the classical period see the groundbreaking paper of O. Ribbeck, 'Über den Begriff des *Eiron*', *Rhein. Mus.* 31 (1876), 381ff. [hereafter 'Ribbeck']: it has not been superseded by later studies which I shall not undertake to review in the present essay.

⁴ In his invaluable edition of the *Clouds* (Oxford, 1968).

admonition. In the *Sophist*, pronouncing Socrates' dialectic a superior form of *sophistikē* (ἡ γένει γενναία σοφιστική, 231b), Plato contrasts it with the run-of-the-mill *sophistikē* practised by ordinary sophists: these are the people he puts into the εἰρωνικὸν εἶδος of the art; not Socrates, but his arch-rivals, whom Plato thinks impostors, are the ones he calls εἴρωνες (268a–b).

How entrenched in disingenuousness is the most ordinary use of εἴρων at this time we can see from the picture of the εἴρων in Aristotle and Theophrastus. Strikingly different though the εἴρων is in each – odious in Theophrastus, amiable in Aristotle⁵ – in one respect he is the same in both: he wilfully prevaricates in what he says about himself. Aristotle takes a lenient view of such dissembling in the case of Socrates. Casting him as an εἴρων, Aristotle contrasts him with his opposite, the braggart (ἀλαζών), and finds him incomparably more attractive, because the qualities he disclaims are the prestigious ones and his reason for disclaiming them – 'to avoid pompousness' – is commendable (*N.E.* 1127b23–6), though still, it should be noted, not admirable in Aristotle's view. When he expresses admiration for Socrates' personal character he shifts to an entirely different trait: it is for indifference to the contingencies of fate (ἀπάθεια), not at all for εἰρωνεία, that he calls Socrates μεγαλόφυχος (*Po. An.* 98a16–24; cf. *D.L.* 6.2). In Theophrastus the εἴρων is flayed mercilessly,⁶ portrayed as systematically deceitful,⁷ venomously double-faced,⁸ adept at self-serving camouflage.

This too is how Thrasymachus views Socrates in that famous passage in the *Republic* (337a) in which he refers to Socrates' 'customary' εἰρωνεία:

ΤΙ 'Heracles!' he said. 'This is Socrates' habitual shamming (εἰρωνεία). I had predicted to these people that you would refuse to answer and would sham (εἰρωνεύσοιο) and would do anything but answer if the question were put to you.'

Thrasymachus is charging that Socrates lies in saying he has no answer of his own to the question he is putting to others: he most certainly does, Thrasymachus is protesting, but pretends he hasn't to keep it under wraps so he can have a field-day pouncing on ours and tearing it to shreds while his is shielded from attack. So there is no excuse for rendering εἰρωνεία here by 'irony' (Bloom, Grube, Shorey):⁹ if that translation were correct, lying would be a standard form of irony.¹⁰

From the behaviour of εἰρωνεία and εἰρωνεύειν in all of the foregoing Attic texts from Aristophanes to Theophrastus one could easily jump to a wrong conclusion: *because* they are so commonly used to denote sly, intentionally deceptive speech or conduct throughout this period, *must* they be always so used of Socrates by Plato?

⁵ In his reference to Socrates in the *N.E.*, *E.E.*, and *M.M.*, but perhaps not in the *Rhet.*, where εἰρωνεία is reckoned a 'disdainful' trait (καταφρονητικόν, 1179b31–2).

⁶ 'Such men are more to be avoided than adders' (I, *sub fin.*).

⁷ 'He pretends (προσποιέσθαι) not to have heard what he heard, not to have seen what he saw, to have no recollection of the thing to which he agreed' (I.5).

⁸ 'He will praise to their faces those he attacks behind their backs' (I.2). I find it astonishing that Friedländer (*Plato*, I [English tr., New York, 1938], p. 138) should remark that Theophrastus ('the moral botanist') portrays, but 'does not evaluate', irony: could there be a more emphatic devaluation than the remarks quoted in this and the two preceding notes? By leaving Socrates out of it, Theophrastus feels free to vent on the εἴρων the scorn he well deserves in the common view.

⁹ Bloom and Grube take this to be the sense of both εἰρωνεία and εἰρωνεύσοιο. Shorey too takes 'irony' to be the sense of εἰρωνεία (referring to *Symp.* 216e: to be discussed below); but he shifts to 'dissemble' for the latter, offering no explanation for the shift. I suspect he is confused about the meaning of the English word 'irony', taking it to mean 'dissembling'. (Translations and commentaries to which I refer by name of author only are listed at the end of the paper.)

¹⁰ For correct translation consult Cornford ('shamming ignorance'), Robin ('feinted ignorance'). That 'shamming', 'feigning' is the sense should be completely clear from the context.

This is what many noted Hellenists have assumed: Burnet,¹¹ Wilamowitz,¹² Guthrie¹³ among them. Let me point out how unsafe is this kind of inference. From the fact that a word is used in a given sense in a multitude of cases it does not follow that it cannot be used in a sharply different sense in others. Such statistical inferences are always risky. This one is certainly wrong. Consider the following:

T2 *Gorg.* 489d5–e4: [a] Socrates: ‘Since by “better” you don’t mean “stronger”, tell me again from the beginning what you mean. And teach me more gently, admirable man, so that I won’t run away from your school.’ Callicles: ‘You are mocking me (ἐῤῥωνεύη).’ [b] Socrates: ‘No, by Zethus, whom you used earlier to do a lot of mocking against me (πολλὰ ἐῤῥωνεύου πρὸς με).’

In part (a) Callicles is protesting Socrates’ casting himself as a pupil of his – a transparent irony, since Callicles no doubt feels that, on the contrary, it is Socrates who has been playing the school-master right along. In (b) Socrates is retorting that Callicles had used the figure of Zethus to mock him earlier on, associating him with the latter’s brother, the pathetic Amphion, who ‘despite a noble nature, puts on the semblance of a silly juvenile’ (485e7–486a1). In both cases mockery is being protested without the slightest imputation of intentional deceit. In neither case is there any question of shamming, slyness or evasiveness – no more so than if they had resorted to crude abuse, like calling each other ‘pig’ or ‘jack-ass’.¹⁴

No less instructive for my purpose is the following from the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (a late fourth-century treatise of uncertain authorship):¹⁵

¹¹ Burnet *ad* Plato, *Apol.* 38a1: ‘The words ἐῤῥων, ἐῤῥωνεία, ἐῤῥωνεύομαι (in Plato) are only used of Socrates by his opponents, and have always an unfavourable meaning.’ He is not overlooking ἐῤῥωνενομένην *ad* *Apol.* 38a1 (taking it, quite rightly, to mean ‘regarding this pretence as a sly evasion’; the same sense in R. E. Allen’s translation, ‘I am being sly and dishonest’). But he is ignoring (or misunderstanding?) both of the notable uses of the word in Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium* (to be discussed below).

¹² Platon (3rd ed., 1948), p. 451 n. 1: ‘Wo [die Ironie] dem Sokrates beigelegt wird [im Platon] geschieht es immer als Vorwurf, auch von Alkibiades, *Symp.* 216c.’ Neither he nor Burnet (preceding note) takes any notice of Ribbeck’s discussion of *Rep.* 337a, which captures exactly the sense of εἰωθῦν ἐῤῥωνεία here.

¹³ In Plato it retains its bad sense, in the mouth either of a bitter opponent like Thrasymachus or of one pretending to be angry at the way in which Socrates deceives everyone as to his real character (Alcibiades *ad* *Symp.* 216e, 218d), *History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969) [hereafter ‘*HGPh*’] III, p. 446. He is taking no notice of *Gorg.* 489d–e (to be discussed directly in the text above) and assumes that in *Rep.* 337a above εἰωθῦν ἐῤῥωνεία has the same sense as does ἐῤῥωνικῶς . . . εἰωθότως in *Symp.* 218d and μάλα ἐῤῥωνικῶς in *Symp.* 218d6.

¹⁴ My translation follows Croiset–Bodin. Woodhead’s ‘you are ironical’ is acceptable in [a], where the mockery is ironical: it takes the form of saying something contrary to what the speaker believes to be true, but not at [b], where this is not the case. Irwin’s ‘sly’ will not do: there is nothing particularly ‘cunning, wily or hypocritical’ (*O.E.D.* for ‘sly’) in the tone or content. We must also reject Ribbeck’s understanding of the sense at [a]: inexplicably, he reads ‘chicaniren’ into ἐῤῥωνεύη at [a]. But there is nothing wrong with his gloss on ἐῤῥωνεύου at [b] (‘Art der Verhöhnung durch nicht aufrichtig gemeinten, unwahres Lob’), rightly connecting the use of ἐῤῥωνεύειν here with Pollux 2.78, καὶ τὸν εῤῥωνα ἔνιοι μυκτῆρα καλοῦσι, and the sillographer Timon’s reference to Socrates (fr. 25d, *ap.* D.L. 2.19), μυκτῆρ ῥητορόμυκτος ὑπαττικός ἐῤῥωνευτής. Ribbeck remarks a *propos* of [b]: ‘so muss der gangbar Begriff des ἐῤῥωνεύεσθαι ein weiterer gewesen sein, als man gewöhnlich annimmt’ (loc. cit.) He should have specified more definitely this ‘wider’ use. That it is to express mockery pure and simple without any insinuation of deceit Ribbeck does not seem to have grasped clearly, else why ‘chicaniren’ as the sense at [a]?

¹⁵ Long attributed to Aristotle (included in the Berlin edition of Aristotle’s works), this treatise then came to be ascribed to Anaximenes of Lampsacus, a contemporary of Theophrastus (see the introduction to the treatise by H. Rackham in his translation of it in the Loeb Classical Library: *Aristotle, Problems* II and *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* [London, 1937], pp. 258ff.). The

T3 'Εἰρωνεία is [a] saying something while pretending (προσποιούμενον) not to say it or [b] calling things by contrary names (21).'

At [a] we get nothing new: εἰρωνεύειν is one of the many tricks of the trade this handbook offers the rhetorician.¹⁶ Not so at [b], as becomes even clearer in his example:

T4 Evidently, those good people (οἱ μὲν οἱ χρηστοί) have done much evil to the allies, while we, the bad ones (ἡμεῖς δ' οἱ φαῦλοι) have caused them many benefits (loc. cit.)

The way χρηστοί is used here reminds us of the line Aristophanes gives Strepsiades in the opening monologue of the *Clouds*: 'ὁ χρηστὸς οὐτοσὶ νεανίας', the old man says of his good-for-nothing son.¹⁷ This is irony of the purest water: mockery without the slightest insinuation of deceit.

Can we make sense of this state of affairs: in a mass of Attic texts (eight of those to which I have referred; I could have added many more of the same ilk) we find εἰρωνεία implying wilful misrepresentation; yet in the ninth we see it standing for mockery entirely devoid of any such connotation and so too again in part [b] of the tenth, where a rhetorician who is thoroughly at home in fourth-century Attic usage gives a definition of εἰρωνεία which anticipates Quintilian so perfectly that the two definitions are precisely equivalent: each is a description of the same speech-act, viewed from the speaker's point of view in T3[b], from the hearer's in Quintilian. Is this linguistic phenomenon understandable? Yes, perfectly so, if we remind ourselves of the parallel behaviour of our own word 'pretending'. To say that a malingerer is 'pretending' to be sick and that a con man is 'pretending' to have high connections is to say that these people are deceivers: 'to allege falsely' is the basic use of 'to pretend'. Even so, there are contexts where 'to pretend' by-passes false allegation because it by-passes falsehood, as when we say that the children are 'pretending' that their coloured chips are money ('pretend-money' they call them) or that their dolls are sick or die or go to school. In just the same way we could say that the crook in my example is 'pretending' that the stone on the trinket he offers his daughter is a diamond, which is as far as anything could be from his 'pretending' it is a diamond when putting it up to the people he is trying to hook. That the latter should be the most common and, in point of logic, the primary use of 'pretending' does nothing to block a secondary use of the word, tangential to the first – a subsidiary use of 'pretending' which is altogether innocent of intentional deceit, predicated on that 'willing suspension of disbelief' by which we enter the world of imaginative fiction in art or play. This is the sense of 'pretending' we could invoke to elucidate ironical diction, as in Mae West's remark: we could say she is 'pretending' that the length of the journey is her reason for declining, which would be patently absurd if 'pretending' were being used in its primary sense; there is no false allegation because there is no allegation: she is pulling our leg.

ascription is far from certain, but its date cannot be much later. Its linguistic and political ambience is that of fourth-century Athens, echoing Isocrates' *Techne Rhetorike*. Eight fragments of the treatise turn up in a papyrus dated by its editors in the first half of the third century (Grenfell & Hunt, *Hibeh Papyri*, Pt 1, No. 26, pp. 114ff.).

¹⁶ E. M. Cope (in his *Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric* [London, 1867], pp. 401ff.) describes the form of persuasion recommended by the treatise as 'a system of tricks, shifts and evasions, showing an utter indifference to right and wrong, truth and falsehood'.

¹⁷ Should the reader be reminded that the occurrence of ironical speech-acts is independent of the availability of a description of them as such in the speaker's language? The use of irony, as distinct from reflection upon it, is no doubt as old as the hills. We can imagine a caveman offering a tough piece of steak to his mate with the remark, 'Try this tender morsel'.

This, I suggest, gives a good explanation of the fact that though *εἴρων*, *εἰρωνεύειν*, *εἰρωνεία* are commonly used to imply wilful disingenuousness, even so, *pace* Wilamowitz, Burnet, Guthrie,¹⁸ Dover,¹⁹ they are susceptible of an alternative use which is completely free of such evocation. What happened, I suggest, is this. When *εἰρωνεία* gained currency in Attic speech (by the last third of the fifth century at the latest), its semantic field was as wide as is that of ‘pretending’ in present day English, and *εἴρων*, *εἰρωνεύειν*, *εἰρωνεία* had strongly unfavourable connotations – were used as terms of denigration or abuse – because the first of those two uses predominated heavily over the second: to be called an *εἴρων* would be uncomplimentary at best, insulting at the worst. But turn the pages of history some three hundred years – go from Greece in the fourth century B.C. to Rome in the first, and you will find a change that would be startling if long familiarity had not inured us to it. The word has now lost its disagreeable overtones. When Cicero, who loves to make transliterated Greek enrich his mother tongue, produces in this fashion the new Latin word, *ironia*, the import has an altogether different tone. Laundered and deodorized, it now betokens the height of urbanity, elegance, and good taste:

T5 Cicero, *de Oratore* 2.67 (269–70): Urbana etiam dissimulatio est, cum alia dicuntur ac sentias...Socratem opinor in hac *ironia* dissimulantiaque longe lepore et humanitate omnibus praestitisse. Genus est perelegans et cum gravitate salsum...²⁰

And when Quintilian, two generations later, consolidating Cicero’s use of the term, encapsulates its meaning in the definition cited above, we are no longer in any doubt that *ironia* has shed completely its disreputable past, has already become in their prose²¹ what it will come to be in the languages and sensibility of modern Europe: speech used to express something contrary to what is said – the perfect medium for mockery innocent of deceit. Subsidiary in the use of the parent word in classical Greece, this now becomes the standard use. *εἰρωνεία* has metastasized into irony.

Exactly what made this happen we cannot say: we lack the massive linguistic data we would need to track the upward mobility of the word. What, I submit, we can say is *who* made it happen: Socrates. Not that he ever made a frontal assault upon the word. There is no reason to believe he ever did. In none of our sources does he ever make *εἰρωνεία* the *F* in a ‘What is *F*?’ question or bring it by some other means under his elenctic hammer. He changes the word not by theorizing about it but by creating something new for it to mean: a new form of life realized in himself which was the very incarnation of *εἰρωνεία* in that second of its contemporary uses, as innocent of intentional deceit as is a child’s feigning that the play chips are money, as free of shamming as are honest games, though, unlike games, serious in its mockery (*cum gravitate salsum*), dead earnest in its playfulness (*severe ludens*), a previously unknown,

¹⁸ For Burnet, Wilamowitz, Guthrie see, respectively, nn. 11, 12, 13 above.

¹⁹ Cf. his gloss on *Symp.* 216e4: ‘*εἰρωνεία* (unlike “irony”) is “mock-modesty”, “pretended ignorance”; in *Rep.* 337a Thrasymachus speaks (in no friendly tone) of “Socrates’ accustomed *εἰρωνεία*”.’ He is assuming that *εἰρωνεία* is used in the same sense in both passages.

²⁰ If we translate *dissimulatio* here by ‘dissembling’ (as we may, with good warrant from the dictionaries), we should bear in mind that *deceitful* concealment, normally conveyed by the English word, is completely absent from the figure of speech Cicero has in view. Deceitful speech would not be what he calls ‘*urbane* dissimulation... where the whole tenor of your speech shows that you are gravely jesting (*severe ludens*) in speaking differently from what you think’ (loc. cit.).

²¹ Though not perhaps in that of their Greek contemporaries, as Professor Fred Ahl pointed out to me when I presented this essay at Cornell. How soon the change came to be shared by the Greek rhetoricians, whose diction was likely to be governed more strictly by classical models, is a topic calling for special research which falls outside the scope of the present study.

unimagined type of personality, so arresting to his contemporaries and so memorable for ever after that the time would come, centuries after his death, when educated people would hardly be able to think of *ironia* without its bringing Socrates to mind. And as this happened the meaning of the word altered. The image of Socrates as the paradigmatic *eirōn* effected a change in the previous connotation of the word.²² Through the eventual influence of the after-image of its Socratic incarnation, the use which had been marginal in the classical period became its central, its normal and normative, use: *εἰρωνεία* became *ironia*.

I have made a very large claim. What is there in our sources to show that Socrates was really the arch-ironist Cicero and Quintilian thought him?

Nothing in Aristophanes. The anti-hero of the *Clouds* is many things to many men, but an ironist to none: too solemn by half as natural philosopher, sage or hierophant, too knavish²³ as a preceptor of the young. Nor is he represented as an ironist in the sideswipe at him in the *Frogs* (1491–9).²⁴ We turn to Xenophon: At first it looks as though here too we shall get nothing better. Through most of the *Memorabilia* this tirelessly didactic, monotonously earnest, Socrates appears to have no more jesting, mocking or riddling in his soul than does the atheistic natural philosopher and ‘high-priest of subtlest poppycock’²⁵ in the Aristophanic caricature. But once in a while we get a flash of something different,²⁶ and then, in chapter 11 of Book III, we get a big break. Here Socrates turns skittish and goes to pay a visit to the beautiful Theodote.²⁷ He offers her suggestions on how she might enlarge her clientele and she invites him to become her partner in the pursuit of *philoi*. He demurs, pleading much public business (*δημόσια*), and adding:

T6 Xenophon, *Mem.* 3.11.16: I have my own girlfriends (*philai*) who won’t leave me day or night, learning from me filtres and enchantments.

Since she is meant to see, and does see, that these ‘girlfriends’ are philosophers, depressingly male and middle-aged, there is no question of her being misled into thinking that her visitor has a stable of pretty women to whom he teaches love-potions. So here at last we do get something Cicero and Quintilian would recognize as *ironia*, though hardly a gem of the genre: its humour is too arch and strained.

After the visit to Theodote, Socrates in the *Memorabilia* resumes his platitudinously

²² A change so drastic as to eclipse the original meaning of the word from Cicero’s and Quintilian’s view. The occultation seems total: from what they say about *ironia* we would never guess that in texts they knew well its Greek original had been a *Schimpfwort*. The authority of the Socratic paradigm becomes so definitive for Cicero that he is content to understand by the word simply ‘that *ironia*...found in Socrates, which he deploys in the dialogues of Plato, Xenophon and Aeschines’ (*Brutus* 292). And when Quintilian remarks that ‘*ironia* may characterize a man’s whole life’ he refers (only) to Socrates (*Inst. Or.* 9.2.46).

²³ Though he does not himself inculcate crooked argument, he panders to the demand for it. He keeps both the *δίκαιος* and the *ἀδίκος λόγος* on the premises and the client has his choice.

²⁴ The portrait is now appreciably different: outside the Thinkery (else the question of an ordinary Athenian picking a seat next to him [*Σωκράτει παρακαθήμενον*, 1491–2] would not arise), no longer a sinister figure, Socrates is still a quibbler whose hair-splitting solemnities (*ἐπὶ σεμνοῖσι λόγοις | καὶ σκαριφήσμοις λήρων*, 1496–7) engulf his interlocutors in tasteless triviality. No hint of irony in this pretentious idler’s chatter.

²⁵ *λεπτοτάτων λήρων ἱερῶν*, 359, in Arrowsmith’s amusingly inventive translation.

²⁶ Kierkegaard (*The Concept of Irony* [Eng. tr. 1965: to be cited hereafter only by the author’s name], pp. 58–9 and 64) notes flashes of irony in the dialogue with Charicles (1.2.36) and Hippias (4.4.6).

²⁷ Here Kierkegaard’s taste, usually faultless, deserts him. He finds the episode ‘disgusting’ (pp. 61–2).

wholesome moralizing. But he snaps out of it for good in Xenophon's *Symposium*.²⁸ There we see what he might have been in the *Memorabilia* if the severely apologetic aims of that work had not darkened the hues of its Socratic portrait into shades of gray. The convivial *mise-en-scène* of the *Symposium* prompts Xenophon to paint bright, even garish, colours into the picture. Asked what is that art of his in which he takes great pride he says it is the art of the procurer (*μαστροπός*, 4.56). Challenged to a beauty contest with the handsome Critoboulus (5.1ff.), he pleads the superior beauty of his own ugliest features – his snub nose, his oversized flaring nostrils – on the ground that useful is beautiful (5.6). Here we see a new form of irony, unprecedented in Greek literature to my knowledge, which is peculiarly Socratic. For want of a better name, I shall call it 'complex irony' to contrast it with the simple ironies I have been dealing with in this essay heretofore. In 'simple' irony what is said is simply not what is meant. In 'complex' irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant. Thus when Socrates says he is a 'procurer' he does not, and yet does, mean what he says. He obviously does not in the common, vulgar, sense of the word. But nonetheless he does in another sense in which he gives the word *ad hoc*, making 'procurer' mean simply someone 'who makes the procured attractive to those whose company he is to keep' (4.57). Xenophon's Socrates can claim he does exactly that. Again, when he says that his flat, pushed-in, nose, and his oversized flaring nostrils are beautiful, he does not, and yet does, mean what he says. In the ordinary sense of that word he would be the first to deny they are. But if by 'beautiful' he were allowed to mean 'well made or constituted for their required function' (5.4), then he would have us know that his particular sort of eyes and nose are superlatively beautiful: his eyes, unlike the deep-set ones of fashion-models, can see sidewise, not merely straight ahead; his nose is a more efficient vent than that of the currently admired profile (5.5–6).

Undoubtedly then there is an authentic streak of irony in Xenophon's depiction of Socrates. But for the purpose of assuring us that it was really Socrates who played the critical role in the mutation of *eirōneia* into irony, what Xenophon tells us about Socrates would still be defective in two ways.

In the first place, the ironies Xenophon puts into the portrait have little doctrinal significance. They contribute nothing vital to the delineation of Socrates' philosophy, because Xenophon systematically ignores those very features of it which can only be understood as complex ironies of the sort he illustrates in making his hero say he is a procurer and has a charming nose. I mean, of course, the two great philosophical paradoxes of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and of teaching. Each of these is intelligible only as a complex irony. When he professes to have no knowledge he both does and does not mean what he says. In one sense of 'knowledge', the traditional one, in which it implies certainty, Socrates means just what he says: he wants it to be understood that in the moral domain there is not a single proposition he claims to know with certainty. But in another sense of 'knowledge', where the word refers to justified true belief, justified through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument, there are many propositions he does claim to know. So too, I would argue, Socrates' parallel disavowal of teaching should be understood as a complex irony. In the conventional sense, where to 'teach' is simply to transfer knowledge from the teacher's to the learner's mind, Socrates means what he says: that sort of 'teaching'

²⁸ For shrewd appreciation of irony in this work see the comments on the goings-on at the drinking party in W. E. Higgins, *Xenophon the Athenian* (Albany, N.Y., 1977), pp. 15–20. Full discussion of the same material also in Emma Edelstein, *Xenophontisches und Platonisches Bild des Sokrates* (Berlin, 1935), pp. 11–12, though curiously enough she does not perceive it as irony.

he does not want to do and cannot do. But in the sense which *he* would give to ‘teaching’ – engaging would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and give them opportunity to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back – in that sense of ‘teaching’ Socrates would want to say he is a teacher, the best of teachers in his time, the only true teacher.

In the second place, the words *εἶρων*, *εἰρωνεία*, *εἰρωνεύομαι* are never applied to Socrates by Xenophon himself or by anyone else in his account of Socrates. If we had only his picture of Socrates we would have no reason to think that Socrates’ contemporaries had thought of *εἰρωνεία* as a distinctively Socratic trait. That noun and its cognate verb, so conspicuous in the attack on Socrates by Thrasymachus in T1 above, are omitted when an identical reproach is ventilated by Hippias in the *Memorabilia*. This is how the complaint is now made to read:

T7 Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.4.9: You are content to make a laughing-stock of others, questioning and refuting them, while you yourself will not submit to questioning or state your own opinion about anything.

The reference to Socrates’ ‘habitual *eirōneia*’ with which Thrasymachus’ attack begins T1 above, and the verb *εἰρωνεύοιο* that follows, have dropped out.

Fortunately, we have Plato’s Socratic dialogues. Here what Xenophon has denied us is supplied in such abundance that to go through all of it would be work for a whole book. Forced to be harshly selective, I shall concentrate on one piece of it – the half dozen pages or so that make up the speech of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Despite the provenance of this composition from a dialogue of Plato’s middle period, its Socrates is unmistakably the philosopher of the earlier ones: he voices that total disavowal of knowledge (T15 below) which separates the Socrates who speaks for Socrates from the *Apology* through the first part of the *Meno* from Plato’s proxy in what follows. The reported dialogue with Diotima put into the mouth of Socrates in the *Symposium* is as strong an affirmation of Plato’s *un*-Socratic doctrine, the theory of transcendent Forms, as is anything he ever wrote. But Alcibiades has not heard that discourse. He joins the banquet after Socrates has finished. In that last speech of the *Symposium* Plato brings back to life the earlier *un*-Platonic Socrates as surely as he does also in Book I of the *Republic*. He ushers us into the *Republic* through a Socratic portico and escorts us out of the *Symposium* through a Socratic back-porch.

The key sentence in Alcibiades’ speech is

T8 *Symp.* 216e4–5: *εἰρωνευόμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων πάντα τὸν βίον πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διατελεῖ.*

How shall we read the first word? When Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 9.2.46) remarks that *ironia* may characterize not just a text or a speech but ‘an entire life’ (*vita universa*) Socrates is his only example. So we know how *he* would read *εἰρωνευόμενος* in this text. But time and again it is read differently by scholars. Guthrie²⁹ takes it to refer to ‘the way in which Socrates deceives everyone as to his real character’. Dover,³⁰ assimilating it to T1 above, denying that the word means ‘irony’ here, takes it to refer to Socrates’ pretended ignorance. Suzy Groden translates,

He *pretends* [my emphasis] to be ignorant and spends his whole life putting people on.
and W. Hamilton,

He spends his whole life *pretending* [my emphasis] and playing with people.

²⁹ *HGPh* 3, p. 446.

³⁰ See n. 19 above.

If we follow Quintilian, we shall understand Alcibiades to be saying that Socrates is a life-long ironist. If we follow Guthrie & Co. we shall understand him to be saying that Socrates is a life-long deceiver. Since, as I explained above, the latter was the most common of the current uses of the word, the presumption should indeed be that these scholars are right. So if one believes that, on the contrary, Quintilian's reading is the right one, one must assume the burden of proof. I gladly assume it.

But I must start with another sentence in Alcibiades' speech which is almost as important for my thesis, for here again the critical word is applied not to what Socrates says on this or that occasion but to his usual, characteristic, way of speaking:

T9 *Symp.* 218d6–7: καὶ οὗτος ἀκούσας, μάλα εἰρωνικῶς καὶ σφόδρα ἑαυτοῦ τε καὶ εἰωθότως ἔλεξεν.

Here Groden translates,

He answered in that extremely *ironical* [my emphasis] way he always uses, very characteristic of him.

and Hamilton,

He had a thoroughly characteristic reply in his usual *ironical* [my emphasis] style.

Thus of their own accord both of them now give me all I want. Do they realize what they are doing? Do they see that they are welshing on their previous translation of εἰρωνευόμενος in **T8**? I don't know and don't need to know. It suffices that here Plato's text gives them no other choice.

Let us recall the context. **T9** comes at the climax of the *pièce de résistance* of Alcibiades' speech: his narration of an episode from his distant youth, when he was still in his 'bloom' – that final stage in a boy's transition to manhood, which in that culture marked the peak of his physical attractiveness to males older than himself. The story begins as follows:

T10 *Symp.* 217a: Believing that he was seriously smitten by my bloom, I thought it a windfall, a wonderful piece of luck, since by allowing him my favours I would be able to hear from him all he knew.

The project of swapping sex for moral wisdom may seem incredible today. It would not have seemed so *in the least* to someone in Alcibiades' circumstances at the time. Let me enumerate them:

(1) As we know from Pausanias' speech in the *Symposium*, this is the norm (νόμος)³¹ in the higher form of pederastic love: the boy gives 'favours', the man gives intellectual and moral improvement (218d6–219a).

(2) Alcibiades already had (and knew he had: 217a5–6) that asset to which he was to owe throughout his life so much of his unprincipled success: stunning beauty and grace.³²

(3) We know from other Platonic dialogues (*Prot.* 309a; *Gorg.* 481d; *Charm.* 155c–e; *Meno* 76c1–2) and from Xenophon too (*Symp.* 8.2) that Socrates has a high susceptibility to male beauty to which a sexy teenager could hardly have failed to resonate.

³¹ *Symp.* 182a–e, 183c, 184a–b, on which see K. J. Dover, 'Eros and Nomos', *BICS* 11 (1964), 31–42, and *Greek Homosexuality* [hereafter 'GH'] (London, 1978), 'Pursuit and Flight', pp. 81–91.

³² Cf. W. Ferguson in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, 5 (1935), p. 263: 'Arrestingly handsome, he received from men in Athens the recognition and privileges ordinarily given in other societies to extraordinary beauty in women; and his insolence he draped in such charm of manner that, when he showed respect for neither gods nor man, age nor authority, guardian nor wife, the outrageousness of the act was often forgotten and only the air of the actor remembered.'

(4) Socrates does not answer questions, does not expound his ‘wisdom’. Pieces of it spill out in elenctic arguments, leaving the interlocutor wondering how much more is being held back.

(5) We know that the speaker is a highly acratia personality. He starts his whole speech with a confession:

T11 *Symp.* 216b3–5: I know that I cannot contradict him and I should do as he bids, but when I am away from him I am defeated by the adulation of the crowd.

There is no reason to think he had been different as a teenager.

Put these five things together and it should not seem strange if a boy who longs to become *kalos kagathos* should get it into his head that the key to what he wanted was hidden away in that vast undisclosed store of the wisdom of Socrates who might be induced to slip him the key were he to offer as a *quid pro quo* something as irresistibly attractive to all the men of his acquaintance as was his own superlative ‘bloom’. He pursues the project methodically, going through all the ploys in the current repertoire of homosexual seduction. But nothing works. Socrates remains friendly and distant. When Alcibiades waits to hear the sweet nothings of love all he gets is elenctic argument – more of the same old thing. Finally he sets Socrates up and blurts out his proposition. **T9** above introduces the response he gets:

T12 *Symp.* 218d6–219a1: He heard me out and then *μάλα ἐῤῥωνικῶς*, in his most characteristic, habitual manner [**T9** above], he said: ‘Dear Alcibiades, it looks as though you are not stupid (*φᾱῦλος*), if what you say about me is true and there really is in me some power which could make you a better man: you must be seeing something inconceivably beautiful in me, enormously superior to your good looks. If that is what you see and you want to exchange beauty for beauty, you mean to take a huge advantage of me: you are trying to get true beauty in exchange for seeming beauty – “gold for brass” [*Il.* 6.236]...’

Here, I submit, it is incontestably clear that ‘ironically’ *has* to be the sense of *ἐῤῥωνικῶς*, for the context gives absolutely no foothold to the notion of pretence or deceit. Socrates is turning down flat the proposed exchange, saying it is a swindle. He starts off with a simple irony, saying to Alcibiades, ‘you are not stupid,’ when he clearly means: you *are* stupid, very stupid: what could be more stupid than to think I would fall for a barter of gold for brass? When such a thing happens in those verses of the *Iliad* he echoes here – Glaucus exchanging his golden armour for one of brass – the poet explains that ‘Zeus had taken away his wits’ [*Il.* 6.234]. Socrates is saying to Alcibiades: I would have to be out of my head to buy your proposal; what a fool you must be, a complete ass, to think you could pull it off.

He winds up with a ‘complex’³³ irony:

T13 *Symp.* 219a1–4: But look more closely, blessed boy, lest you have missed that I am nothing. The mind’s vision becomes acute only when the eyesight has passed its peak, and you are still far from that.

Alcibiades is told that the ‘gold’ he has been looking for – the sort of wisdom that could be handed over in a swap – isn’t there after all. That sort of wisdom Socrates does not have, though he does have another sort, which Alcibiades could have for free if he would seek it for himself, looking to Socrates not as a guru but as a partner in the search. To find deception anywhere in this speech we would have to plant it there ourselves: there is not a shadow of the will to mislead in what Socrates has said to Alcibiades *μάλα ἐῤῥωνικῶς*.

Does that settle the sense of *ἐῤῥωνεύμενος* at **T8**? No, but it does create a powerful

³³ Cf. p. 86 above.

presumption that there too the sense is the same. It would be most unlikely that *εἰρωνικῶς* would be used as we have now seen it used in T9 if just two Stephanus pages earlier *εἰρωνευόμενος πάντα τὸν βίον... διατελεῖ* had carried the thought that Socrates went through life 'deceiv[ing] everyone as to his real character'.³⁴ So let us look as closely into the context there – the paragraphs in Alcibiades' speech which precede immediately the seduction story. They are pursuing the famous simile with which the whole speech had begun:

T14 *Symp.* 215a7–b3: I assert that he is very like those Sileni that sit in the workshops of the statuaries... who, when opened into two, turn out to have images of gods inside.

This is the picture of a man who lives behind a screen – a mysterious, enigmatic figure, a man nobody knows: 'You should know that none of you know him' (216c–d), says Alcibiades to Socrates' friends. To say this is not at all to imply that Socrates has been deceiving them: to be reserved and to be deceitful are not the same thing. All we can get from the simile is concealment, not deceit. Even so, we have to ask if Alcibiades does not insinuate deceit in his own explication of the simile:

T15 *Symp.* 216d2–5: You see that [a] Socrates is erotically attracted to beautiful youths, always hanging around them, smitten by them; and again [b] that he knows nothing and is ignorant of everything. Isn't this like Silenus? Enormously so.

The allusion to Socrates' eroticism in part [a] of this text is amply corroborated elsewhere in Plato and in Xenophon as well.³⁵ But here, after putting Socrates' bloom-chasing into the centre of the picture, Alcibiades seems to take it all back:

T16 *Symp.* 216d7–e1: You should know he does not care at all if someone is beautiful: you wouldn't believe how he scorns that sort of thing...

He says the same thing again no less than four times at the climax of the attempted seduction:

T17 *Symp.* 219c3–5: ... he was so superior, so scornful and derisive of my bloom, so insulting of it...

So on one hand we are told that Socrates is 'smitten' by male beauty, on the other, that he is utterly scornful of it. Isn't this what Guthrie might have cited as good reason for reading deceit into *εἰρωνευόμενος* at T8? If Socrates is so contemptuous of such beauty, how could his pursuit of it be anything but a sham?

This is a highly pertinent question. I must meet it head on. To do so I must say something about Socratic *erōs*, distinguishing it from Platonic *erōs*, with which it is so often conflated – most recently in Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* (1978) and again in Volume two of Foucault's *Histoire de la Sexualité* (1984). There are four differences:

(1) In Platonic *erōs* what is loved in a beautiful boy is the transcendent form of Beauty whose image he is. Socrates' ontology has no transcendent forms. So what he loves in a beautiful body is a beautiful boy, and that is all.

(2) In Platonic *erōs* passionate body-contact is normal: the lovers in the *Phaedrus* touch, kiss, 'lie down together', and 'sleep together' (255e).³⁶ In the Socratic counterpart erotic intimacy is limited to mind and eye contact.³⁷

³⁴ So Guthrie: n. 29 above.

³⁵ References in Dover, *GH*, pp. 154–5.

³⁶ This physical intimacy, so explicit in the text of the *Phaedrus*, is seldom noticed in accounts of Platonic *erōs*. It is ignored in comment on the passage where we would most expect it: Wilamowitz (n. 12 above), pp. 368–9; Guthrie, *HGPh* iv pp. 404–6. Earlier translations blunt the force of Plato's words: in Jowett *συγκατακείσθαι* becomes 'embrace', ἐν τῇ συγκαομῇσει, 'when they meet together'.

³⁷ In Xenophon, Socrates' fear of physical contact with an attractive youth is obsessive (to kiss a pretty face is 'to become forthwith a slave instead of a free man', *Mem.* 1.3.11; a momentary

(3) While both Plato and Socrates interdict terminal gratification, they do so for different reasons. In Plato's case these are ultimately metaphysical, for he regards the soul's conjunction with the body as a doom calling for a life-long discipline whose aim is to detach soul from body, so far as possible, in the present life and liberate the soul from the wheel of reincarnation after death; sexual bliss defeats this endeavour, nails the soul to the body, distorts its sense of reality (*Phaedo* 83d). This doctrine is utterly foreign to Socrates. In none of our sources does Socrates object to orgasmic pleasure as such – only to that form of it which is pursued in pederastic coupling,³⁸ and there only for moral, not metaphysical, reasons: because he thinks it bad for the boy,³⁹ viewing it as a form of predation in which a younger male is exploited ('devoured'⁴⁰) by his lover, used for the latter's one-sided gratification.⁴¹

(4) Platonic *erōs* generates an emotion which has torrential force, matching that imputed by the poets to all forms of sexual passion: pederastic, lesbian, or heterosexual. Like the poets, Plato calls *erōs* 'madness' and so describes it:

T18 *Phaedrus* 251d–252b: ... and so between joy and anguish [the lover] is distraught at being in such a strange condition; perplexed and frenzied, with madness upon him, can neither sleep by night nor sit still by day... Mother, brother, friends, he forgets them all, not caring if his property is being ruined by neglect; those rules and graces in which he previously took pride he now scorns, welcoming a slave's estate, sleeping anywhere at all, if only it can be as close as possible to his darling.

For such amiable insanity Socratic *erōs* has no place. It is even-keeled, light-hearted, jocular, cheerfully and obstinately sane.⁴² Not that Socrates is sexually anorexic (I stressed the contrary a moment ago) or that he anticipates the Cynic and Christian determination to expunge the joy of sex from the economy of happiness. The sliver of it he allows himself he pursues openly, without the least embarrassment, and in any

contact of his nude shoulder with that of the beautiful Critoboulos affects Socrates like 'the bite of a wild beast', his shoulder stings for days, *Symp.* 4.27–8). There is nothing so extreme in the Platonic portrait; Socrates there shows no terror of skin-contact with a beautiful body (wrestling in the nude with Alcibiades happens 'often' on the latter's initiative [*Symp.* 217c] and makes no dent in Socrates' resistance to the youth's advances); but neither is there anything in Plato to suggest that Socrates would ever encourage physical endearments from any of the youths he 'loves'.

³⁸ Cf. Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.22: Socrates counsels 'those who delight in the sexual charms of boys in bloom' (τοῖς τῶν ὠραίων ἀφροδισίοις ἡδόμενοι) to resist the attraction 'in order to cause no distress to those who should be spared it (ὥστε μὴ λυπεῖν οὓς μὴ προσήκει)'.
³⁹ See 'Additional Note' below.

⁴⁰ *Charmides* 155d–e: 'And I thought how well Cydias understood the ways of *erōs*; giving advice to someone about a beautiful boy, he warned: Don't bring the fawn too close to the lion that would devour his flesh.' *Phdr.* 241d1: 'As wolves are fond of lambs, so lovers love a boy.'

⁴¹ Xen. *Symp.* 8.19: the man 'reserves the pleasure for himself, the most shameful things for the boy'. Ibid. 21 (translation, in part, after E. C. Marchant): 'the boy does not share, like a woman, the delight of sex with the man, but looks on, sober, at another in love's intoxication.'

⁴² It is so pictured in both Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic dialogues. Nor does the reference to Socrates' *erōs* for Alcibiades in the eponymous dialogue by Aeschines Socraticus (fr. 11, Dittmar) tell a materially different story. Though there is a suggestion here of greater intensity in Socrates' sentiment for the youth than there is in Alcibiades' narrative in Plato, neither is there any call for blowing it up into 'fine frenzy' as in A. E. Taylor's fanciful interpretation of the fragment (*Philosophical Studies* [London, 1934], 15). His reading of part *c* of the fragment has lost track of what was said just before in its parts *a* and *b*. If so read, it will be seen that Taylor misunderstands the point of the comparison with the bacchantes in part *c*. It is not said there that Socrates is like them in being made *ἐνθους* by his love for the youth, but that just as they achieve wonderful results ('draw milk and honey from wells where others cannot even draw water') by divine possession (hence not through art or science), so too Socrates hopes to achieve the improvement of Alcibiades (a wonderful result) not through art or science (whose possession he disclaims by suggestion at *a* and by explicit denial at *c*) but by love (διὰ τὸ ἐρᾶν).

case, without fear that it could get out of control, for in the dynamics of his psyche it is held in the field of force of an incomparably mightier drive: when Alcibiades comes to speak of the glimpse he once got of the 'images of gods' concealed by the satyr's bestial exterior, his language becomes ecstatic. It dissolves in a shimmer of glittering, evocative adjectives:

T19 *Symp.* 216e–217a: I saw them once and they seemed so divine, golden, altogether beautiful, wonderful...

What is this dazzling, enchanting thing Socrates keeps hidden inside his own soul? His *sôphrosynê*, says Alcibiades:

T20 *Symp.* 216d7–8: But, oh my fellow-drinkers, how full of *sôphrosynê* [he would be seen to be] inside, if he were opened up...

But it could hardly be only that, since this is in the public view. What no one but Socrates himself can see is, I suggest, the happiness he finds in that *sôphrosynê*, which is so much more alluring than anything he could hope to get from physical beauty or from any other mundane good – health, wealth, honour, life itself – that he can enjoy each of these for what each is worth, flavouring in each its own sweet little quota of contentment or delight – that, and no more, thumbing his nose at it ('scorning' it) when it promises more. A maxipassion keeps all the minipassions effortlessly under control. It has been recently said,⁴³ following Foucault, that 'sex is a hard knot of anxiety' in all Western discourse about love. If that is true, then Socrates is an exception. From what we learn about Socratic *erôs* from Plato, in it there is no *inquiétude* at all.⁴⁴

Once we take this into account it becomes arbitrary to read deceit or pretence into Socrates' dalliance with youthful 'bloom'. We can understand Socratic *erôs* as a 'complex' irony⁴⁵ of the same sort as the other irony Alcibiades allows him in part (b) of **T15** above – that of 'knowing nothing and being ignorant of everything'. Just as when maintaining 'he knows nothing' Socrates both does and does not mean what he says, so too when he says he is erotically attracted to beautiful young men, he both does and does not mean what he says. In the currently understood sense of pederastic love Socrates does not 'love' Alcibiades or any of those other youths he pursues.⁴⁶ But in the other sense which *erân* has in the doctrine and practice of Socratic *erôs*, he does love them: their physical beauty gives special relish to his affectionate encounters with their mind. So there is no pretence and no deceit in his saying to others that he is Alcibiades' lover (*Gorg.* 481d) or saying the same thing, as he no doubt did, to Alcibiades himself.

'But surely,' it will be said, 'to court those giddy young things, whose head is swimming with the compliments being paid to them by swarms of powerful Athenians, will deceive them. So isn't Socrates guilty of intentional deceit after all?' How it was in other cases we do not know. But in the case of Alcibiades we do have the data for

⁴³ Michael Ignatieff, in his review of M. Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité* (vols. 2 and 3) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 Sept. 1984, p. 1071.

⁴⁴ This fundamental feature of Socratic *erôs* has been missed in all accounts of it known to me, from Kierkegaard, whose romantic fancy reads 'passionate turmoil' into it (88), to Foucault, whose highly discerning discussion of 'le véritable amour' in Plato reveals its residual blind-spot in the hyphenated expression, 'l'Érotique socratico-platonicienne' (op. cit. vol. 2, p. 225) by which he refers to it.

⁴⁵ Cf. p. 86 above.

⁴⁶ Admitting the allegation that he has been 'chasing' Alcibiades' bloom (standard metaphor for pederastic courting), Socrates proceeds to smother it in irony (*Prot.* 309a1–d2).

a confident reply. Yes, Alcibiades was deceived, for otherwise he would not have hatched that crazy scheme of bartering bloom for wisdom and would not have stuck to it for who knows how long, while Socrates kept refusing to take the bait. Deceived he was, but by whom? Not by Socrates, but by himself. He believed what he did because he wanted to believe it. We might have guessed as much; but we don't need to guess. Just from his own story we can tell that this is what happened. At **T12** Socrates is saying 'No' to the offer, doing so as emphatically as would a Zen Rōshi responding to a foolish question by bringing down his staff full strength on the questioner's head. Alcibiades could not but see that Socrates is saying 'No'. And still he refuses to believe it. He jumps into Socrates' bed as though he had been told 'Yes' or, at least, 'Maybe'. And if this is what happened then, there is no reason to believe that Socrates had ever said or done anything intended to deceive Alcibiades into thinking that skin-love was what he wanted from the youth.

But I may be asked: 'Even so, can we not gather from the account that long before that night Socrates was aware of what was going on in the boy's head, and yet was willing to let his young friend wallow in self-deceit without taking any decisive action to dispel it?' To this we surely have to answer: Yes. Over and over again before that night Socrates would have had ample opportunity to explain that Alcibiades was making a fool of himself, duped by his own wishful thinking. Yet Socrates said nothing. Day after day Socrates watched and kept still. Why so? The only reasonable answer is that he wanted Alcibiades to find out the truth for himself by himself. The irony in his love for Alcibiades, riddling from the start, persisted until the boy found the answer the hard way, in a long night of anguished humiliation, naked next to Socrates, and Socrates a block of ice.

This essay has been an investigation of the meaning of two words, 'irony' and *εἰρωνεία*, a good part of it devoted to the meaning of just two tokens of the latter occurring in Alcibiades' speech: *εἰρωνευόμενος* at **T8**, *εἰρωνικῶς* at **T9**. It does, however, have wider implications. A word about these by way of conclusion.

A question always hanging over our head as we work in Plato's Socratic dialogues is whether or not their protagonist allows himself deceit as a debating tactic. Some of Socrates' most devoted students have taken it for granted that he does. For Kierkegaard Socrates is the anti-sophist who by sophistry tricks sophists into truth.⁴⁷ For Paul Friedländer, whose three-volume work on Plato is as learned a work of scholarship as any produced in his time, Socrates is 'the living witness to the fact that he who knows the truth can deceive better than he who does not, and that he who deceives voluntarily is better than he who deceives involuntarily' (*Plato* 2, Eng. tr. [1964], p. 145). This point of view has been widely influential. One sees it at the centre of Michael O'Brien's brilliant book, *The Socratic Paradoxes*⁴⁸ and at the edges of much distinguished work on Plato.⁴⁹ The obvious objection is in what Plato makes Socrates say:

⁴⁷ 'Socrates tricks Protagoras out of every concrete virtue; by reducing each virtue to unity, he completely dissolves it; while the sophistry lies in the power through which he is able to accomplish this. Hence we have at once an irony borne by a sophistic dialectic and a sophistic dialectic reposing in irony.' (96).

⁴⁸ Whose contribution to our understanding of Socrates is sidetracked because the author, misapplying the use of irony in the Socratic dialogues, is prepared to jettison some of Socrates' most fundamental doctrines. Thus, if *καλῶς* at *Prot.* 352d4 means the contrary of what it says, the whole Socratic doctrine of the impossibility of *acrasia* goes down the drain; to cite its Aristotelian attestation would be useless: it would be met by the retort that he too missed the irony.

⁴⁹ Most recently in Charles Kahn, 'Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2 (1984), 75ff. He speaks of 'the trickery' by which Socrates rebuts Polus

- T21** *Gorgias* 458a1–b1: As for me, I would be pleased to cross-question you, provided you are the same sort of man as I. Of what sort is that? One of those who would be pleased to refute another if *he* says something untrue, but more pleased to be refuted than to refute – as much more as being rid of the greatest evil is better than ridding another of it; for I do not believe that anything could be as evil for a man as to harbour false beliefs about the things we are now discussing.

These words are familiar to those scholars. We ask them if they doubt their sincerity and they assure us they do not. Well then, we ask, if Socrates would rather lose than win the argument when the truth is on the other side, what could he stand to gain by deceit: how could he cope to advance his search for truth by slipping in a false premise or a sophistical inference? But this argument, which ought to be conclusive, falls flat on scholars who tell us that just in making it we are revealing we have been reading Plato's text with a tin ear for irony. It should be obvious, they say, that what would be out of the question in the usual mode of philosophical discourse may be normal in the ironical one: that Socrates should out-sophist the sophists is no paradox if the sophistries with which he plies them are ironical.

In this essay I have tried to nail down the mistake in the conception of irony which underlies this point of view. For this purpose I have gone back to the primary, down-to-earth, meaning of the living word which 'irony' has been in all the languages of the Western world, beginning with Cicero's Latin. In this primary use from which all philosophically invented ones are derived (including the one Kierkegaard fished out of Hegel: 'infinite absolute negativity'),⁵⁰ what irony means is simply expressing what we mean by saying something contrary to it. This is something we do all the time – even children do it – and if we choose to do it we forfeit in that very choice the option of speaking deceitfully. To think otherwise is to mistake *ironia* for *εἰρωνεία*, thereby reversing the process by which the former evolved out of the latter, denying Socrates one of his chief titles to fame: his contribution to the sensibility of Western Europe, no less memorable an achievement than is his contribution to our moral philosophy.

But in the course of this inquiry I stumbled upon something I had not reckoned on at the start: that in the persona of Socrates depicted by Plato there is something which helps explain what Kierkegaard's genius and Friedländer's learning have read into Socrates. In that small segment of the evidence I have scrutinized one can see how Socrates could have deceived without intending to deceive. If you are young Alcibiades courted by Socrates you are left to your own devices to decide what to make of his riddling ironies. If you go wrong and he sees you have gone wrong, he may not lift a finger to dispel your error, far less the obligation to knock it out of your head. If this were happening over trivia no great harm would be done. But what if it concerned the most important matters – whether or not he loves you? He says he does in that riddling way of his which leaves you free to take it one way though you are meant to take it in another, and when he sees you have gone wrong he lets it go. What would you say? Not, surely, that he does not care that you should know the

(*Gorg.* 474dff.). I would not accept his description of my analysis of the argument (*AJP* 88 [1967], 454ff.) as 'Socrates tricks Polus' (90); I argued *against* the suggestion that Socrates' argument is intentionally fallacious.

⁵⁰ 276 *et passim*. His treatment of Socratic irony is hopelessly perplexed by this dazzling mystification. It seduces him into finding in the Platonic texts he purports to be glossing the vagaries of a romantic novella: 'the disguise and mysteriousness which it [irony] entails, ... the infinite sympathy it assumes, the elusive and ineffable moment of understanding immediately displaced by the anxiety of misunderstanding' etc. (p. 85).

truth, but that he cares more for something else: that if you are to come to it at all, it must be by yourself for yourself.

The concept of moral autonomy never surfaces in Plato's Socratic dialogues – which does not keep it from being the deepest thing in their Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns. What he is building on is the fact that in almost everything we say we put a burden of interpretation on the hearer. When we speak a sentence we do not add a gloss on how it should be read. We could not thus relieve the hearer of that burden, for that would be an endless business: each gloss would raise the same problem and there would have to be gloss upon gloss *ad infinitum*. Socratic irony is not unique in acknowledging the burden of freedom which is inherent in all significant communication. It is unique in playing that game for bigger stakes than anyone ever has in the philosophy of the West. Socrates doesn't say that the knowledge by which he and we must live is utterly different from what anyone has ever understood or even imagined moral knowledge could be. He just says he has no knowledge, though without it he is damned, and lets us puzzle out for ourselves what that could mean.⁵¹

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ADDITIONAL NOTE

Erōs Kalos: Its Hazards for the Boy

Third parties close to him who are concerned for his own good – parents and friends within his peer group – think he would be well out of such affairs:

Fathers put tutors in charge of the boy and won't let him talk with lovers: the tutors are ordered to forbid it. And friends of his own age reproach him (*ὀνειδίζουσιν*: cf. *ὀνειδος*, *Phdr.* 231e3–4) if they see him going in for anything of this sort, and their reproaching isn't vetoed by their elders – they don't say the blame is undeserved (*Symp.* 183c5–d2).

If formerly, bad-mouthed by his friends, who had been saying that dallying with a lover is a disgrace (*αἰσχρόν*), he had repelled the lover... (*Phdr.* 255a4–6).

⁵¹ My guess at the riddle is stated and argued for in 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge' (*Philosophical Quarterly* 35 [1985], 1ff.).

However glamorized in the fashionable νόμος, the boy's role remains *risqué*: he is placed in an ambiguous and vulnerable position. Still in mid-teens, emotionally immature, his character barely formed, without seasoned judgement of men and the world, suddenly, if he happens to be καλός, he finds himself in possession of an asset in short supply and high demand,⁵² for access to which an older man will grovel⁵³ at his feet, prepared to offer great prizes in return for 'favours'. Would he not be under the strongest of temptations to barter his new-found treasure in ways which would corrupt him?

Suppose he does form an honourable liaison within which his lover gets all he wants. Will the boy escape the stigma which in Greek opinion taints the sexual pathic?⁵⁴ So Dover thinks because, he holds (*GH*, pp. 103 *et passim*), within the νόμος orgasmic contact remains solely intercrural. Deeply conscious of my debt to him for what little understanding I have of this difficult matter, I remain strongly sceptical of this particular thesis of his. The vase paintings supply his evidential ground for it. But can we exclude the possibility that prevailing conventions screened out the depiction of what was in fact the normal mode of gratification? That this is no idle conjecture we know from the literary evidence. As Dover recognizes,⁵⁵ his thesis gets no support from this quarter:

In Greek comedy [anal copulation] is assumed (save in *Birds* 706)⁵⁶ to be the only mode of [homosexual consummation]; and when Hellenistic poetry makes a sufficiently unambiguous reference to what actually happens on the bodily plane, we encounter only anal, never intercrural, copulation (*GH* 99).

But even if the thesis were to be accepted *in toto*, it would still not obliterate the shadow on the boy's good name. If submitting to anal copulation carries a stigma, the boy would always be under suspicion of it. Who is to know what goes on between him and his lover in the privacy of their *amours*?

⁵² The demographic facts should not be overlooked: bloomers are to potential bloom chasers as are the καλοί within a five-year age-group to most of the adult males. Of the scarcity of the καλοί within their own age-group we get some sense in the opening scene of the *Charmides*: droves of youngsters in the palaestra and one καλός, all eyes on him, 'gazing on him as at a statue' (154c).

⁵³ 'Praying, entreating, supplicating, vowing upon oath, sleeping at the door, willingly enduring slavery worse than any slave's' (*Symp.* 183a4-7).

⁵⁴ Dover, *GH*, pp. 103-4: 'By assimilating himself to a woman in the sexual act the submissive male rejects his role as a male citizen' and chooses 'to be the victim of what would be, if the victim were unwilling, hubris'.

⁵⁵ He is misrepresented in Martha Nussbaum's account of his view (*The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 188): 'But two things [the boy] will not allow, in the works of art and the literary testimonies [my emphasis] that have come down to us: he will not allow any opening of his body to be penetrated' etc.

⁵⁶ I would not concede that this verse of Aristophanes is an exception. There is no textual evidence for the supposition (*GH*, p. 98) that the word used here, διαμηρίζειν, was 'almost certainly' the original term for intercrural copulation or that it ever meant anything but genital intercourse with females or anal with males, as it uncontroversially does in Zeno Stoicus (H. von Arnim, *SVF* 250 and 251, *ap.* Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyp.* 3.245, *Adv. Math.* 11.190). Its three earliest literary occurrences are in the *Birds*. In 1024 it refers unambiguously to vaginal copulation, as Dover recognizes. I submit that it must refer likewise to the usual type of intercourse in the other two occurrences as well: Euelpides, declaring, διαμηρίζοιμ' ἂν αὐτὴν ἡδέως (699), could hardly be lusting after *ersatz* gratification. And if it were agreed that the word is used to signify phallic penetration in 699 and then again in 1024, as it is by Zeno in the Stoic fragments cited above, we would have no good reason for supposing that in 706 Aristophanes has shifted to a different sense which is never unambiguously attested in a single surviving Greek text and is not required by its immediate context: no reason is discernible in the text why the birds' vaunted power to fulfil men's longings should accord to their favourites something less than the usual thing.