

# SOCRATIC IRONY AND ARISTOTLE'S *EIRON*: SOME PUZZLES

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**I**N *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* 4.7 Aristotle discusses, as part of his analysis of specific virtues as means between extremes, the truthful man and his opposites, the *alazon* and the *eiron*. Though he rarely offers illustrations of his moral types, he explicitly names Socrates in connection with *eironeia*; and further, he points not to a Socratic doctrine (cf. 3.8, 6.13, 7.2) but to Socrates' actions. The *eirones*, he says, disown especially qualities which are highly esteemed, οἷον καὶ Σωκράτης ἐποίει—just as Socrates used to do (1127b25). The phrase seems innocuous, an example almost taken for granted. Yet in this apparently accidental association of Socrates with *eironeia* Aristotle becomes the originator of the meaning of "Socratic irony." That he had a large hand in shaping this meaning has been noted before;<sup>1</sup> at the same time, little detailed attention has been paid to the way in which the argument of *E.N.* 4.7 proceeds. I hope to show that in several respects Aristotle's analysis and evaluation of *eironeia* are puzzling, as is his invocation of Socrates; and to argue that the best explanation for the chapter's revalued *eironeia* lies in Aristotle's attitude to Socrates, who is the controlling model for the analysis rather than an innocuous example.

We may begin by setting out our expectations about Aristotle's treatment of truthfulness and its opposites. Given his doctrine of the mean, we find two vices at the opposite poles of truthfulness: *alazoneia*, playing up the truth, and *eironeia*, playing it down. This scheme is set out clearly for the reader near the end of *E.N.* 2 (1108a19–22; cf. the chart in *E.E.* 2.3, and *M.M.* 1.32), then taken up in 4.7. In more than one place Aristotle attaches to both vices the notion of pretense (προσποίησις, *E.N.* 2.7, 1108a21; 4.7, 1127a20; *E.E.* 2.3, 1221a25). The pretense takes opposite forms, of course:

<sup>1</sup>At the end of the last century J. A. Stewart wrote, "Aristotle is the first to make Socrates the type of refined *Irony*" (*Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* [Oxford 1892] 1.359). Next Burnet: "This passage seems to be the origin of the current phrase 'Socratic irony,' a thing which is almost as mythical as 'tragic irony'" (*The Ethics of Aristotle* [London 1900] 196). Then T. Marshall: "Irony, in the sense in which it is now commonly taken, as meaning an affectation of ignorance, is here attributed to Sokrates . . . The authority of Aristotle has had a good deal to do with fixing the present meaning of the word" (*Aristotle's Theory of Conduct* [London 1909] 264). And G. G. Sedgewick: "our ideas of Socratic irony spring ultimately from Aristotle's definition of *eironeia* as a pretence which takes the form of self-depression . . . [Aristotle] fixed the general sense of Socratic irony for all time" (*Of Irony, Especially in Drama*<sup>2</sup> [Toronto 1948] 11–12). (Works mentioned in this note will be cited by author's name, as will R. A. Gauthier and J. Y. Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque* [Louvain 1959] and T. Irwin, tr., *Nicomachean Ethics* [Indianapolis 1985]).

the *alazon* pretends to more than he really has, the *eirōn* to less—but since both stray from the plain truth, Aristotle judges that the *alazon* and the *eirōn* alike are false (*E.N.* 4.7, 1127a31) and love falsehood (1127b10; *E.E.* 3.7, 1234a3). From this classification, then, we might legitimately expect that the *alazon* and the *eirōn* are equally deserving of blame. In our chapter Aristotle does state that those who speak falsely in both these ways are blameworthy (1127a31), a judgment confirmed by his consistently negative appraisal of *alazoneia* and by his remark in the *Rhetoric* that *eironeia* makes us angry because it shows disdain (καταφρονητικόν, 2.2, 1379b31). Nevertheless, this expectation is curiously disappointed by Aristotle's actual reasoning in 4.7. For as the chapter unfolds, Aristotle refines his attitudes towards the *alazon* and the *eirōn*, with the result that he is much harder on the former than on the latter. Right after his claim that the falseness of both is blameworthy, he adds that “especially the *alazon*” deserves blame (1127a31). Although an earlier remark could suggest that extremes may not be equally vicious (since one extreme can resemble its virtue more than does the opposite extreme, 1108b31), it is important to investigate just why the *eirōn* comes off more lightly here.

Our interest is first aroused by a remark about the truthful person. Unsurprisingly, he is to be praised without qualification, for he loves the truth (1127b4) as a matter of course instead of speaking truthfully only when it is to his advantage. He “will scrupulously avoid falsehood as being base” (ὥς γὰρ αἰσχρόν τὸ ψεῦδος εὐλαβήσεται, 1127b5, tr. Ostwald). Nevertheless, Aristotle interestingly does not demand from such a conscientious type utter truth-telling. Instead he adds that the truthful man “leans rather towards understating the truth,” which is more proper or decorous (ἐμμελέστερον, 1127b8) than overstatement. Though it is the description of *eironeia* rather than the term itself which is here associated with the truthful man, our presumption about its blameworthiness has been altered in this remark. We are not told why the lover of truth may share this characteristic of the *eirōn*, but the reason presumably lies in his motivation;<sup>2</sup> and for that topic we must next turn to the *alazon*.

Aristotle's analysis of *alazoneia* uncovers three types, classified—and blamed—according to motivation. The mildest type is exhibited by the *alazon* who acts without ulterior motives, simply wanting to be taken as better than he actually is. Since he enjoys this falsehood he is a base sort, but not dangerous or wicked (1127b11). More serious are those with some other end to be gained by their *alazoneia*, and Aristotle discerns two groups, and

<sup>2</sup>Aquinas expands on Aristotle's text: “since sometimes it is quite difficult to tell the exact truth,” the truthful man regards it as more “prudent” to lean towards understatement (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. C. I. Litsinger [Chicago 1964] 1.362). This is however an additional justification, for Aristotle allows understatement to be more decorous on occasion, considerations of exactness or prudence apart.

two grades of blameworthiness, here. The less severe type wants to share by pretense in reputation and honour: that this *alazon* does not deserve strong censure (οὐ λίαν ψεκτός, 1127b12) reflects the relative importance of honour as a good, and also Aristotle's own recognition of the ambiguities of honour-seeking in 4.4. The most serious *alazoneia* belongs to those who are after money; their gaining by pretense is more disgraceful.

This attention to motivation is important because it permits us to proportion blame. It will also help us to see why the *eiron* is treated differently from the *alazon*. Aristotle does distinguish types of *eironeia*, but only two. The *eirones* readily despised are the "humbugs" (βαυκοπανούργοι, 1127b27), whose pretense involves what Aristotle calls insignificant and obvious things. He seems to mean that they play down what most people value, but only in trivial and unsubtle respects: his example is Spartan dress, regarded as excessively plain and cheap.<sup>3</sup> Why should this type of *eiron* be despised? In Aristotle's answer there is a sound insight: sometimes, he says, this kind of obvious downplaying appears to be *alazoneia*, for both excess and too much deficiency are *alazonikon* (1127b29).<sup>4</sup> In spite of the fact that Aristotle has until now associated the "less" only with *eironeia*,<sup>5</sup> we know very well what he means: we call it reverse snobbery, and we can appreciate that this *eiron*'s motive may be just like the motive of the *alazon*. It is accordingly blameable in the same degree. But if this is so, the result is curious. It means that the real problem with this kind of *eironeia* lies in the fact that it is *alazoneia* in disguise.

The second type of *eironeia* distinguished by Aristotle is, I think, also related to *alazoneia*, but by rejecting it rather than masking it. For instead of blaming all *eirones* in general, Aristotle at 1127b23 claims that they "seem of a more refined character" (χαριέστεροι μὲν τὰ ἡθῆ φαίνονται, tr. Rackham, Loeb ed.). The reason is that they are motivated not by gain (as is the worst kind of *alazon*) but rather by the desire to escape from "pomposity" (τὸ ὀγκηρόν, 1127b24). In this term's notion of swollenness there is (I suggest) implicit reference to the *alazon*'s vice of playing up the truth. So it appears that, while the *eiron* and the *alazon* both stray from the mean of truthfulness,

<sup>3</sup>Some commentators suggest that Aristotle intends not the Spartans, but the Athenians who imitated them (see Stewart *ad loc.*)—not the bearded hippie but the mimicking guru-like professor; not the Cockney but the Victorian aristocrat who uses "ain't."

<sup>4</sup>It is best, I think, to keep this line a general claim. By translating "extreme negligence in dress, as well as excessive attention to it, has a touch of ostentation," Rackham in the Loeb edition unnecessarily restricts Aristotle's comment to his Spartan dress example. Irwin's recent translation inadvertently omits this line (though it will be added in the next edition).

<sup>5</sup>Aristotle's formal definitions of *eironeia* and *alazoneia* have been quantitative, related to *how much* of the truth is told or acted out. When the distinguishing mark of the *alazon* is excess, how can deficiency be *alazonikon*? The answer must resort to the psychology of the *alazon*: his *motive* remains on the side of exaggeration (his aim is perhaps self-aggrandisement), but his *behaviour* displays this in a reverse manner.

ness, the real villain is the *alazon*. This is confirmed by other comments in the chapter. Aristotle is willing to say categorically of the *alazon*'s vice, exaggeration, that it is offensive (ἐπαχθεῖς, 1127b8), but refrains from any blanket judgment about its opposite, understatement. Instead, at the chapter's end, he points out that those who use *eironeia* modestly and not too trivially seem refined. The real opposite to the truthful person is the *alazon* because, he concludes, *alazoneia* is worse than *eironeia*.

To recapitulate: contrary to expectation, the *eirōn* is not given the same moral assessment as the *alazon*, though both are called pretenders at the chapter's beginning. The *alazon*, though he may be blamed in varying degrees, never receives approval in any measure. In the *eirōn*'s case blame at the chapter's end is attached, not for pretense or love of falsehood, but rather because he may be an *alazon* in disguise. Nor is all *eironeia* to be evaluated negatively: it may be motivated by a praiseworthy desire, so that the *eirōn* ends up like the truthful man, with a cultivated and charmingly understated manner. This rapprochement between the two types may answer our earlier question about the truthful person's inclination towards understatement. Such behaviour is compatible with his moral character, for his motive is not to speak falsely but to avoid any taint of *alazoneia*.<sup>6</sup>

We came to this chapter prepared to believe that one extreme may be worse than its opposite. We were not prepared, though, to have Aristotle's scheme end up with a putative vice vicious only in the measure that it harbours its opposing vice. That is puzzling. It is especially puzzling that *eironeia* is assimilated to the virtuous mean when one considers Aristotle's treatment of *eironeia* elsewhere, since he almost always assesses it negatively: he associates the *eirōn* with knaves and mockers.<sup>7</sup> In this the *eirōn* is accorded the usual assessment found in Greek literature from Aristophanes on (*Clouds* 449), an assessment which treats the *alazon* as equally blame-

<sup>6</sup>Gauthier and Jolif provide some useful comments on motive and truth-telling (2.1.309 f.).

<sup>7</sup>For εἰρωνες καὶ πανούργοι see *Rhet.* 2.5, 1382b21. The conjunction μωκοῦ καὶ εἰρωνος occurs in *Hist. An.* 1.9, 491b17, where the *eirōn*'s eyebrows are described as bending outwards (cf. *Physiognomics* 3, 808a27–29: the *eirōn* has a sleepy, fat face with puckered eyes). I have found only two places outside *E.N.* 4.7 where Aristotle refers to the *eirōn* without negative overtones. (i) The first, though, is debatable. Perhaps *eironeia* is to be associated with Aristotle's μεγαλόψυχος in *E.N.* 4.3: Rackham and Ostwald translate 1124b30–31 so that the magnanimous man speaks "ironically" to commoners. Such usage would anticipate the analysis of 4.7, since this *eironeia* would not be a vice. Irwin's translation, however, takes the lines to mean "And he speaks the truth, except [when he speaks less than the truth] to the many, [because he is moderate], not because he is self-deprecating." This keeps the *eironeia* of πλὴν ὅσα δὲ εἰρωνεῖαν πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς in its negative mode. (ii) *Rhet.* 2.18, 1419b7 does seem to fit with the usage of *E.N.* 4.7: the "ironical" type of jest is more "gentlemanly" than is buffoonery. But there are problems in developing a consistent view of *eironeia* from the *Rhetoric*: see Zojia Pavlovskis, "Aristotle, Horace, and the Ironic Man," *CP* 63 (1968) 22–41, at 22–23.

worthy.<sup>8</sup> Why then should Aristotle separate these two types and evaluate them differently in *E.N.* 4.7? This puzzlement can be heightened when it is realized that Aristotle's different assessment of these types depends upon an analysis which is not parallel. We have just seen his discernment of three types of motivation in *alazoneia*, followed by a breaking of *eironeia* into the cultivated and the contemptible kinds. Curiously, though, it is perfectly possible to apply the analysis of *alazoneia* to the phenomenon of *eironeia*, so that one arrives at three parallel degrees of blameworthiness in this vice. There are cases of *eironeia* without ulterior motive: take the familiar professorial type whose soiled and baggy tweeds are regarded by others as "dressing down." Although he may recognize that for some occasions he is under-dressed, this type need have no "Spartan" desire for reverse self-display; it may merely be his habit, done for its own sake. In other cases, though, *eironeia* may be the product of unworthy motives—to fit in with one's fellow *eirones*, or more basely to profit from others by deception. Given the customary understanding of the *iron*, this last possibility is perhaps the most surprising omission in Aristotle's treatment of *eironeia* in this chapter. Why ignore and even deny (in claiming that *eirones* do *not* speak for the sake of gain, 1127b24) the truly reprehensible *iron* who conceals the truth to advance his own purposes?

Into these puzzles of revised evaluation and obvious omission we must now place the case of Socrates. As we noted at the beginning, Aristotle characterizes the *eirones* as those who deny especially τὰ ἐνδοξα, qualities generally considered valuable, then adds "just as Socrates used to do." It appears, then, that he cites Socrates as an example of the *iron*—not one of the easily despised *eirones* of the humbug stripe, but among the cultivated, close in spirit to the truthful person. In this we reach what seems to me the most puzzling aspect of the chapter. To put the difficulty succinctly: if *this* is what the "irony of Socrates" consisted in—a charming and cultivated use of understatement—then it is hard to imagine how Socrates could have achieved the negative reputation for lack of credibility to which he himself alludes at his trial. Or to use a different diction: Aristotle's Socrates would be more at home in an English novel about Oxbridge philosophers than in Plato's dialogues.

<sup>8</sup>The pejorative flavour of *iron* and *eironeia* is well documented. Modern studies seem to have begun with O. Ribbeck, "Über den Begriff des εἰρων," *RhM* 31 (1876) 381–400; see also Stewart 1.358 f. and J. A. K. Thomson, *Irony* (London 1926), especially chapters 2 and 11. Additional references may be found in Gauthier and Jolif 2.1.313, and Mark T. Riley, "The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates," *Phoenix* 34 (1980) 55–68, at 64–65. Riley shows that the Epicureans "maintained the traditional picture of the *iron*" (68) and were critical of Socrates because they considered him to fit the type. Stewart, and R. C. Jebb (*The Characters of Theophrastus*<sup>2</sup> [London 1909] 51–53), find it a problem that Theophrastus should treat the *iron* so negatively in the light of his master's comments in *E.N.* 4.7; but on this see below, n. 19.

Commentators have not always sensed the discrepancy between Socrates and Aristotle's *iron* partly because (as noted at this paper's beginning) *E.N.* 4.7 has had such a large role in developing the very meaning of "Socratic irony" as a philosophically intriguing understatement for some pedagogic end. If we come to Aristotle already thinking that this is the nature of Socrates as *iron*, we will find little to surprise us in his invocation of Socrates to illustrate the cultivated kind of *eironeia*. Nevertheless the tension is difficult to dissolve satisfactorily. Some merely deny it. Terence Irwin, for instance, claims that Aristotle does not actually say that Socrates displayed "the vice of self-deprecation" and that if Socrates' disavowals were sincere they would not express *eironeia* (330). This keeps *eironeia* vicious, as does John Burnet's comment that "neither here nor anywhere else is the word *eironeia* used in a good sense."<sup>9</sup> The cost, though, is high: Aristotle's whole revaluation of the concept must simply be ignored. On the other hand, if we take T. Marshall's line (265) that *eironeia* is "not a serious moral fault," we are forced to overlook the entire history of the word's negative meaning. The approach taken by Gauthier and Jolif (2.1.313) at least faces the problem. They suggest that Aristotle changes the term from its "sens ordinairement péjoratif" to a good kind of dissimulation "en dépit de l'usage" because he follows Plato's presentation of Socrates. As Stewart has it, Aristotle takes the *iron* in "a better and finer sense;" for although the term was previously one of reproach, "the notion of *eironeia* was, however, ennobled by the character of Socrates, and by the representation which Plato gave of him."<sup>10</sup>

This solution depends of course on our finding something of Aristotle's *iron* in Plato's Socrates.<sup>11</sup> Although the issues involved in Plato's portrait are tangled, one way to come at the question is to ask about Socrates' behaviour with respect to the *ἔνδοξα* which Aristotle's *iron* disclaims. While Aristotle gives no examples of these valued qualities, it is not unreasonable to think of honour, wealth, power, quick wit or intelligence, a good memory, love of truth, and the recognized virtues of justice, courage, self-control and wisdom. However such a list is generated,<sup>12</sup> it is by no means obvious that Socrates dismissed through understatement or denial *all* these *ἔνδοξα*.

<sup>9</sup>Burnet 196. I disagree of course only with Burnet's first disjunct, for elsewhere *eironeia* is usually not praised or rehabilitated: see above, nn. 7 and 8.

<sup>10</sup>Stewart 1.359. Related to the question of Aristotle's admiration of Socrates is the belief (for references see Pavlovskis, above, n. 7, 24) that the figure of Socrates lies behind the *μεγαλόψυχος* of *E.N.* 4.3: perhaps the remark about irony at 1124b30–31 suggests an association of Socrates with Aristotle's moral ideal (though see above, n. 7, point [i]). But see below on the applicability of certain key features of the *μεγαλόψυχος* to Socrates.

<sup>11</sup>I choose Plato's Socrates partly because this is the issue set by the commentators, but also because Xenophon's Socrates exhibits very little *eironeia* (see C. de Vogel, "Who was Socrates?," *JHistPhilos.* 1 [1963] 143–161, at 151). Neither *iron* nor *eironeia* are to be found in F. G. Sturz, *Lexicon Xenophonticum* (Leipzig 1801–04, reprinted Hildesheim 1964).

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle's own portrait of the *μεγαλόψυχος* in *E.N.* 4.3 supplies the items at the beginning of this list; Plato's account of the necessary qualities of the philosopher in *Resp.* 6.485 ff. includes the others.

He did not disparage his own moral qualities, or intellectual virtues such as intelligence and love of truth; on the contrary, he strongly defends them in the *Apology*. So with respect to the last half of the list there is no *eironeia*. Nor is there in the ἐνδοξα at the list's beginning. Think of Socrates' rejection of wealth and political power: remember his old cloak (*Symp.* 220b; cf. *Phaedo* 64d), his bare feet (*Phaedrus* 229a), his lack of political ambition or forensic expertise (*Gorg.* 473e, 486b), and again the *Apology*'s defense before the jury which sums up his attitude towards these things. Although Socrates went against the general view about what makes life successful, his denial was neither charming nor, strictly speaking, an expression of *eironeia* at all, since it was a deliberate statement of conviction unclouded by falsehood. At the same time, his conduct was capable of being *understood* as the behaviour of an *eiron* in the customarily pejorative sense. Alcibiades tells us that when Socrates walked barefoot on the ice his fellow soldiers "viewed him with suspicion, believing that he meant to humiliate them" (οἱ δὲ στρατιῶται ὑπέρβλεπον αὐτὸν ὡς καταφρονούντα σφῶν, *Symp.* 220b, tr. Hamilton). From their point of view, Socrates was so far from gracefulness that he fits Aristotle's despicable humbug exactly—he exhibits a reverse *alazoneia* by his dress.

We have in this incident hit upon the truth Aristotle insufficiently examines in his account of *eironeia*, that *eironeia* is a matter of perception largely dependent on the motives attributed to the agent. That this is so in Socrates' case may be confirmed by picking out from our list the qualities of "quick wit" and "good memory," until now ignored. For here we have our best examples of the ἐνδοξα Socrates denied: he often issues disclaimers about his ability to remember, or to follow or to make long speeches, to be good at debate or rhetoric. And Plato lets us know that his modesty in such matters is only mock-modesty. Phaedrus chides Socrates for being coy about his rhetorical powers (236d); Alcibiades remarks in the *Protagoras* that Socrates was only joking when he said he was a forgetful sort of person (336d; cf. *Meno* 71c); the Socrates who insists on short questions and answers in that dialogue goes on to speak at length and to spin arguments of great complexity. But the problem with his disclaimers is that, while on occasion they could wear a certain grace, at other times they look for all the world like little tricks; and worse, they can be provocative and annoying. Protagoras found this so: Socrates' dissimulation about his memory almost broke up their discussion.

There is exactly the same problem of perception and motive at the heart of what many commentators think Aristotle must have had preeminently in mind with his citation of Socrates: Socrates' profession of ignorance.<sup>13</sup> It is true that Socrates claimed not to know, but there is a large question about

<sup>13</sup>So, among many others, Aquinas (above, n. 2) 1.364 and Irwin 330. This is supported by *Soph. Elenchi* 34, 183b6–8. As my last paragraph shows, however, we have good textual

how this claim should be perceived. Plato's reader often feels like appropriating Callicles' words from a very different context (*Gorg.* 481b): "is Socrates serious, or is he joking?"—except that Chaerephon's reply, "there's nothing like asking him," is sadly beside the point. Whether or not the claim of ignorance was indeed serious, Plato does not spare Socrates' reputation for playing with people in argument in the fashion of an unreconstructed *ieron*. This is echoed in the trial when Socrates confesses that he will be thought to dissemble (ὥς εἰρωνευομένῳ, *Apol.* 38a1) in maintaining that his philosophical activity is a divine duty. Further, that reputation is upheld by friend as well as foe. If it is a Thrasymachus who sneers at the "well-known irony of Socrates" (ἡ εἰωθυῖα εἰρωνεία Σωκράτους, *Resp.* 337a), it is the admiring Alcibiades who must accuse him of spending "his whole life playing his little game of irony and laughing up his sleeve at all the world" (εἰρωνευόμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων πάντα τὸν βίον πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διατελεῖ, *Symp.* 216e, tr. Joyce). Those upset with Socrates in Plato's dialogues accuse him of being an *ieron*, and nowhere in the dialogues is *eironeia* itself ever defended.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Plato never attempts to comment directly on Socrates' professed ignorance: his very style of dramatic presentation allows him to report Socrates' claim and the reactions it engendered without ever requiring him to justify the method his master employed. Whether that method is justifiable is a separate issue, as is the question of Plato's possible contribution to Socratic *eironeia*.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes it is enough to stress

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ground in Plato for believing that Socrates ironically denied good memory and argumentative skill, so Aristotle could easily have had these qualities in mind as well.

A different view has been proposed by Th. Deman (*Le témoignage d'Aristote sur Socrate* [Paris 1942] 69; quoted with approval by Gauthier and Jolif, 2.1.315; cf. Pavlovskis [above, n. 7] 24): Aristotle is here concerned with *eironeia* as a moral and social characteristic, not as a feature of Socrates' philosophical method for discovering truth. This distinction is however too neat. To call Socrates an *ieron* was neither to engage in pure methodological criticism nor to evaluate his social manners; it was to make a moral assessment related explicitly to his method.

<sup>14</sup>Plato uses this language of the imposter sophist at *Soph.* 268a–d. As Sedgewick remarks, "not one of Plato's thirteen or fourteen uses has an association quite reputable" (11).

<sup>15</sup>Socratic ignorance may be defended in two different ways. If it is thought ironical (in the current sense of that term) justification may be attempted on pedagogic grounds: the "ignorance" of the teacher can be a useful means to provoke independent thought in the pupil (cf. Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*<sup>2</sup> [Oxford 1966] 18). Or Socrates' profession may be defended as sincere and non-duplicitous. The best-known defender of Socrates' integrity is Gregory Vlastos, who in his essay "The Paradox of Socrates" holds that there must be a genuine sense in which Socrates does not know the answers to questions he raises; his professed agnosticism is "a conscientious objection to the notion that the conclusions of any discussion are secure against further testing by further discussion" (G. Vlastos, ed. *The Philosophy of Socrates* [Garden City, N.Y. 1971] 12; Irwin apparently agrees [330]).

Plato's own attitude to these questions is not easy to decide. It may be significant, though, that Socratic ignorance and irony are absent from two important presentations of the Socratic method: the slave boy episode in the *Meno* (80a–86c) and the art of purification passage in the *Sophist* (227c–230e). See also below, n. 18.



that Socrates' ignorance was persistently regarded as a manifestation of a negative *eironeia*, and that this belief played a major role in the charges brought against him in both the *Apology* and the *Symposium*. However morally and philosophically noble Socrates' character, we cannot find in Plato's portrait any rehabilitation of the concept of the *eiron*.

This means it is Aristotle, and so far as we know, Aristotle alone<sup>16</sup> who disinfects *eironeia* of its customarily negative taint when nothing in Plato's usage or his own analysis required him to do so. For if he had thought Socrates sincere in his claim to ignorance, though misunderstood by his contemporaries, he would not have associated Socrates with *eironeia* at all. If in a contrary mind he had adopted an attitude severely critical of Socrates' method, he might readily have perceived Socrates as the customary sort of *eiron*:<sup>17</sup> as we have seen, his analysis of motivation in *alazoneia* gave him the tools for that sort of critique. Instead of these possibilities, however, the reprehensible sort of *eiron* is excluded from the discussion and *eironeia* is revalued as a mark of cultivation.

Why should Aristotle skew his analysis and evaluation of *eironeia* towards the truthful and gracious when Plato did not? The answer is to be found not so much in Plato's presentation of Socrates as in Aristotle's own evaluation of that Socrates. Aristotle, I suggest, must have thought Socrates' denial of knowledge to be disingenuous and not sincere.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he

<sup>16</sup>That we have no source other than Aristotle for refined *eironeia* does not in itself prove that Aristotle alone refined the term. Nonetheless it is significant that Theophrastus and later writers retain the negative taint. Jebb complains that Theophrastus' picture of the *eiron* is "strikingly inadequate" because negative, and "unfaithful to the essence of the quality portrayed by Plato and defined by Aristotle." A term "most flexibly and delicately expressive . . . had scarcely passed into currency when it was debased" (above, n. 8, 52, 53). But if Plato portrays Socrates as morally praiseworthy, this will easily give grounds for the repudiation of the label *eiron*; it does not inexorably lead to an ennobling of the notion of *eironeia*. And it could well be that it is not Theophrastus who descends from the refined heights of delicacy in his picture, but Aristotle who has inflated and disinfected a negative term for his own purposes. Moreover, for the later Epicureans "*eironeia* retained its original bad sense, and the word downgraded Socrates" (Riley, above, n. 8, 65). The story is different by Cicero's time: the *ironia* which is Socrates' profession of ignorance is witty and elegant (*Brutus* 292; cf. Quintilian *Instit.* 6.3.68, 9.2.46).

<sup>17</sup>This possibility raises a large problem for Dorothea Krook's opinion (*contra* the view in note 13 above) that Aristotle's μεγαλόψυχος is a deliberate criticism of Socrates (*Three Traditions of Moral Thought* [Cambridge 1959] 74–78). While Socrates hardly fits the description of this "best of men" in 4.3 (at least with respect to the ἐνδοξά discussed above), Aristotle had a natural opportunity to repeat the standard charge of *eironeia* against Socrates four chapters later, if he had thought of Socrates what Krook thinks he thought. His decision to revalue the concept rather than impugn Socrates is surely important.

<sup>18</sup>Why he should have thought this when others do not (see above, n. 15) is an intriguing question. Perhaps it has to do with Plato's own dramatic success in constructing a Socrates who seems to know more than he lets on. I have said a little about this in "Socrates: Devious or Divine?," *G&R* 32 (1985) 32–41, at 40–41; see also my "Irony and Insight in Plato's *Meno*," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 43 (1987), forthcoming.

regarded him as morally and philosophically virtuous. He might have attempted a justification of modest dissembling for a good pedagogic purpose, but instead of a defense Aristotle gives us a revaluation of the very concept of *eironeia*. This means it is wrong to take the words "just as Socrates used to do" as giving Aristotle's *example* of a graceful *eiron* wishing to escape *alazoneia*. Socrates is not an incidental illustration of a view generated independently by Aristotle; he is instead the controlling model for the discussion of *eironeia* in *E.N.* 4.7. In itself a redefinition of *eironeia* solves none of the moral questions about Socrates' method, for the exoneration of Socrates the *eiron* is merely verbal. Nevertheless in the puzzles of this chapter is betrayed Aristotle's desire to justify that most famous of *eirones*. In its terse and enigmatic way, οἶον καὶ Σωκράτης ἐποίει is the briefest Ἀπολογία Σωκράτους that we have.<sup>19</sup>

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