THE EVOLUTION OF EIRÔNEIA
IN CLASSICAL GREEK TEXTS:
WHY SOCRATIC EIRÔNEIA
IS NOT SOCRATIC IRONY

MELISSA LANE

This paper argues that eirôneia and its cognates¹ should nowhere in Plato be translated as ‘irony’² (defining ‘irony’ as ‘saying something with the intent that the message is understood as conveying the opposite or an otherwise different meaning’²). The best-known

¹ In no Greek author considered here have I found the usage of any of the cognate forms of eirôneia to be markedly distinct in meaning from that of any other. I will therefore use eirôneia, and sometimes a standard verb form, as shorthand reference to all of them.

² Note that the meaning and use of eirôneia in Plato’s works, as compared with those of Aristophanes, Aristotle, and other writers, cannot be settled by appeal to the dictionary. In its list of possible meanings of the term in Aristic Greek, LSJ—in keeping with the aims of a dictionary—gathers together the Aristophanic sense of ‘dissimulation’ with the Aristotelian sense of ‘irony’ without distinguishing between what the word meant in different authors and times (LSJ 491 s.v. elpôneia). Moreover, LSJ twice makes reference (explicit, in defining elpôneia; implicit, in defining elpôneia, etc.) to Socrates, speaking of Socrates as affirming ignorance and appealing to ‘Pl.R. 372a, cf. Arist.EN 11.4.210, Cic.Acad.Pr.2.5.15’, so invoking the very tradition of realizing the Platonic ascription of eirôneia to Socrates as consonant with the later interpretations of Aristotle and Cicero which I seek to explore.

³ This definition is adapted from J. Opsomer, ‘The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Ironic elpôneia’ [‘Rhetorie’], Orbét, 40 (1998), 1–34 at 14, who asserts rightly that eirôneia in Plato, as in Aristophanes, is related to ‘various forms of dissimulation’ (10) and does not mean ‘irony’ so defined. (Opsonser’s definition, like most, is at fault in failing to include ironic actions as well as words.) But I disagree with some of
of the uses of *eirôneia* in Plato is of course its ascription to Socrates. Consequently the present argument establishes that when Plato’s characters call Socrates *eirônikos*, they should not be translated as calling him ‘ironic’. The assumption that Plato’s application of *eirôneia* to Socrates licenses or underwrites discussions of ‘Socratic irony’—an assumption made by most such discussions—is correspondingly unsound.

Of course, later sources do abound in ascriptions to Socrates of *eirôneia* (e.g. Aristotle, on whom more below, as well as Arisoten of Ceos, Philodemus, Plutarch, the Platonist commentators), Latin his readings of the Platonic uses of the term, among them his specification of the ‘standard situation’ (in Plato) designated by *eirôneia* as ‘that someone pretends to be different from what he is, usually more naif or ignorant, and therefore less dangerous’, for reasons given below. Opsiomer also neglects the fact that ascribers of *eirôneia* may be mistaken in their ascription or their interpretation of the motive.

My case and some of my readings share some features with an argument made by I. Vasilou, ‘Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues’, *Classical Quarterly*, 58.49 (1999), 456–72 at 466 and 469, but his summary at 466—‘throughout Plato and Aristotle *eirôneia* and its cognates continue to imply some sort of shamming or false modesty’—is, as argued below, both wrong with respect to Aristotle and also wrongly Aristotelian in insisting that the shamming (i.e. feigning) be limited to modesty. Oddly, Vasilou’s subsequent article, ‘Socrates’ Reverse Irony’, *Classical Quarterly*, 61.2 (2000), 220–30, uses the term *eirôneia* to explain contexts where it does not appear, and departs unhurriedly at 223 from his stipulation in the earlier article that it must involve modesty. I owe my knowledge of Vasilou’s work to Karl Steven.

1 See e.g. the immediate assimilation of *eirôneia* to a taxonomy of irony in C. L. Griswold, Jr., ‘Irony in the Platonic Dialogues’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 36 (2002), 84–106 at 89–93, although Griswold’s observation of the potential for ironic actions (which also applies, though he does not distinguish them, to *eirôneia*) and his distinction between Socratic and Platonic irony are valuable. The same unquestioned assimilation occurs in A.N. Michelin, ‘( Tollé) *eirôneia*: Rudeness and Irony in Plato’s Gorgias’, *Classical Philology*, 93 (1998), 30–9 at 50 and 52, (though at 38, inexplicably, she refers to ‘the tactic of *eirôneia* without irony’), together with an inappropriately Aristotelian gloss on the subject in Plato at 52. K. M. Sayre, *Plato’s Literary Garden: How to Read a Platonic Dialogue* (Notre Dame, 1995), 32, remarks that *eirôneia* does not mean ‘Socratic irony’ in our modern ‘commendatory’ sense, but still translates it as ‘irony’ at Gorg. 489 B. 1.

2 The case of Arisoten of Ceos was brought to my attention by Monique Dussout, ‘Thales ou Socrate, qui commence? Où de l’ironie?’ [‘Thales or Socrates, who begins? Where is the irony?’], in Dussout, *Platon et la question de la pensée* (Paris, 2000), 15–44 at 30, a reference I owe in turn to Dimitri El Morr. While noting the real divergence between what Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Alcibiades mean by ascribing *eirôneia* to Socrates, Dussout argues contrary to the present paper that it is in the Platonic dialogues involving them and in Plato’s *Apology* that the term gains a superimposed second meaning of ‘irony’ on top of the older meaning of *eirôneia*. Note that neither Aristophanes nor Xenophon ascribes *eirôneia* to Socrates.

The case of Philodemus was brought to my attention by K. S. Steven’s unpub-
The Evolution of Eirônea

eironia (e.g. Cicero and Quintilian), and later Ironie (e.g. Schlegel, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) and words in other languages for 'irony'. But this later tradition has a life of its own and must be understood as stemming not from Plato but from Aristotle, who is shown below to have made eirônea mean 'irony' for his own rhetorical purposes rather than in consonance with any prior ascriptions of it to Socrates. The concept of 'Socratic irony' has no basis in Plato's use of eirônea with respect to Socrates.

That the occurrence of eirônea in Plato gives no support to the edifice of 'Socratic irony' is, in brief, because the (purported) purpose of someone called an eirôn is to conceal what is not said; the (purported) purpose of someone called an ironist is to convey what is not said (to at least one person, though not necessarily the person who is addressed in ironic tones). Thrasymachus and Alcibiades make the two most important ascriptions of eirônea to Socrates in Plato's dialogues. We shall see that they contradict one another in what they take Socrates to be concealing, a contradiction which suggests that the ascription of eirônea to Socrates in Plato's work cannot be taken at face value. Despite their disagreement about

listed Cambridge University doctoral dissertation (in progress), 'Socrates and the Romanization of Philosophy'.

In Plutarch, we see the survival of the Aristophanic and Platonic meaning beyond the advent of the Aristotelian one in other authors. See (as noted by Onorato, 'Rhetoric', 14) Plutarch's Life of Demetrius 18.6, where the diadochs are described as having formerly disseminated their violent attitude and intentions behind a mask of clemency: this dissembling, which involves our classic elements of concealing by feigning, is called 'their former eirônea'.

On the Platonist commentators, see D. Sedley, 'Socratic Irony in the Platonist Commentators', in J. Annas and C. Rowe (eds.), New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient (Washington, 2002), 37-57, and D. Blank, 'Commenta on Sedley', ibid., 59-71. At 52-3 Sedley rightly observes how difficult it is in most cases to decide whether a remark in a Platonic text is ironic, and the dangers of making such an assumption as an interpretative strategy.

Many translators and scholars of Plato have imported an Aristotelian framework into their understanding of eirônea in Plato, e.g. J. Adam (ed.), Plato's Apology Socrates (Cambridge, 1905), on 377a 7: 'ος ευκρησεσχώνοντος 'believing me to be insincere'. The eirônea of Socrates consisted in apparently insincere professions or disclaimers of some sort; in either case it is some sort of self-deprecation, moral or intellectual. Adam goes on to adduce the (Aristotelian) contrast with xalograia and the examples given at Sym. 216 d ff., without explaining how 'continually pretend[ing] to be in love when he is not' could count as an instance of Socratic self-deprecation. See similarly A. E. Taylor (trans. and intro.), Plato: The Sophist and The Statesman, ed. R. Kibbey and E. Anscombe (London, 1961), on Soph. 268 a: 'The fundamental meaning of irony [sic] to the Greek is insincerity self-deprecation made a pretext for evading one's responsibilities' (emphasis original), where the reference to self-deprecation again bears the imprint of Aristotle's reading of eirônea.
what Socrates is concealing, however, both Thrasydamus and Alcibiades take Socrates' communicative intention to be concealment rather than revelation. Both of them pride themselves on having penetrated a disguise which they take Socrates to have intended to maintain. And it is this which decisively distinguishes *eirôneia* from irony.

Against Gregory Vlastos's claim* that it is in some Platonic contexts, specifically with reference to Socrates, that words deriving from *eirôn-* come to mean 'irony', I argue that they both can and should throughout Plato be translated consistently with their meaning in Aristophanes of 'concealing by feigning' (in other words, an act of feigning which serves to conceal something).* While not all acts of feigning serve to conceal (an actor's feigning does not conceal anything), those which give rise to an ascription of *eirôneia* are thereby judged to do so. Such an accusation—for accusation is the speech-act in which such ascriptions usually feature—normally carries the implication of deceit; 10 Indeed, one can often accurately

---

* G. Vlastos, 'Socratic Irony', *Classical Quarterly*, 33 37 (1987), 79–93, as repr. in *Vlastos, Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge, 1991), 21–44. Both Vlastos, 'Socratic Irony', and Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault [Are]* (Berkley, 1998), locate the semantic shift in *eirôneia* which expands its meaning to include 'irony' as occurring within at least some of Plato's ascriptions of it to Socrates, so distinguishing the meaning of the term in certain Platonic contexts sharply from its meaning in Aristophanes. For Vlastos, the choice between translating an ascription of *eirôneia* to Socrates as 'dissembling' or as 'ironic' was literally a choice between a Socrates who was deceptive and one who was ironic; he overlooked the fact that the ascription of a deceptive motive to Socrates by a Platonic character may be false. Vlastos's own alternative, which is that Plato originated a sense of 'complex' irony in his characterization of Socrates as engaging in *eirôneia*, is both flawed (as argued by D. Morrison, 'On Professor Vlastos' Xenophon', *Ancient Philosophy*, 7 (1987), 9–22) and unnecessary (as argued here). For criticisms of Vlastos from other angles, see J. Gordon, *Turning toward Philosophy: Literary Devices and Dramatic Structure in Plato's Dialogues* (University Park, Pa., 1990), 117–33; P. Gottlieb, *The Complexity of Socratic Irony: A Note on Professor Vlastos' Account*, *Classical Quarterly*, 43 44 (1992), 278–9; and D. Roothuij, *Socratic Ignorance as Complex Irony: A Critique of Gregory Vlastos*, *Archaios*, 25 (1995), 39–52.

---

10 Here and throughout this article I offer analytical definitions which may not be particularly idiomatic, in order to make clear the structural elements of the meanings I discuss. 'Concealing by feigning' may be more idiomatically summed up by LSJ's 'dissembling', though see n. above for the inadequacy of LSJ's approach to defining the term. But 'dissembling' is not obviously parsed into these particular components and can be confusing in its use in English.

11 Here, I concur with the note to 337 a in G. M. A. Grube, (trans.), *Plato: Republic*, rev. by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1992): 'The Greek word *eirôneia*, unlike its usual translation "irony", is correctly applied only to someone who intends to deceive. Thus Thrasyamus is not simply accusing Socrates of
sum up 'concealing by feigning' in the single word 'deceiving' so long as the structure of the deceit is understood in terms of the prior phrase.

Admittedly, someone can be accused of being an eirôn only if the eirôneia has been detected by a second party, which means that at least a purported attempt at concealment, if not necessarily what was being concealed, has been exposed.11 (Whether that accusation was well founded may then itself be further judged by another party, such as the audience of a play or the reader of a Platonic dialogue.) But just as an ascription of adultery does not mean that the purported adulterer did so stray, so an ascription of eirôneia does not establish that the purported eirôn actually did (intend to) deceive.

My contention about the meaning of eirôneia in Plato raises two larger questions, one historical and one philosophical. To the first—the question of how it is that eirôneia came in Aristotle to acquire a more restricted and technical meaning which is consonant with, if not always identical to, 'irony'—I shall sketch an answer at the end of the article. In brief that answer appeals to Aristotle's attempt to circumscribe and stabilize the meaning of eirôneia to suit a technical purpose of rhetoric, and contrasts the continuing use of eirôneia in the Aristophanic–Platonic sense by fourth-century orators prior to or outside the Lyceum circle.12 The second—the question of saying one thing while meaning another; he is accusing him of trying to deceive those present.' Oddly, the note appeals for support to Vlastos, 'Socratic Irony', who while rejecting the translation of eirôneia as 'irony' in the Republic precisely defends it elsewhere. Even more oddly, the Grube/Reeve translation (which is also the one reprinted in Cooper, Plato, itself retains 'irony' and 'ironical' in its rendering of 337a. See also M. C. Stokes (ed.), Plato: Apology of Socrates (Warminster, 1997), who translates 38a as 'you will not be convinced, but will think I'm putting it on' and comments: 'On the word eirôneia and its relatives: 'irony' in English does not imply deceit, but in Greek of the fifth and early fourth centuries eirôneia ... does at least normally have that implication. Vlastos' exceptions from this period ... do not strike me as cogent; the earliest clear exception is Pseudo-Arist. Rh. Al. 21, not earlier than Aristotle.'
whether there is any sense left to the notion of ‘Socratic irony’ once it has been deprived of the support of ascriptions of εἰρόνεια in Plato’s work—I treat elsewhere. This article seeks only to establish the negative claim that εἰρόνεια should not be translated as ‘irony’ anywhere in Plato’s work. Any future attempts to read irony into, or out of, that work (or that of Xenophon, who nowhere ascribes an εἰρόν word to Socrates) cannot appeal to the ascription of εἰρόνεια to Socrates in Plato for support.

We may begin by reviewing the use of these words in Aristophanes, whose works contain its only three extant occurrences before Plato, only two of which give it substantive content. At *Wasps* 174 the jury-mad Philocleon, whose son has locked him in the house to prevent him from serving on any more juries, tries to leave the house, concealing the fact that he intends to join a jury by feigning to be taking his donkey to sell at market. His slave Xanthias correctly (from the audience’s perspective) identifies him as concealing his real intention in order to deceive his son. Xanthias remarks, ὅπως τρόφαιναι καθήκεν, ὡς εἰρονικός, which I translate ‘What a pretext he dangled in front of you [i.e. like a bait on a hook], how cunningly deceptive.’ Note that here it is an action which is described as quoted above), and commentary, together with a useful introductory note to ‘The Disssembler’ which is broadly correct in where it draws the line for the transformation of εἰρόνεια, but which lumps together all the Platonic ascriptions of it to Socrates as denoting his ‘hoodwink[ing] others by feigning ignorance’, see J. D. Dillig (ed. and trans.), *Theophrastus: Characters* (Cambridge, 2004), 106–7 and ad loc. at 156.


12 Vlastos, ‘Socratic Irony’, 39–42, also claimed to detect traces of irony in Xenophon’s portrait of Socrates, but however this may be, Xenophon nowhere employs the term εἰρόνεια or its cognates in relation to Socrates.

The third occurrence is at *Clouds* 449, where Strepsiades is soliloquizing on his decision to associate himself with the Thespian, listing all the attributes which he expects that he will gain as a result. Most of his chosen epithets have negative connotations in Attic, but he (to the audience, humorously) views them as positive because he aims for success at any price. The list of epithets does not provide much purchase on the specific meaning of εἰρόν; Vlastos, ‘Socratic Irony’, 29, with n. 3, is right to quote K. J. Dover (ed.), *Aristophanes: Clouds* (Oxford, 1988) ad loc., who remarks of the passage that εἰρόν figures in ‘a catalogue of abusive terms against a man who is a tricky opponent in lawsuits’. Dover goes on to gloss εἰρόν as ‘deceitful’, ‘pretending to be innocent when one is up to mischief’, comparing it to the *Wasps* and *Birds* passages, though he then muddies the waters by adding ‘making excuses’ and ‘pleading inability’, and by invoking Aristotle’s gloss on Socratic εἰρόνεια in Plato as ‘using affectation of intellectual inadequacy as a dialectic tool’.

16 Thanks to this point to Michael Trapp, who suggested this translation in
The Evolution of Eirôneia

*eirōnikos* rather than words, which underscores the difference between Aristophanes' use of the term and an Aristotelian emphasis on verbal self-deprecation. But more fundamentally the passage illustrates that the action is accused of being *eirōnikos* in so far as it involves concealing something (here, his true intention) by means of feigning (here, feigning the intention of taking the donkey to market).

Whereas the humour of *Wasps* depends on Philokleon being clearly engaged in feigning an action to conceal his true intention, the humour of *Birds* depends on the goddess Iris being clearly innocent of the concealing by feigning of which she is accused. At *Birds* 1211 the self-appointed ruler of the city of the birds, Pisthetaerus, demands of the captive Iris how she evaded his defences in order to enter the city. She replies that she has no idea which gate she has entered by, upon which Pisthetaerus remarks to his attendants, ἡκούσας αὐτῆς οἶν ἐπονεύεται, which I translate 'Did you hear her, how she deceitfully conceals the truth by feigning?'

Vlastos comments: 'it [the verb *eirōneuesthai*] is applied to Iris for lying her way into the city of the birds' ('Socratic Irony', 23). But while this is indeed what Pisthetaerus accuses her of doing, the whole joke is that she is doing no such thing. While he believes her to have sought to conceal her intention of penetrating the city by feigning ignorance of its defences, she has not perceived any such defences, either because she is a goddess whom they cannot impede, or because (as Nan Dunbar argues) no barricades or defences

private correspondence; a fuller unpacking would be 'how cunningly concealing his true motive by how he feigns'. D. M. MacDowell (ed.), *Aristophanes: Wasps* (Oxford, 1971), ad loc., suggests for εἰπονεύω 'disingenuously' or 'hypocritically', which captures a similar air of deceitful concealment; A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aristophanes: Wasps* (Warminster, 1983), translates, without a note, 'What an excuse he dangled, what an innocent air he took on, to get you to let him out!'

17 Steven (n. 7 above) has coined the useful term 'practical *eirôneia*' for such cases; compare C. Thirlwall, 'On the Irony of Sophocles', in *Remains Literary and Theological of Connop Thirlwall*, ed. J. J. S. Perowne, iii (London, 1878), 1-57 at 3, on 'practical irony' (emphasis removed), which is 'independent of all forms of speech', as *eirôneia* and irony share this structural possibility.

14 Compare A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aristophanes: Birds* (Warminster, 1987), ad loc.: 'did you hear her, how she dissembles?'

19 N. Dunbar (ed.), *Aristophanes: Birds* (Oxford, 1995), comments ad loc. that Pisthetaerus' sceptical response to the chorus leader at 1167 about the messenger's report of the successful establishing of the city of birds—roughly, that it seems too good to be true—shows that no such city walls had been built. C. Shelley, 'The Irony of Iris and Socrates', previously available at www.members.rogers.com/
have actually been built. So his accusation that she is engaging in *eirôneusthai* is false, shown to the audience to be incorrect. She is not concealing anything, nor is she feigning anything, a point made apparent in her bewildered next line (‘Am I dreaming?’) as the exchange continues to alternate between his officiousness and her bewilderment. This text sits athwart Vlastos’s binary classification of *eirôneia* as deceiving vs. irony as non-deceiving communication. It demonstrates a third possibility: *eirôneia* may be ascribed to mean deceit, but this ascription may be false. Thus we need not, *pace* Vlastos, impose a new definition on the term in order to rescue Socrates (or anyone else accused of *eirôneia*) from the accusation of deceit. For accusations of deceit may simply be wrong, and *eirôneia* accordingly be wrongly ascribed.

Let us turn now to the uses of *eirôn-* words in Plato, and begin with three occurrences in which it is used neither by nor about Socrates. These cases are useful because we can interpret them free from presuppositions about ‘Socratic irony’. The first is Hermogenes complaining of Cratylus at the beginning of the eponymous dialogue that the latter ‘explains nothing and conceals by feigning [*eirôneusthai*] towards me, pretending [*προσποιοιόμενος*] that he has in him knowledge about it [the correct theory of names] such that, if he chose to speak it out clearly, would make it the case that I would agree to say what he says [about names]’ (Crat. 384A 1–4, my translation). What Cratylus is accused of feigning is not the claim to possess (what he takes to be) knowledge, since as David Sedley remarks, ‘[n]o one is likely to doubt that Cratylus, for all his

---

20 L. Bergson, ‘Eiron und Eironesia’, Hermes, 99 (1971), 409–22 at 411, suggests that Aristophanes is actually playing here on the Socratic attitude of not-knowing; if so, *Birds* shows how not-knowing may depend on the assumptions in the eye of the beholder, a point which could be helpful in interpreting the notorious paradoxes surrounding the Socratic disavowal of knowledge.
reticence about explaining it, has a worked out theory of names, the one which has come to be known as linguistic "naturalism". It is rather the insinuation that were Cratylus to expound his knowledge, his account would be so compelling that Hermogenes would inevitably and necessarily come to agree. Hermogenes sees this as a feint which conceals the fact that Cratylus may not have such a knock-down proof. His objection is that Cratylus is trying to triumph without having put his theory to the test, by feigning it to be so conclusive that the argument can be short-circuited.

A second use of eirôneia in Plato without involvement of Socrates is at Soph. 268 a 8 (invoked again at 268 c 8), where the Eleatic Stranger divides the category of belief-imitation or δοξομυμητική into two branches. One branch, which will be dubbed the ἀπλοῦς or ‘simple’ one, consists of imitators who are ‘foolish, thinking they know things which they only believe’ (267 e 11–268 a 1). The typical member of the other branch, which will be dubbed the eirônikos one, is described as follows: '[having] been around a lot of discussions... by temperament he’s suspicious and fearful that he doesn’t know the things that he pretends in front of others to know' (268 a 1–4). Note that what is purportedly concealed here is not possession of knowledge, but rather its possible lack. The eirônikoi sophists fear that they may be ignorant, and seek to conceal this from the public by feigning knowledge of the subject in question.

Similar to this second case is the third, in Laws 10, 908 c–e. Here

---

21 D. Sedley, Plato's Cratylus (Cambridge, 2003), 51.

22 It has been suggested that the Cratylus is like the Sophist in using eirôneia to refer to someone's claiming or pretending to know more than he does: see M. Gourinat, 'Socrate était-il un ironiste?', Revue de métaphysique et de morale, 91/3 (1986), 339–53 at 344, who, however, fails here as throughout to distinguish between eirôneia and irony; and Bergson, 'Eiron und Eironie', 410, who points out that these two instances do not fit Büchner’s proposal that the core sense of eirôneia was Kleintreff. Opstomer, 'Rhetoric', 10 and n. 31, also invokes the Sophist passage to make the same point against Büchner. They are referring to W. Büchner, 'Über den Begriff der Eironie', Hermes, 76 (1941), 339–58 at 340.

---

23 My translation draws in part on that of White in Cooper, Plato. Compare L. Campbell, The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato, with a revised text and English notes (Oxford, 1867): his gloss on eirônikos here is 'hollow, insincere, designing'. L. Robin (trans. with notes), Platon: œuvres complètes [Œuvres] (Paris 1950), ad loc., translates as 'plein d'astuce', and remarks: 'On "hypocrite". Platon dit “ironique”, prenant dans un sens péjoratif le terme qu’il applique d’ordinaire inversément à l’attitude de Socrate, lequel fait mine, non point de savoir, mais de ne point savoir' (emphasis original). Contra Robin, I seek to show that there is no reason to take eirônikon in anything other than the usual pejorative sense which it exhibits also in application to Socrates.
the Athenian Stranger is outlining that version of atheism which consists in not believing that the gods exist, and he identifies two groups among the adherents to that view. One group includes those who exercise frankness (παρρησία) about the fact that they do not believe that the gods exist. The other group are by definition those who are not frank or honest about their lack of belief in the gods’ existence. This group is described as ‘full of cunning and guile’, and is later identified as eirônikos (908 B 2). The eirônikos type deceive others about their lack of belief in the gods’ existence by concealing it, e.g. by feigning that they are actually diviners.¹⁴

Vlastos for his part admits that the Sophist and Laws passages (he does not mention the Cratylus) exhibit the standard Aristophanic meaning of eirôneia implying that the concealing is deceitful: indeed, he cites them alongside instances in Aristophanes and Demosthenes as exemplifying that original meaning, which he associates with the ‘intention to deceive’.²⁵ But he claims that the inference from these cases to the conclusion that eirôneia is always used by Plato with this meaning is mistaken. He acknowledges that the burden of proof—that a word used in a multitude of cases with a given sense is used in other cases in a sharply different sense—rests with him, and contends that the proof needed can be found in the Gorgias, where he takes eirôneia to be used by both Socrates and Callicles of one another in order to mock ‘without the slightest imputation of intentional deceit’ (‘Socratic Irony’, 26).

Before disputing Vlastos’s reading of the Gorgias, it is useful to consider two other passages where eirôneia is used by Socrates: the Apology and Euthydemus. In the Apology speech in which he is proposing a penalty to the jury who have voted to convict him, Socrates explains why he is not proposing exile as his sentence even though the jury might be likely to accept it. He says that wherever he might go, the young men would listen to him, and this would ultimately lead to him being driven out of any city where he might have sought refuge. He then goes on to imagine and answer a possible objection to this reason for not avoiding exile:

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to

The Evolution of Eirôneia

keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me
and will think I am deceiving you [eirôneuesthai]. On the other hand, if I
say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and
those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself
and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will
believe me even less. (Ap. 37 Π 3–38 κ 7)24

What does Socrates mean by eirôneuesthai here? Vlastos says noth-
ing about it. Alexander Nehamas, deciding as did G. M. A. Grube
in his translation that ὥσ εἷπωνευμένως should be translated as ‘being
ironical’, explains it thus:

Whether his judges believe that Socrates is sincerely convinced of his divine
connection or is making fun of them, they will think that his claim is also a
claim that he is superior to them. Socrates’ ‘evasion’, whether truthful or
dishonest, would be taken to involve a boast, and that is why he finds it so
difficult to make it. (Art, 49–50)

This explanation accords with Nehamas’s general claim that ‘irony’
(as he translates eirôneia in this and other contexts referring to
Socrates) involves boasting and superiority on the part of the iro-
nist.27 But this claim in turn does not conform to the practices of
ascribing eirôneia in either Aristophanes or Plato, in all of whose

24 I quote the translation by Grube in Cooper, Plato, except that I substitute ‘you
will think I am deceiving you’ for his ‘you will think I am being ironical’, in line
with the present argument. E. de Strycker, SJ, and S. R. Slings, Plato’s Apology of
Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary, edited
and completed from the papers of the late E. de Strycker, SJ, by S. R. Slings (Leiden,
New York, and Cologne, 1994), ad loc., give no exposition of our term except to refer
to a general discussion they give at 197, which in my view is imprecise: ‘the
jurors will not accept this motivation and think it a mere pretext: as they see it,
Socrates had made this choice because it suited him, and he should not now try to
avoid his responsibility by invoking a divine command’. Robin, Œuvres, translates
well as ‘feinte naïveté’, but compares it ad loc. to the simulation of ignorance
which he takes to be ‘Socratic irony’, though he says it would be ‘to anticipate’
to translate ‘ironiquement’ here. J. Burnet (ed.), Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology of
Socrates, and Crito (Oxford, 1924), ad loc., more soundly: “regarding this pretext
as a sly evasion”. The words εἶπων, εἵπωνελα, εἵπωνευμένως are only used of Socrates by
his opponents, and have always an unfavourable meaning. The εἶπων is the man who
shirks responsibility by sly excuses (such as the Socratic profession of ignorance).
Observe that the court is not for a moment expected to take the oracle very seriously,
though they knew well enough it had actually been delivered. Socrates is serious
enough; but, when he speaks of “disobedience to God”, he is really thinking of
something very different from the oracle-mongering of Delphi.’ On this last point,
see also M. F. Burnyeat, ‘The Impiety of Socrates’, Ancient Philosophy, 17 (1997),
1–12.

27 Nehamas, Art, 62: ‘the sense of superiority that is irony’s constant companion’.
An interpretation of eirôneia as involving the recognition of ‘eine Chicane, einen
The Evolution of Eirôneia

Having resolved this use of eirôneia by Socrates about himself, we must look now at the two cases where he deploys the term about others. One is in the Euthydemus, when he is recounting his being questioned by the eristic Dionysodorus, and says that at one point the eristic resumed his questioning only after briefly 'deceptively [eirônikōs] holding back [from speech], as if he were contemplating some weighty matter' (302 B 3–4, my translation). To translate eirônikōs here as 'ironically' would be to have Socrates describing Dionysodorus as intending to convey the gap between his purportedly pregnant pause and his empty eristic line of argument, which makes no sense. But on our reading of eirônikos as 'concealing by feigning', it rather indicates Socrates' accusation (as narrator) that Dionysodorus has feigned a pregnant pause concealing (absent) profound thought, in order to build up the audience's respect for the eristic argument to follow. And this is more consonant with the dialogue as a whole. Admittedly, Dionysodorus on this reading would be construed as intending his pause to be perceived, and to be perceived as an indication of his having some deep thought to convey. But he does not intend it to be perceived as merely feigning the claim to have something (deep thought) to conceal. It is the unmasking of this feigning, unintended by Dionysodorus, that Socrates signals in diagnosing his behaviour as eirônikos.

The other case where Socrates deploys the term eirôneia brings us at last to his exchange with Callicles in the Gorgias (489 D–E), believe me even less' (490 B 1–7). The majority (and notice that he claims it is only 'some of you' who will find this point the most difficult) have made plain by their voting to convict him that they believe neither his story of the oracle instructing him to question others nor his earlier assertion about the goodness of discussing virtue, which were part of his claim to be benefiting the city as a gadfly.

9 I owe identification of this passage to Dixsaut, 'Thalès', 32.
10 M. Narcy, Le Philosophe et son double: un commentaire de l'Euthydème de Platon (Paris, 1984), 35–57, treats the question of Socratic irony and its relation to incidences of eirôneia in the context of a discussion of the Euthydemus. While he rightly contends that the Greek word should not be translated as 'irony' in the Euthydemus, at 41 he wrongly in my view also rejects any relationship 'de l'ordre de la ruse'. More broadly, his contention at 56 that when ascribed to Socrates eirôneia is best translated as 'se dérober aux questions' groundlessly separates these incidences of it from the others in Plato and Aristophanes. However, elsewhere, in 'Le comique, l'ironie, Socrate', in M.-L. Desclos (ed.), Le Rire des Grecs: anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne (Grenoble, 2000), 283–92 at 289 and 292, where he argues generally that Socratic eirôneia involves not responding as one is expected to do, he connects it to the later use by Demosthenes. See also his brief restatement in 'Qu’est-ce que l’ironie socratique?', Journal of the International Plato Society (March, 2001), available at http://www.nd.edu/~plato/contents.htm (accessed 29 January 2006).
where the same term is also deployed by Callicles against him. Socrates has just caught Callicles in a self-contradiction. The latter had asserted that justice is determined by convention rather than nature, but he had also asserted that justice is the justice of the stronger, and had admitted that the many are stronger than the few. Socrates then asked him to agree that the many, being the stronger, must therefore be correct in their belief that having an equal share is just. Callicles retorts that being ‘the superior’ must mean being ‘the better’ rather than ‘the stronger’. Socrates apostrophizes Callicles as ὁ ὕπυπνός (‘O wonderful one’, 489 D 1) and then addresses him in terms which conclude with the two following injunctions and the exchange they provoke (my own translation throughout):

(G1) socr. But tell me once more from the beginning, who you say are ‘the better’, if they are [as Callicles has just conceded] not ‘the stronger’? And, O marvellous one [ὁ ὕπυπνός], teach me more gently, so that I don’t give up attending to you.

(G2) call. You are concealing your real attitude [towards me] by feigning [εἰρονευεσθαι], Socrates.

(G3) socr. No, by Zethus, Callicles, whom you made use of just now in concealing your real attitude by feigning [εἰρονευεσθαι] towards me. But tell me, who do you say are ‘the better’? (489 D 5–E 4)

In G3 Socrates accuses Callicles of having engaged in εἰρόνεια towards him in the passage involving the latter’s mention of Zethus, which is 485 E 3–486 D 1. That passage concludes Callicles’ great diatribe against Socrates for living the life of a philosopher skulking in corners rather than seeking to realize ambition and fame in

---


12 My translation is meant to allude to the pedagogical connotations of the verb used here (ἀνοφορικάω; see LSJ) which have been drawn to my attention by K. S. Steven (n. 7 above); compare D. J. Zeyl’s translation, ‘go easier on me in your teaching, so that I won’t quit your school’, in Cooper, Plato.

13 My translation draws in part on that of Zeyl in Cooper, Plato.
the active life of the city, a philosopher who would be disgracefully unable even to save himself in court if prosecuted. He compared his criticism of Socrates on this count to Zethus’ criticism of his twin brother Amphion in a play by Euripides (the lost Antiope). In the play, Zethus defends the active life and its capacity for self-defence and aid to others against (what he sees as) Amphion’s feckless commitment to contemplation and music. Vlastos takes Callicles to be mocking Socrates by comparing him with the ‘pathetic’ Amphion, and then carries over the meaning of mockery into the subsequent reciprocal exchange of accusations of eirônea which he sums up in the claim (noticed earlier) that ‘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’ (‘Socratic Irony’, 26). But when the eirônea exchange and the Zethus back reference are understood in context, we shall see that putative intentional deceit by a concealing act of feigning—as is standard with Aristophanic and Platonic accusations of eirônea—is precisely what is in play.

Introducing his invocation of Zethus at 485E, Callicles had averred, ‘But Socrates, I do feel a proper friendly regard towards you.’ Thus framed, the point of the Zethus story appears to be Zethus’ claim in Euripides’ lost play to be doing out criticism of his brother’s life of contemplation and music solely out of sincere concern for his being thereby deprived of any practically relevant and beneficial expertise. Callicles claims to be as sincerely concerned as Zethus was with the welfare of his object of criticism, in his case Socrates, whose philosophic life he attacks as ridiculous (καταγελαστον, appearing in various forms in at 484E1, E3, 485A7) and unmanly (ἀνανδρον, 485C2), making its adherent pathetically unable to defend his interests in political or juridical fora.

In subsequently charging Callicles in G3 with eirônea in having made that criticism, Socrates is charging that Callicles was concealing his genuine attitude to Socrates by feigning concern for him. What attitude is it that Socrates thinks that Callicles was concealing? It could have been a sense of superiority, or a driving passion for eristic triumph which leaves Callicles indifferent to the predicament and needs of his interlocutors. What, precisely, was concealed is not made clear; what matters is that Socrates detects that Callicles was deceitfully feigning in expressing his concern for Socrates as modelled on that of Zethus for Amphion.
We can now move back one step to see what Callicles meant in making the first charge of *eirōneia* in the dialogue in G2, charging Socrates with *eirōneia* for saying to him ‘O marvellous one, teach me more gently, so that I don’t give up attending to you.’ While again it is not spelt out exactly what Callicles thinks Socrates is concealing, the charge of *eirōneia* makes it plain that he does not believe that Socrates is sincere in his request for more gentle teaching. Callicles charges Socrates with feigning this request, without having to establish exactly what it is that Socrates would thereby wish to hide. What matters is that the two claims are symmetrical: Callicles accuses Socrates of feigning concern for him just as Socrates is accusing Callicles of having feigned concern for him in the same way that Zethus feigned concern for Amphion. Each accuses the other of feigning their concern for the welfare or value of the other, and so each accuses the other of deceit. They are precisely accusing each other of deceitful concealing by feigning (what Vlastos, who wanted to exclude it from this passage, dubbed ‘shamming’), which is equivalent neither to mockery nor to irony.\(^{34}\)

Readers may feel that this interpretation fails to get to grips with what they take to be an obviously ironic element of the text which is independent of the meaning of *eirōneia*. While putative incidences of irony independent of the meaning of *eirōneia* are generally outside the scope of this article, persuasiveness as to how to read the *Gorgias* requires brief comment on one here. This is the ‘ironic praise’\(^{35}\) which is epitomized in Socrates twice apostrophizing Callicles as ‘O wonderful one [δ θαυμάσω]’ and ‘O marvellous one [δ θαυμάσω]’, and which many readers take as supporting evidence that Callicles’ charge of *eirōneia* is actually a charge of irony. However, as we shall now see, Eleanor Dickey’s magisterial analysis of ‘friendship terms of address’ (in her parlance, FTs) in ancient Greek establishes that such epithets, including these ‘friendship terms’, are with only one exception never in Plato to be read ironically.\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Vlastos, ‘Socratic Irony’, 26, says that Callicles protests against Socrates’ injunction to ‘teach me more gently’ as ‘a transparent irony, since Callicles no doubt feels that . . . it is Socrates who has been playing the schoolmaster right along’. But this is not correct. It is Callicles who has been lecturing Socrates for some time before Socrates has intervened again at this point in the dialogue.

\(^{35}\) This is the useful phrase coined by A. W. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy [Genres]* (Cambridge, 1995), 115, 119, and passim.

\(^{36}\) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address: From Herodotus to Lucian [Greek Forms]* (Oxford, 1996). I discuss these terms in Plato more fully in Lane, ‘Irony’. Of all the
Dickey’s contention is that ‘FTs in Plato, rather than being complimentary to the addressee, show the dominance of the speaker’ (Greek Forms, 117). She argues that they are genuinely used as polite terms rather than insults or ironic put-downs, albeit that their politeness serves to demonstrate the speaker’s control of the situation in a somewhat patronizing way (Greek Forms, 122, 126). In the Gorgias, she observes, Socrates uses no FTs in conversing with Gorgias; he alone uses FTs in the conversation with Polus; and both he and Callicles use FTs in conversing with each other. This pattern fits with the fact that Gorgias willingly enters into conversation and makes no resistance to Socrates’ questioning; Polus needs to be kept on the conversational track which he tends to wander off; while the exchange of FTs between Socrates and Callicles both in and beyond the passage that we have been considering indicates that the dominance of the conversation is contested between them from the time that Callicles begins speaking. Dickey shows that the use of FTs in our passage is no indication of irony; it is rather an indication of the tussle over conversational dominance which marks the dialogue as a whole. And so the FTs import no irony of their own to the interpretation of eirôneia here, which as has been shown should be understood in the normal Aristophanic-Platonic sense of ‘concealing by feigning’ rather than in any new and putatively non-deceitful way.

We turn now to consider the two best-known and most significant ascriptions of eirôneia to Socrates, by Thrasydamus and Alcibiades. Yet the contrast between what each means by his ascriptions points up how much Plato links the use of eirôneia to the character of the person who ascribes it. Indeed, contrasting Thrasydamus and Alcibiades will underscore the fact that the ascription of eirôneia to Socrates is portrayed by Plato as lying entirely in the eye of the beholder. It is a question of temperament and perception as to what the interlocutor who charges Socrates with eirôneia believes him

FTs used by Socrates in Plato, Dickey at 143 mentions only a single instance of an FT used in Plato as in other authors in a ‘usually ironic’ way: this is ἀοράτωρ, which is used five times by Socrates in Plato, including Gorgias 489 c 8, just before our main passage. But her full evidence and analysis show how rare such an ironic use of an FT is in Plato. The difficulty of (and resistance to) fully appreciating what Dickey’s line of analysis shows about FTs not normally being ironic in Plato is indicated in a warm review of her book by H. Dik in Bryn Mawr Classical Reviews, 9 Nov. 1997; available at http://cat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1997/97.11.09.html (accessed 29 January 2006), where Dik bizarrely concludes that Dickey’s analysis ‘fits in well with the picture of [Socrates as] an accomplished ironist’.
to be trying to conceal. Thrasylocian scorn for Socrates detects him to be hiding a fear of ignorance; Alcibiadean baffled admiration detects him to be hiding, and as Andrea Nightingale stresses, 'hoarding', knowledge (Genres, 124, 126). Given these opposing claims, as well as the moral defects of their proponents, the reader must beware before assuming that their ascriptions of eirôneia are meant by Plato to record something true about Socrates. They are accusing him, and what they accuse him of depends on what they (with their own marked flaws) perceive as fault. It is hard to imagine how much more clearly Plato could have signalled that eirôneia is not to be taken as a conclusive characterization of Socrates, than by having Thrasylocus and Alcibiades ascribe it to him for opposite reasons.

The contexts for each ascription are well known. Let us begin with the Republic (336 a ff.), where Vlastos (in contrast to Nehamas) does construe eirôneia in the Aristophanic sense of concealing by feigning, but where he misconstrues both what is being feigned and what that feigning may be concealing. Socrates and Polemarchus have just reached an agreement that Polemarchus' definition of justice as giving each what is owed (understood as harming enemies and benefiting friends) is not true. Thrasylocus breaks into the conversation to attack this conclusion and their actions in reaching it. He charges that they have been acting like idiots who simply 'give way' to one another in the question-and-answer mode. And then he challenges Socrates as follows:

(R1) ... if you truly want to know what justice is, don't just ask questions nor out of love of honour [φιλοτιμούν] engage in elenchus when someone answers them. You know that it is easier to ask than to answer, so you yourself answer to tell us what you say justice is. (336 c 2–6)

Socrates as narrator continues, saying that he was afraid and answered 'trembling a little':

(R2) Don't be too hard on us, Thrasylocus, for if Polemarchus and I made an error in our investigation, you should know that we did so unwillingly. If we were searching for gold, we'd never willingly give way to each other, if by doing so we'd destroy our chance of finding it. So don't think that in searching for justice, a thing more valuable than even a large quantity of gold, we'd mindlessly give way to one another or be less than completely serious about finding it. You surely mustn't think that, but rather—as I do—that we're incapable
of finding it. Hence it's surely far more appropriate for us to be pitied
by you clever people [τῶν δεινῶν] than to be given a hard time." (336 E
2–337 A 2)

And he then as narrator describes Thrasymachus' response follow-
ing a sarcastic laugh:

(R3) 'By Heracles', he said, 'that's just Socrates' usual way of feigning
something to conceal what he's up to [my translation of εἰσθοίη
εἰπωμένα, 'habitual eirōneia']. I knew, and I said so to these people
earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone ques-
tioned you, you'd feign something [eirōneusthai] and do lots of things
rather than give an answer.' [Socrates then gives his own reply:]
'That's because you're clever [σοφός], Thrasymachus.' (337 A 4–8)

Notice that Thrasymachus charges Socrates both with engaging in
eirōneusthai in what he has just said and with engaging in habi-
tual eirōneia (we shall see that Alcibiades makes a similar double
claim). Let us begin by considering the particular charge, that
what Socrates has just said—protesting that he and Polemarchus
were not giving way to each other mindlessly or frivolously, but
rather were together incapable of finding justice though they tried—
was said, as it were (to coin an English counterpart to eirōnikōs),
eironically. Although some, including Grube and Reeve, whose
translation I have otherwise largely followed, translate eirōneia and
eirōneusthai here as 'irony' and 'be ironical', Vlastos is happy to
treat this as an instance of the traditional Aristophanic meaning of
eirōneia and eirōneusthai as dissimulation, by which he means con-
cealing in order to deceive (roughly what I also take to be the Aristo-
phanic meaning). What Vlastos, however, takes Thrasymachus to
be charging Socrates with dissembling or concealing is actual knowl-
dge. Writes Vlastos:

Thrasymachus is charging that Socrates lies in saying that he has no answer

37 The translation of this paragraph of text is only lightly altered from that of
Grube/Reeve in Cooper, Plato; in the other paragraphs quoted from the Republic
below, this translation is also drawn on to some extent, but the crucial lines for
purposes of the present argument are my own.

38 Contrast the translation of this section by Grube/Reeve in Cooper, Plato: 'By
Heracles, he said, that's just Socrates' usual irony. I knew, and I said so to these
people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned you,
you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer.' P. Friedländer, Plato,
have the usual irony of Socrates'; his larger discussion incorporates Socratic irony
into that of Plato, the 'ironic metaphysician' (147).
of his own to the question he is putting to others: he most certainly has, Thrasy- 
macus 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. (‘Socratic Irony’, 24)

But is it the case that Socrates ‘most certainly’ has, as Vlastos sug- 
gests, an answer of his own to the question of what justice is, and that it is his keeping such an answer under wraps that Thrasy-
machus is protesting against? In R1 Thrasymachus objects that Socrates is not actually doing his utmost to reach a definition of 
justice, because he has refrained from one obvious path to that end, which is for him to offer an answer himself. Instead, his philotimia 
(‘love of honour’) is leading him to engage in elenches with Pole- 
marchus. In R2 Socrates tries to rebut the claim that he has not been doing his utmost to define justice, saying that he has been 
working together with Polemarchus to this end in all seriousness; R3 then constitutes Thrasymachus’ rejection of Socrates’ sincerity in 
this rebuttal. Thrasymachus charges that in saying that he and Polemarchus have been doing their best to define justice, Socrates 
is actually feigning to have given the search his best efforts, while 
concealing his own reluctance to answer. (Contrast Vlastos, who 
says that Thrasymachus takes Socrates to be lying about having no definition of his own; Thrasymachus’ charge is rather about the 
value and purpose of the elenctic engagement with Polemarchus. The 
generalization of the charge of eirōneia in this instance to habitual (εἰρωνεία) eirōneia implies that Socrates is habitually 
reluctant to answer, and that he covers up this reluctance with feigned commitment to joint search as a superior method or to the 
productivity of the elenches.

39 The comma here is misprinted as a full stop; the original publication in Classic Quarterly, NS 37 (1987), 81, confirms the comma (but gives ‘does’ rather than ‘has’).
40 Compare Xenophon’s treatment of what is εἰρωνεία in Socrates. In Mem. 1. 2. 3 
(trans. E. C. Marchant, in Xenophon, iv. Memorabilia and Oeconomicus (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1968)), Charicles, one of the Thirty Tyrants, is depicted as prohibiting Socrates from holding any conversation with the young. Goaded by Socrates to explain the prohibition more fully, he says: ‘Socrates, you are in the habit [εἰρωνέω] of asking questions to which you know the answer: so that is when you are not to do.’ Socrates responds by asking whether he cannot answer simple questions such as where Charicles lives, to which the answer is that he can. It is striking that Xenophon’s character accuses Socrates of asking questions to which he knows the answer (in contrast to Thrasymachus); that his Socrates does not dispute the validity of this accusation; and that his Socrates’ subsequent reference to his own ignorance is made purely hypothetical (‘lest I unwittingly transgress through ignorance [δύναμαι], I want clear directions from you’, 1. 2. 34).
Why, according to Thrasy machus, is Socrates both in this case and habitually reluctant to give his own answer, concealing this reluctance by feigning a commitment to the elenchus as the best path to knowledge? Because Thrasymachus believes Socrates to be motivated by philotimia, it makes no sense for him to be charging Socrates with a reluctance to reveal genuine knowledge—because if Socrates had such knowledge, the surest way for him to satisfy his philotimia would be to display it. Rather, what he must be charging Socrates with concealing is the fear that his knowledge would prove inadequate. Just as in the Sophist, we saw the eirônikos belief-imitator described as hiding his suspicion that he lacks knowledge behind a cloak of putatively knowledgeable speeches, Socrates is charged here by Thrasy machus with hiding an absence of knowledge (or a suspected one, since the status of his knowledge has so far been shielded from the proof-test of the elenchus) behind a cloak of questioning others. In both cases, the cloak is meant to ward off challenges that would expose the self-suspected ignorance. (While Vlastos notes the shielding effect, he seems to imply that Socrates has an actual and potentially sound definition hidden behind it, whereas in my view Thrasy machus is insinuating that there may not be.)

This interpretation is supported by the fact that Thrasy machus goes on to propose that he give his own answer to the question of what justice is, asking Socrates what he will do if that answer is (as the tone of the question implies it will be) ‘a better one’ (337 D 1–2). And Socrates himself, as narrator, comments on the action of the dialogue in terms which also confirm this reading:

It was obvious that Thrasy machus thought he had a fine answer and that he wanted to earn their admiration by giving it, but he pretended [προσεπο- εύρε] that he wanted to indulge his love of victory [φιλοποιεῖ] by forcing me to answer. However, he agreed in the end, and then said: ‘There you

41 προσεποίησε is the key to the scholiast’s remarks on eirônia in the Gorgias and eirônia ἐν καρασται[v in the Republic: the εἰρῶν ‘pretends’ (προσεποίησις) to be ‘incapable of doing something which he is capable of doing’, while the ἀλάζων ‘pretends’ to be ‘capable of doing something which he is incapable of doing’ (ad Gorg. 489 B, Rep. 337 A). These glosses fit awkwardly with the texts, betraying instead clear Aristotelian influence, as in the contrast between εἰρῶν and ἀλάζων. The remark on Sym. 216 B is more interesting: eirônia is there glossed as ὅπορκοψεως, χελεκίων, of which the first connotes ‘playing a part’ but the second imports the post- aristotelian sense of jesting. See Scholia Platonica, ed. W. C. Greene (Haverford, Pa., 1938), ad loc.; these are the only remarks on the passages concerning us in this article contained in either part 1 (the Scholia VETERA) or part 2 (the Scholia Arethae).
have Socrates' wisdom; he himself isn't willing to teach, but he goes around learning from others and isn't even grateful to them.' (338 A 5-B 4)

As Socrates reports it, what Thrasymachus believed at this point in the dialogue was that it was he himself who had something to teach others, not that Socrates was concealing anything from which he or others could learn. Vlastos is correct, then, in his conclusion (rejecting the translations offered by Bloom, Grube, and Shorey, as by other subsequent scholars) that 'there is no excuse for rendering eirôneia here by "irony"' (‘Socratic Irony’, 24–5). But he is wrong in implying that what Thrasymachus charges Socrates with is the attempted concealment of knowledge. The charge is rather the attempted concealment of ignorance, or better, of a feared inadequacy of any attempt to give a definition.

In his interpretation of this passage Nehamas does not follow Vlastos, and instead treats eirôneusthai as importing irony, which for Nehamas is attended by mockery and superiority. He says that Thrasymachus 'charges Socrates with pretending to be innocent of his real meaning . . . and with failing, intentionally, to hide his mockery', and that it is this taunting and mocking to which Thrasymachus objects and which, although 'at best peripheral features of Aristophanic eirôneia, the point of which . . . is to pass unnoticed', are 'essential to irony as we understand it today' (Art, 58). But given what we have so far understood of the passage, this interpretation appears to be wholly detached from its context. Socrates has not been mocking Thrasymachus or anyone else when the passage begins—he has said nothing to Thrasymachus before the latter interrupts him, and he has been encouraging Polemarchus along—except if one construes his failing to give his own definition as mockery. But that is just what Thrasymachus, as we have seen, does not do. He construes Socrates' failure to give his own definition as evidence of inferiority, not of superiority. Rather than detecting in Socrates an irony which evinces a wounding and mocking superiority (which is Nehamas's line), it is Thrasymachus

42 Vlastos makes this assertion because he wrongly believes that 'if that translation were correct, lying would be a standard form of irony' ('Socratic Irony', 25).

43 Nehamas may also be assuming that Socrates' comment as narrator that he was 'afraid' and 'trembling' before Thrasymachus' outburst, and his references to Thrasymachus as τῶν θεῶν and σοφός, are all ironic. On such narrative ironies by Socrates, which are independent of the meaning of eirôneia and which could not have been known to the participants within the conversation as it happened, see Lane, 'Irony.'
The Evolution of Eirênia

who is bent on humiliating Socrates by mocking his poor attempt to conceal his feared ignorance.\(^{44}\)

If eirênia means the usual ‘concealing by feigning’ in the Republic, the only place left for the ‘irony’ interpretation to take refuge is the Symposium.\(^{45}\) Here, as noted earlier, we must be careful not to take Alcibiades’ claim to have penetrated Socrates’ concealment as a claim that Socrates had intended (ironically) to convey something that he was only apparently concealing. Alcibiades never makes such a claim. For him, Socrates’ intention to conceal is real; it is only by chance that he claims to have penetrated Socrates’ façade. Like Thrasymachus, he ascribes eirênia to Socrates twice, once as a general characteristic (§1, below) and once in a particular context (§2, below). And note that he explicitly ascribes deception to Socrates as the motive for such concealing by feigning. At the end of his speech he says that he has seasoned his praise of Socrates with a little fault-finding, and that, like Charmides, Euthydemus, and others, he has been deceived (ἐξαπατών, 222 β 3) by Socrates’ playing the lover, with the result that they tumbled into love with him themselves. He avers that his purpose for telling this to Agathon is that the boy will be on his guard against being similarly deceived (ἐξαπατῶσθαι, 222 β 5).\(^{46}\) This confirms that

\(^{44}\) This is confirmed by Thrasymachus’ use of ἄδικος as a friendship term of address at 338 ε 6, where he believes himself to be triumphant in giving a victorious definition of justice as ‘the advantage of the stronger’. Dickey, Greek Forms, 111, observes that ἄδικος in Plato specifically expresses a victory in the argument, and so it fits that Thrasymachus seeks to reclaim it after an earlier use of it by Socrates in addressing him.

\(^{45}\) For readings of the Symposium which emphasize irony see: Vlastos, ‘Socratic Irony’, 33–42, where he asserts at 36 that it is ‘incontestably clear that “ironically” has to be the meaning of eirênikēs, for the context gives no foothold to the notion of pretence or deceit’, and then argues that the same meaning should be presumed and can be defended at 216 ε; Nehamas, Art, 57–64; R. Hunter, Plato’s Symposium (Oxford, 2004), 11; A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff (trans.), Symposium, in Cooper, Plato, at 216 ε (‘In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony’) and 218 δ (‘he said in that absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his’); also, as cited by Vlastos, S. Groden (trans.), Symposium, in J. A. Brentlinger (ed.), The Symposium of Plato (Amherst, 1970), and W. Hamilton (trans. and intro.), Plato: Symposium (Baltimore, 1951). But contrast C. J. Rowe (ed. and trans.), Plato: Symposium (Warminster, 1998), who translates 216 ε 4–5 as ‘spends his whole life continually pretending and playing with people’ and 218 δ 6 as ‘with great pretence of seriousness’. Rowe comments on the latter passage that ‘No doubt he [Socrates] is also being ironic in our sense . . . but Alcibiades is surely not calling him “ironic”, since that would mean that he actually understood what S. was saying’ (emphasis original).

\(^{46}\) On ἀντίρητος, ἴδιος, δὲνος, and their cognates as terms for deception in Athenian
in ascribing εἰρήνεια to Socrates, Alcibiades is not shrinking from ascribing deception (in the classic εἰρήνεια form of concealing by feigning) to him.

Having asserted his dominance of the conversation virtually upon entrance by addressing Eryximachus with (in Dickey’s terms) the friendship term of address μακάριε (214 C 8), Alcibiades is persuaded to make his speech praising Socrates. He purports to understand and explain the paradoxes of Socrates’ character, comparing him to the Silenus figures which contain images of gods and to the satyr Marsyas, Socrates being able to entrance men by his speaking as the satyr did by his piping. Alcibiades boasts confidently that ‘not one of you [of those present] knows him’ and states that he will ‘make him clear’ (216 C 7–D 1).

Alcibiades goes on to identify a number of Socrates’ outward actions and apparent attitudes, and then a number of the inner attitudes that he is concealing inside him, on the model of the Silenus figures. Outwardly, Socrates appears to be erotically engaged with beautiful young men, and presents a figure of himself as ‘wholly ignorant and knowing nothing’. Inwardly, he is full of temperance (σοφροσύνη, 216 D 7); he despises human physical beauty (and believes ‘us’ young men, in Alcibiades’ report, to be worth ‘nothing’); he believes wealth and other forms of honour (τιμή to be nothing. This situation is fully summed up by the claim that Socrates is concealing (inner attributes) by feigning (outward ones),47 which is precisely what we should expect and take the verb εἰρήνευσθαι to mean in the sentence which sums up the Silenus comparison:

(S1) He [Socrates] believes all these possessions to be worth nothing and us to be nothing, I tell you; he spends his whole life in concealing [this] by feigning [εἰρήνευσθαι] [in the ways described above], including

discourse, see J. Hesk, Deception and Democracy in Classical Athens (Cambridge, 2000), a reference I owe to Paul Cartledge.

47 As to why Alcibiades should take Socrates’ profession of ignorance to be a way of concealing his possession of temperance (and more generally the question of how to interpret Alcibiades’ speech), see M. Lane, ‘Virtue as the Love of Knowledge in Plato’s Symposium and Republic’ [“Virtue”], in D. Scott (ed.), Maieutics: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat (Oxford, forthcoming). For present purposes it is sufficient simply to observe the claim that he sees the former to be a form of feigning which is serving to conceal the latter.
toying with his fellow men [εἰρωνευόμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων πάντα τὸν βίον πρὸς τοὺς ἄνθρωπους διατελεῖ]. (216 B 2–5) **

There is no need to seek any new or fancy meaning for the term. Its ordinary and so far univocal meaning in Plato fits precisely with the logic of what Alcibiades is saying.

What of καὶ παίζων in this sentence? As my translation ‘including toying’ shows, I suggest (against most recent translators) that the καὶ is epexegetic. What best exemplifies the way in which Socrates is feigning various concealments for his true inside qualities (according to Alcibiades) is his ‘toying’ (as Nehamas, Art, 59 n. 50, suggests and defends translating παίζων) with beautiful boys—appearing to be erotically interested in them while in fact not being so. It makes sense for Alcibiades to give this toying special mention as he is specially aggrieved by it, as the subsequent section of his speech between texts S1 and S2 shows. And notice that by reading παίζων as an example of what Alcibiades objects to in Socrates’ eirōneuesthai, this turns out to be an example of eirōneuesthai by means of actions rather than words, showing that Plato shares this with Aristophanes’ Wasps as one possible meaning of the term.

Whether or not the καὶ is read as epexegetetic, many translators have seen in καὶ παίζων a reference to playfulness and games, and so have taken this to be the motive which Alcibiades is ascribing to Socrates for engaging in eirōneuesthai. By ascribing a motive of playfulness, Alcibiades would be doing something different from all other ascribers of eirōneuesthai or eirōneia in Plato (and also from those in Aristophanes). Whereas they all implicitly or explicitly ascribe deceit as the motive for eirōneuesthai, Alcibiades would be suggesting playfulness—a suggestion seemingly bolstered by his subsequent comment that it is only once when he caught Socrates ‘being serious’ (σπουδάσαντος, 216 B 5) that he was able to look inside. And if Alcibiades were describing Socrates as playfully concealing by feigning, how different is that really then from ironizing and irony?

My resolution of these problems is this. The contrast between παίζων and σπουδάσαντος is significant, but this does not discredit the translation of the former as ‘toying’; nor does it turn eirōneuesthai by association (epexegetic or not) into ‘irony’. Let me explain each.

** My translation, but following in part that of Nehamas and Woodruff in Cooper, Plato.
point. First, the contrast between παλίςω and σπουδάσαντος is that Alcibiades is able to look inside Socrates only at a moment when Socrates does not have his defensive guard up—that is, when he is not deploying his feigned attachment to beautiful youth as a way to fend off anyone’s perceiving his inner temperance, and in particular at a moment when he is not courting Alcibiades. So Alcibiades is not ascribing a general motive of playfulness to Socrates as the reason for his engaging in eirōnēeusthai. Rather, he perceives his toying with boys as a specific aspect of the feigning in which he engages to conceal his true attitudes.

In fact, I would suggest that Alcibiades nowhere identifies the motive or reason for which Socrates engages in eirōnēeusthai, nor does he claim any privileged insight into this question. Alcibiades nowhere claims that Socrates is deliberately seeking to communicate or convey his inner attitudes to anyone by means of adopting his outer ones. He himself has happened to penetrate the concealment, but apart from this chance, the inner truth is securely sequestered away from the outer show. And this means that Alcibiades cannot be describing Socrates as ‘ironizing’. Recall the definition of irony which we have adopted: ‘saying [or doing] something with the intent that the message is understood as conveying the opposite or an otherwise different meaning’. As Alcibiades portrays Socrates, he takes what Socrates says and does as intentionally concealing (remember the concluding references to deception) what he truly believes and desires, not as intending to convey it.

The second ascription of eirōneia to Socrates by Alcibiades, which generalizes the ascription to one of habitual eirōneia, occurs a little later. Having reported his former belief that he was lucky in having captivated Socrates by his looks, and so able to exchange sexual favours for hearing Socrates’ knowledge, Alcibiades goes on to describe his attempts to initiate such an exchange by spending time alone with Socrates. When only conversation or physical training and wrestling resulted, he invited Socrates to dine with him, despite the fact that Athenian homoerotic convention would have expected such overtures to be made by the lover rather than the beloved. At the end of a second and so far sexless dinner, Alcibiades recounts that he frankly told Socrates that he was willing to satisfy his presumed lust sexually, believing Socrates to be the ablest possible (οὖδένα κυριώτερον εἶναι) ally in helping Alcibiades to become the best that he can (not using a word specifically for virtue, but the
The Evolution of Eirôneia

general term βέλτιστον, ‘best’, 218 d 2). According to Alcibiades, Socrates responded thus:

(S2) Highly deceptively [μάλα εἰρωνικός: μάλα εἰρηνικός], that's to say in what is an utterly characteristic and habitual [eiωθότος] way for him, he said... (218 d 6–7) **

Socrates then (as Alcibiades recounts) speaks, addressing Alcibiades as ‘φίλε Alcibiades’. He praises Alcibiades’ judgement of the unequal benefit that he (the boy) would gain from such an exchange with Socrates if it were true that Socrates has what Alcibiades expects him to be able to give. But, calling Alcibiades μακάρε (219 a 1–2) and so reiterating by this second friendship term that he is in intellectual control of the conversation, he warns him that it is possible that he may be deceived and Socrates may be worthless, so that the exchange would be unequal instead to Alcibiades’ disadvantage: he would give his sexual favours and get nothing of value in return.

We already understand from our discussion of S1 what Alcibiades understands Socrates’ general eirôneuesthai to be: it is deceptively concealing his true beliefs and desires, by feigning others. The challenge now is to fit that reading together with S2. In what sense does Alcibiades take Socrates to be concealing his true attitude, by feigning another, in his responses to the youth in and following S2?

Three candidate acts of feigning are identifiable in Socrates’ response to Alcibiades’ sexual overture, and the description of Socrates as eironizing, as it were, may apply to any or all of them. The first is Socrates’ hypothetical judgement (assuming that he does have the power to help Alcibiades become better) that such power would be far finer than Alcibiades’ physical beauty. Alcibiades might see this as feigned in so far as he himself holds his beauty to be of the highest possible value. Conversely, the second possibility is that when Socrates says that it is possible that Socrates does not have the power to help him and is ‘worthless’, Alcibiades might see this as feigned in so far as he believes himself already to have discerned valuable virtues and knowledge hidden inside Socrates’ soul.

Most readings of the speech focus on one or both of these first two alternatives, and both are plausible. In my view, however, the

** This translation was suggested to me by Michael Trapp, though I take responsibility for it here.
most likely and perhaps decisive moment to have provoked Alcibiades’ ascription of eirōneuesthai is a third moment in the speech, when Socrates seemingly accepts the youth’s concluding proposal to consider (bouleuesthai) what is best (ariston) for the two of them (219 A 6–7), responding by saying ‘in the days that are to come, we shall consider [boulēvōmenoi] and do together [πράξομεν] what appears to be best [ἀριστον] in these and other affairs’ (219 A 8–B 2). In this response, Socrates is responding to Alcibiades’ request that he bouleusthai what is best for the two of them by using the same word in his reply. Alcibiades takes the fact that Socrates is literally speaking in his own terms (echoing his linguistic formulations) to signify that Socrates is accepting the terms of exchange of the broader bargain—not only the joint deliberation, but the exchange of sex for knowledge and virtue—that he (Alcibiades) had offered. Having heard his own choice of words echoed by Socrates, he believes his larger bargain to have been accepted only to be immediately reneged upon when Socrates rebuffs his sexual advances, and so considers himself to have been deceived. In particular, he accuses Socrates of eirōneuesthai for having concealed his rejection of the broader bargain by feigning acceptance of its terms.

It is up to the reader to judge whether in committing himself to joint deliberation to do what is best, echoing Alcibiades’ formulation in doing so, Socrates was indeed feigning an acceptance of the larger bargain (sex for knowledge and virtue, effectively) offered him by the youth. In my view, the verbal echo is better read as intending to reinforce only a commitment to joint deliberation—which does not promise, and may well end up ruling out, a sex/knowledge exchange—rather than as pre-empting it by sealing the sex/knowledge bargain Alcibiades had previously proposed. It is Alcibiades whose assumptions lead him to misunderstand what Socrates said, attributing to him a meaning beyond what Socrates’ words either implied or needed in order to make sense. It is not necessary to assume that Socrates must be concealing something in order to explain his behaviour or his words; what he says is straightforward and not misleading, but Alcibiades’ own eagerness for the sex/knowledge exchange makes him leap to unwarranted conclusions. On this reading, the failure is that of Alcibiades in diagnosing Socrates as engaging in eirōneia, because he chooses to hear in what Socrates says more and other than what Socrates means.60

60 I evaluate Alcibiades’ understanding of Socrates more fully in Lane, ‘Virtue’. In
The Evolution of Eirōneia

Thus in Plato we see eirōneía being ascribed to Socrates in ways which indicate the ascriptions to be untrustworthy. Thrasymachus and Alcibiades clash as to what they believe Socrates to be concealing, and the very model of concealment rests on problematic assumptions. But none of this involves any novel meaning of eirōneía. Eirōneía means just what it always did. And it is that same meaning which is in play in Plato’s younger contemporary Demosthenes, and in Demosthenes’ younger contemporary Dinarchus, who both also extend the use of the term to contexts of self-deception. Consider, for example, the strictures in the funeral oration by Demosthenes (if the attribution is genuine) on the generation of Greeks confronting Philip of Macedon as suffering ‘a stupidity mixed with sloth, which when these [dangers] could have been avoided safely, failed to foresee some and deceived themselves [eirōneuesthai] with regard to others’ (Epit. 60. 18. 7–9, my translation). How, then, did it come to mean something different?

The change takes place (in our surviving evidence) precisely where it seems to do: in Aristotle. Aristotle narrows and stabilizes the use of eirōn within a strictly rhetorical context. It is within this context and for the purposes of illustrating it that he invokes Socrates as an exemplary eirōn. While he uses elements of the Alcib- brief, I agree with A. W. Nightingale, ‘The Folly of Praise: Plato’s Critique of Encomiastic Discourse in the Lysis and Symposium’, Classical Quarterly, NS 43 (1993), 112–30 at 123–7, against M. Nussbaum, ‘The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of the Symposium’, in Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge, 1986), 165–99, that far from enjoying the privileged lover’s knowledge of Socrates that Nussbaum accords him, Alcibiades’ own fallings engender in him a systematic misunderstanding of Socrates. But I cannot for obvious reasons endorse the way Nightingale (124) sums up this misunderstanding—‘[t]he pleonectic Alcibiades is the last person to understand the ironic Socrates’. I owe the reference to Nightingale’s article to Frisbee Sheffield.

Steven (n. 7 above) suggests that it is not self-deception in the usual sense of forming faulty beliefs, but rather a gap between the Athenians’ speech and their deeds, which Demosthenes is criticizing by ascription of eirōneía here and elsewhere in his works. But that would not involve concealment by feigning, whereas we can make good sense of a univocal 4th-cent. Greek reading of eirōneía outside the Aristotelians (whose line subsequently becomes dominant) by construing the criticism as being the concealment from themselves of the urgency of action by pretending that they had more time or no need to act immediately. This is about the gap between speech or belief and deeds, as Steven suggests, but it is also a form of self-deception about how urgently action is required. See also Dem. Phil. 1. 7. 10–11 and 1. 37. 10–12 and Prooem. 14. 3; and Dinarchus, a non-citizen, who in his written speech Against Aristogiton (11) warns the jurors against indulging in feigning ignorance (eirōneuezēs) of aspects of the defendant’s past record in making their decision.
biadean characterization of Socrates as engaging in *eirôneia* (specifically, the idea that Socrates conceals his true qualities), he ignores others (such as the deceit which Alcibiades attaches to Socrates in this context). Nor does he consider the Thrasymachean or any of the other contexts in Plato in which *eirôneia* is used to describe concealing an absence, or suspected absence, of some quality, rather than its possession. Instead he chooses to isolate and define as typical of both Socrates and *eirôneia* a certain limited pattern of behaviour which suits his classification of rhetorical stances.

Of the Aristotelian passages dealing with *eirôneia*, a number display a common pattern of classification, using *eirôneia* as one extreme of the virtue (mean) of truthfulness, with the other extreme being boastfulness or *alazonêia*. Like the Platonic scholiast, he employs the notion of 'pretence' (*προσπορούησις*) in expounding both extremes, as at *NE* 2. 7, 1108a21–2, where *alazonêia* is 'pretence towards the greater' and *eirôneia* is 'pretence towards the lesser' (see also *NE* 4. 7, 1127b20–4 and *MM* i. 32, 1193a29–33). Elsewhere he analyses the *eîrôn* further:

The way self-deprecating people [*eîrônes*] understate themselves makes their character appear more attractive, since they seem to do it from a desire to avoid pomposity, and not for the sake of profit; most of all it is things that bring repute that these people too disclaim, as indeed Socrates used to do. (*NE* 4. 7, 1127b22–6)\(^{13}\)

Here, Socrates is fashioned into the paradigm of the self-deprecator, even though self-deprecation was the last thing which Thrasymachus (or Callicles, for that matter) meant to ascribe to him in accusing him of *eirôneia*. This move is pregnant with later theories of Socratic irony, such as that of Kierkegaard, who would see Socrates as the paradigm of negativity and irony as contrasted with the positive plenitude of Christ.\(^{14}\) But even without those later elaborations, Aristotle's is clearly a new paradigm which has nothing

\(^{12}\) The other passage displaying the same pattern is *EE* 3. 7, 1233b38–1234a3. See also *Rhet.* 3. 18, 1419b8–10, which contrasts *eîrôneia* not with *alazonêia* but with buffoonery (*βουλομοχύλα*): the *eîrôn* laughs at himself, whereas the buffoon laughs at others.


\(^{14}\) S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates, together with Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, ed. and trans. with introduction and notes by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, 1989).
to do with any of the ascriptions of eirôneia to Socrates in Plato except for those by Alcibiades, which this paradigm isolates and accepts at face value despite the indications in Plato’s dialogue that they are unfounded.

In these passages Aristotle imposes a fixed role on eirôneia as the extreme of self-deprecation, as opposed to the extreme of boastfulness or alazoneia (contrast the way in which the Greek terms figured almost side by side in the catalogue of Aristophanes’ Clouds). He does so by stipulating that eirôneia consists of disavowing or downplaying qualities that one actually possesses (contrast the Aristophanic and Platonic contexts in which the eirôn is accused of hiding a lack). He ignores the possibility of eirôneia in action as opposed to speech (which we saw manifested in Aristophanes’ Wasps and at one point in Plato’s Symposium). Finally, the Aristotelian passages imply, though do not explicitly state, that the eirôn intends his eirôneia to be recognized as such: it is the very act of understatement, as well as what is (under)stated itself, that is to be admired. In all these ways, we see in this set of Aristotelian passages a stipulative narrowing and circumscription of the meaning of eirôneia. Aristotle makes no claim that this is what the word has always meant. Rather, he is engaged in setting out technical rhetorical terms, defining them in relation to one another, conscripting the phenomenon of the eirôn to serve his purposes.

So Aristotle chose to adapt ascriptions of eirôneia to Socrates for his own purposes, restricting their range of meaning to that of understatement and concealment of qualities that one in fact possesses. Cicero in De oratore (2. 269–70) followed the same lineaments, adding the thought that istoria (transliterated into Latin from Greek eirôneia) was ‘serious play’ (severe ludas), perhaps inspired by the misunderstanding of naìtōn in Plato’s Symposium as meaning ‘playing’ which we have sought to eradicate above. Even

---

55 Clouds 449, part of Strepsiades’ list of the (in fact, morally dubious) kind of person he hopes to become as a result of his association with the Thinkery, includes both istoria and ἀλαζών.

56 Besides these passages appealing to a common pattern, which are the ones significant for our understanding of Aristotle’s relationship to Socrates and so to Platonic uses of eirôneia, there are a number of more heterogeneous passages. They can focus on jest (Rhet. 3. 18, 1419b7–9) or preserve something of the older meaning of deception and concealment (NE 4. 3, 1124b28–31), though there is also another new meaning added, that of contemptuous disparagement of what others are doing in earnest (Rhet. 2. 2, 1379b30–1). Finally there is an obscure use which appeals to the role of hypotheticals in rhetoric (Rhet. 3. 19, 1420a1–3).
more significantly, Atticus in Cicero’s Brutus says that *ironia* is used by Socrates in the books of Plato, Xenophon, and Aeschines, when discussing wisdom, [he chooses] to deny it to himself and to attribute it playfully [*in ludentem*] to those who make pretensions to it. Thus Socrates, in the pages of Plato praises to the skies Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, Gorgias, and the rest, while representing himself as without knowledge of anything and a mere ignoramus. This somehow fits his character [*deceit I know I know what mode to illum*], and I cannot agree with Epicurus who censures it (Brut. 292).[47]

Notice that none of the Platonic characters mentioned by Atticus ever ascribes *eiron* to Socrates, nor is his interaction with them so described in Plato (and of course, as noted earlier, the term never appears in Xenophon, though we have unfortunately lost Aeschines). Cicero, that is, imputes *ironia* to Socrates without anchor in any ascription of *eiron* in Plato at all. Instead, Cicero uses the term to indicate some combination of the disavowal of knowledge with ironic praise, neither of which phenomenon in Plato has anything to do with the incidences or meaning of *eiron* there.

Aristotle and Cicero, and those who followed each of them in ascribing *eiron* to Socrates, succeeded overwhelmingly in narrowing and stabilizing a portrait of Socrates as *eiron* in the sense of ironist, obliterating the contexts and contradictions with which Plato had his characters deploy cognate terms exclusively in the sense of ‘concealing by feigning’, and linking them instead to the phenomena of ironic praise. In so doing they bequeathed to future generations a portrait of Socratic irony which is utterly unsupported by the incidences of *eiron* in Plato.

*King’s College, Cambridge*

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


The Evolution of Eirôneia

Campbell, L., The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato, with a revised text and English notes (Oxford, 1867).
Hesk, J., Deception and Democracy in Classical Athens (Cambridge, 2000).


——— *Plato’s Cratylus* (Cambridge, 2003).


