
11 Reconsidering Socratic Irony

INTRODUCTION

On his way to court, as a defendant against the charges – of not worshipping the city’s gods, introducing new gods, and corrupting the youth – which will lead to his conviction and execution, Socrates meets his officious Athenian compatriot Euthyphro. Euthyphro is bringing a prosecution of his own father for murder, an action that most Athenians would regard with horror as violating the divine obligation of filial piety. To Euthyphro’s boast that he has knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, Socrates replies: “It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil, and as regards this indictment challenge Meletus [one of the three citizen-prosecutors of Socrates]... and say to him... that... I have become your pupil.” (Euphr. 34 b)

You may find it hard to believe that Socrates is sincere in his admiring desire to become Euthyphro’s pupil. This is a prime instance of the Socratic speeches in Plato’s dialogues which many readers have found it necessary, or desirable, to interpret as spoken ironically: in this case, implying that the smug Euthyphro actually has nothing to teach Socrates. For ‘irony’ is, in a representative definition, “saying something with the intent that the message is understood as conveying the opposite or an otherwise different meaning”x – although we must

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x For comments and advice on various aspects of this chapter, I thank Alex Long, Donald Morrison, Emile Perreau-Saussine, Quentin Skinner, Karl Steel, and Michael Trapp. I am also grateful for permission to see and cite pre-publication proofs of an article by M. M. McCabe [McCabe 2006] in a volume edited by Trapp. That volume is the first of two based on Trapp’s 2005 King’s College London conference on ‘The Uses of Socrates,’ where I presented a paper that was an antecedent both to Lane 2006 [this chapter’s companion piece] and to this chapter. [My eventual publication in the Trapp conference volumes examined a different topic, Socrates in twenty-first-century America; see Lane 2007.] This definition is adapted from that in Opsomer 1998, p. 14. Compare the definitions in Brown 1993, I, “Irony” q.v., among which figures “the
immediately ask, understood by whom? Sometimes, by an addressee who is expected to understand the irony, in which case irony can be a graceful and playful way of conveying meaning. At other times, when the addressee is expected to be obtuse to it and the irony is intended for reception by a third party, irony can be a mocking and even savage way of discriminating between those capable of understanding one's true meaning and those who are blind to it.

Which is the case with Euthyphro? Most readers who discern Socratic irony toward Euthyphro assume that it falls into the latter camp: Euthyphro is not meant to understand it, the irony is meant to be understood only by Plato's reader. (In other dialogues, irony may be perceived as directed toward the understanding of a third character, such as the young boy Clinias in the Euthydemus, for whose benefit Socrates interrogates and comments on the destructive antics of two brother sophists.) The same is true of the candidate cases of Socratic irony that abound in the Hippias Major, where Socrates hails Hippias as “fine and wise” (281a1) and remarks on Hippias' success as a sophist:

That is what it is like to be truly wise, Hippias, a man of complete accomplishments; in private you are able to make a lot of money from young people (and to give still greater benefits to those from whom you take it); while in public you are able to provide your own city with good service (as is proper for one who expects not to be despised, but admired by ordinary people. (281b5-c3)

The implication that Hippias is “truly wise”; the suggestion that making money from teaching, which Socrates himself refused to do (Ap. 199d-19c, 31c), is part of such wisdom; and the taking of “ordinary people” as the standard for admiration, are all aspects of Socrates' interaction with Hippias which can seem to demand to be read ironically. To these sorts of cases of 'Socratic irony' (we will discuss later why the conversations with Hippias and Euthyphro yield the most egregious

expression of meaning using language that normally expresses the opposite.” While both these definitions focus on speech, we must expand them to include the possibility of other cases of ironic action (speech itself, of course, being a form of action).

In tragic or dramatic irony, the relevant intent is that of the author rather than that of the characters; knowledge imparted to or expected of the audience enables them to see that the characters' words and actions will in fact bring about a different meaning from that which they intend, although the characters do not themselves intend (to convey) this in what they do or say. This type of irony is relevant to the question of whether Plato is ironic as an author, a question (distinct from our present topic of whether Socrates is ironic as a character) that cannot be pursued here, for discussion of it see Griswold 2002, Nehamas 1998.

candidates) can be added the broader stance associated with Socrates in the Apology, of the disavowal of knowledge. The idea that this should be read ironically had supporters already in the ancient world. Yet what it means to attribute irony to Socrates has been interpreted in many ways. When speaking ironically, does he (or anyone) simply mean the opposite of what his words literally say – so that, if he is ironically disavowing knowledge of human excellence and virtue (Ap. 203c, 21b), he is really claiming to possess it? Or is irony a more mysterious and potentially all-embracing aspect of one's character, making the ironist essentially opaque? Further, is Socratic irony an occasional and incidental phenomenon, or does it permeate his very being and function as essential to his philosophy?

That Socrates is ironic is something that many people who know little else about Socrates believe. If this belief is rooted in ancient texts, they are likely to be thinking of Plato's and Aristophanes' portraits of Socrates rather than those of Aristophanes and Xenophon, for two reasons. First, irony is absent from the features of Socrates lampooned in Aristophanes' Clouds (which treats him rather as an oblivious pedant), and while incidences of irony have been detected in Xenophon's writings about Socrates, it has not been central to most interpretations of those writings or the portrait of Socrates they create. Second, neither Xenophon nor Aristophanes ever uses about Socrates the Greek word eirônea, which is the only Greek term (sometimes) translatable as irony. By contrast, Plato and Aristotle both use this word and its cognates about Socrates (though I argue later that it is not in fact translatable as ‘irony’ in Plato), and this has played a key part in the formation of the tradition of 'Socratic irony.' The remainder of this Introduction will discuss Aristotle's role in forming this tradition, and those influenced by him, while Plato's Socratic dialogues will be the focus of the rest of the chapter.

Aristotle confines his central accounts of eirônea to the special case of self-deprecation, conceived as the opposite extreme to boastfulness, both in contrast to a mean of truthfulness. As he explains:

The way self-depreciating people [eirônes] understand 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

Vlastos accepted in 1987 [quoted here in a further version of 1991] what he had earlier denied, that "there is an authentic streak of irony in Xenophon's depiction of Socrates" (1991, p. 31). But he insisted that in Xenophon -- in contrast to Plato -- this "contribute[s] nothing to the elucidation of Socrates' philosophy" (1991, p. 31). Morrison 1987 accepts and expands the list of Socratic ironies in Xenophon, while contending that irony is not philosophically central to either Xenophon's or Plato's portraits of Socrates.
repute that these people too disclaim, as indeed Socrates used to do. [EN 4.7, 1127b23–26]4

When Aristotle’s *eirôneia* was transliterated into Latin as *ironia* by Cicero, it brought with it and reinforced this view of Socratic irony as modestly self-deprecating understatement. Aristotle’s analysis has also been retrojected into Plato by many readers, including some of the ancient commentators, who thus came to take the characters in Plato who accuse Socrates of *eirôneia* as calling Socrates a self-deprecating ironist.5

An influential first-century imperial Roman rhetorician, Quintilian, significantly expanded upon the rhetorical tradition of *eirôneia* begun by Aristotle and continued by Cicero.6 In his terms, the uses of irony that we have been so far discussing, in which ironic delivery changes the meaning of the words used [as in the examples from the *Hippias* *Major* earlier, where by calling Hippias wise for making money from his knowledge, Socrates might be taken to mean the opposite], is only one kind of irony—what Quintilian called a “trope,” a rhetorical move in which the meaning of the words used changes [Inst.8.6.54–55]. There was also, Quintilian posited, a broader and deeper rhetorical move of irony in the sense of a ‘figure,’ in which the meaning of the words used does not change, but the global effect is transparently that of a different meaning [Inst. 9.2.44–46]—for example, Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* of 1729, in which the point of any given sentence proposing that the English eat the Irish is not to convey the opposite meaning, but rather the work as a whole is intended ironically as a commentary on the heartlessness of English attitudes. The figure may arise as the result of repeated use of the trope. However, whereas for the trope “although it says something different from what it means, it does not pretend something different,” by contrast for the figure, “the pretense involves the whole meaning” [Inst. 9.2.45, 46]. And in the latter context, Quintilian remarked that “a whole life may be held to illustrate irony, as was thought of Socrates” [Inst. 9.2.46].7 This consolidated a new view of Socratic irony, as involving not simply the occasional self-deprecating remark, but a whole way of life, a global outlook and mode of interaction. This view would resonate powerfully in the portraits of Socrates and of irony produced by many of the medieval and Renaissance authors so deeply marked by Quintilian and other ancient authors [Knox 1989], and would be revived in the Romantic portrait of Socratic irony as the most important and deepest feature of Socrates’ character.

As a result of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian above all, a rich and internally diverse philosophical tradition of considering Socrates as ironic was born, a tradition that has often departed from these anchors to develop more general interpretations of what Socratic irony means. Some have read Socrates as globally ironic,8 while others have insisted on delineating moments in which he is ironic from moments in which he is not.9 Some have celebrated irony as one of the attractive and philosophically valuable aspects of Socrates;10 others have taken it to be an index of both his achievement and his limitations;11 still others have attacked it as a sign of his failure and the misconception of his project as a whole.12

**PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE: DIVERSE VIEWS**

Those holding such divergent attitudes on the value of Socratic irony divide in particular with respect to its purpose [why does he do it?] and its audience [who is able to understand it?]. The dominant view of its

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4 Translation from Rowe and Brodic 2002.
5 Sedley 2002 shows that the Platonist commentators did not agree as to whether Socrates was in fact ironic, though this was the dominant tradition, most adhering to it were careful to distinguish the sorts of speech toward whom Socrates used irony from those toward whom he did not. He also points out the need for a set of rules to enable us to decide whether or not a passage is to be read as ironic [41], and the fact that any such rules or assumptions will be imbued with specific interpretative prejudices [52].
6 In this brief chapter, it is not possible to touch on all of the intervening developments, such as the work of Theophrastus, on which see Diggle 2002 and Lane 2006, pp. 53–54, n. 12.
7 For a global account of irony as a species of consciousness, see Jankélévitch 1964, and for the Romantic irony that influenced him, see the brief discussion in Szelézky 1999, ch. 21. More recently a global account is defended in analytical terms by McCabe 2006.
8 For an interesting position distinguishing moments of “conditional irony” from moments of “reverse irony” in Plato’s Socrates, see Vasililiou 1998 and 2002. I criticize aspects of this position however in Lane 2006, p. 50, n. 4.
9 For a modern argument that shares the view that irony and dialectic are closely related for Socrates, but evaluates both positively in line with the Quintilianic view of irony as part of the Socratic way of life, see Schaefer 1941: “Socrate pratique l’ironie comme le sceptique pratique le doute, et le Christien la charité” [1956].
10 For all their differences, Hegel and Kierkegaard both saw Socratic irony as an achievement that was also starkly limited in its value and potential. Hegel saw the limitations as related to Socrates’ place in the evolving dialectic of spirit, while Kierkegaard saw them rather as marking the limits of reason and the need for faith.
11 Socratic irony is interpreted as part of Socrates’ failure as a teacher by Gogarin 1977, p. 36 and passim.
purpose, operating within an Aristotelian framework, has been shaped by Cicero, who in De Oratore (2.269–270) described irony as “serious play” (severe ludus), implying that it can go beyond self-deprecation, while retaining the playful and self-presentational purpose of Aristotle's conception. In his Brutus [92], the character Atticus 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 ludente) to those who make pretensions to it.” On this account, the playful purpose of irony is tied to its transparency to its audience. The audience is meant to perceive the ironist's modesty and playfulness, and to perceive them as such. No one is intrinsically excluded from grasping this playful irony. Many writers associated with the Enlightenment movements of the eighteenth century adopted a similar approach in praising Socrates for his rhetorical adeptness in using irony.

An opposing account of Socratic irony sees its purpose to lie in the philosopher's response to an inherently divided audience, of whom some are intended to perceive the irony while others are not. This is the view, for example, of Leo Strauss: “Irony is... the noble dissimulation of one's worth, of one's superiority. We may say, it is the humanity peculiar to the superior man: he spares the feelings of his inferiors by not displaying his superiority” [Strauss 1964, p. 51]. Irony for Strauss is not a rhetorical pleasure, it is a political necessity. As he contended: “irony is essentially related to the fact that there is a natural order of rank among men, it follows that irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people” [Strauss 1964, p. 51]. Concomitantly, its intended audience is necessarily esoteric, limited to the philosophical few. For Strauss, Socratic irony is not just a graceful manner of speech; it is designed to make its true meaning accessible only to some, and to shield this meaning from those who are capable of understanding neither the irony nor the philosophy which it protects.

Whereas for Strauss irony functions to protect philosophy, for other writers irony was to be seen as inherent in philosophy – or the special case of Socratic philosophy – itself. Again, for some, the purpose of such philosophical irony was to be celebrated, as being rooted in and revealing the intrinsically critical nature of philosophy. In his Critical Fragments of 1797, which was a paradoxical sort of founding text for German Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel praised a thorough-going literary and philosophical irony as the exaltation of the subjectivity of the ego. For others, however, the essentially ironic nature of Socratic thought was a sign of its limitations. In his Lectures on the History of Philosophy of 1805–06, G. W. F. Hegel criticized Schlegel for inflating Socratic irony too far, holding in contrast that it had limited but positive value in bringing out the actual subjective ideas of his interlocutors and so in “bringing the notion into consciousness” [Hegel 1892, p. 400]. Yet he held that this same irony was also a mark of the incompleteness of the Socratic stance, which needed a further and more positive integration into the dialectic.

The incompleteness of Socratic irony was stressed also by Soren Kierkegaard, both in his 1841 dissertation The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates and elsewhere. But he rejected Hegel's progressivist resolution of it, arguing instead that the limits of Socratic irony testified to the need for a leap into religious faith [Kierkegaard 1899, 1998]. Kierkegaard summed up the contrast thus: Socrates' "irony was not the instrument he used in the service of the idea [as Hegel had claimed]; irony was his position – more he did not have" [Kierkegaard 1839, p. 214]. For their successor Nietzsche in his most scathing moods at the beginning and end of his writing career (which included throughout a wide spectrum of views of Socrates and Plato), irony was a sign of Socrates’ knowledge of his own intellectual failure: a sign of the fear of pessimism in the 1872 Birth of Tragedy (1999, p. 4 [§1]), and arguably an expression of plebeian re-sentiment” in the 1888 Twilight of the Idols [2005, p. 164 [§7]].

Finally, there has been an influential debate as to the interpersonal as well as the philosophical significance of Socratic irony. The dominant view today is that Socratic irony serves at least some dialectical or argumentative purpose: for example, one historical dictionary defines it by which “the perfect city is revealed to be a perfect impossibility” [Bloom 1968, p. 408]. See also Clay 2000.

That irony is inherent in Socratic philosophy is argued by Alexander Nehamas [198] and Gregory Vlastos [199], both discussed later. See, for example, the Critical Fragment number 108, translated in Schlegel 1774, pp. 155–6, arguing that Socratic irony was the only literary attitude that could afford the Romantics total literary freedom.

13 The Latin text is from the Oxford Classical Texts, Cic. Rhet. vol. II, which uses a different paragraph scheme (in which this passage is 85). The translation is from Hendrickson 1977.

14 Fitzpatrick 1993, pp. 180–181, discusses the way that eighteenth-century philosophers who valued Socratic rationality dealt with elements in his persona that did not fit with that image. In particular, Socrates' talk of "knowing nothing" was understood by some to be irony, treated as a matter of elegance and modesty merely; but attackers of the Enlightenment such as Johann Georg Hamann took his confession of ignorance seriously, seeing it as a forerunner leading the way to Christian faith [Lane 2001, p. 22].

15 Allan Bloom broadly follows Strauss, arguing that one must read Socratean political proposals in the Republic as involving irony [Bloom 1968, p. 428].
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it as “the pretense of ignorance practiced by Socrates as a step towards confusing an adversary” [Brown 1993, I, ‘irony’, q.v.] and as “a pose of ignorance by which a skilful questioner exposes the emptiness of the answerer’s claims to knowledge” [Brown 1993, II, ‘Socratic irony’, q.v.]. An innovative variant is to contend that by concealing Socrates’ own beliefs, his irony serves to “tell us about the structure of wisdom, but not about its content,” since each person must arrive at wisdom for him or herself [McCabe 2006, p. 31]. But there has always been opposition to the line that Socratic irony is somehow pedagogically fruitful. The counter-claim that it is evasive and irresponsible in relation to what the philosopher owes his audience goes back to the Epicurean attack on Socrates.

Unlike the Sceptics and Stoics, the Epicureans declined either to idealize Socrates or to take him as the symbolic fount of their tradition, and a major reason for this refusal was his use of irony instead of direct philosophical instruction (Steven, unpublished manuscript). Cicero, an avowed anti-Epicurean, commented on Epicurus’s approach to Socrates in the continuation of the Brutus passage quoted earlier:

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, and I cannot agree with Epicurus who censures it. [Brut. 292] 18

The Epicureans focused their criticisms on the claim that Socratic irony is pedagogically sterile: if Socrates had something to say, he should have said it, rather than hiding behind a veil of irony. To this sort of criticism, others have added the denunciation of Socratic irony as emotionally harmful, for example as humiliating for his interlocutors [Tarnopolsky 2004]. This again has a precursor in Nietzsche: “dialectics lets you act like a tyrant; you humiliate the people you defeat” (2005, §7, p. 164).

The most developed view of this kind is that of Alexander Nehamas for whom irony, including Socratic irony, is inherently wounding, asserting the superiority of the ironist and so akin to the cruder forms of sarcasm and mockery [1998, pp. 49, 58]. The purpose of Socratic irony is however for Nehamas inherently mysterious. Because, as he points out, irony need not entail that one believes the opposite of what one says, but only that one believes something other than what one says, irony does not necessarily convey meaning. It does not make meaning transparent [1998, pp. 56, 67–69]. (To borrow an example from the Wikipedia discussion of irony, the comedian Sacha Baron Cohen does not mean the opposite of what he says when, in the guise of would-be rapper Ali G, he asks an informant from the National Poison Information Center, “Does Class A drugs absolutely guarantee that they are [sic] better quality?”) 19 The ironist is, or can choose to be, mysterious, and this is how Plato portrays Socrates, perhaps (so Nehamas surmises) because he did not understand Socrates himself.

As this contradictory range of interpretations of Socratic irony were not challenging enough, the task of judging these interpretations of Socratic irony is further complicated by the difficulty of proving any case of irony at all. Irony lies necessarily and notoriously in the eye of the beholder. In the absence of “irony marks” akin to question and exclamation marks (which the French pundit Jean Paul urged printers to invent), the question of whether or not Socrates is ironic in any given instance, or globally, is a matter of interpretation. There is no fixed point in the interpretation of Socratic irony. To understand Socratic irony requires us to discuss its complex history in the interpretation of the figure of Socrates and the texts of (above all) Plato, to disentangle aspects of it which are often confused, and ultimately to take a stand on the question of whether, where, and how Socratic irony arises.

In other words, the most fundamental fact about irony is its inherent elusiveness. 20 This makes it impossible to assemble a set of uncontestable cases of Socratic irony for the reader to inspect. Debates about the meaning of Socratic irony cannot be distinguished from debates about what is to count as Socratic irony at all. 21 Therefore this chapter will now proceed by considering three distinct elements that have been incorporated into analyses of Socratic irony: [1] Socratic self-deprecation both as apparently exemplified in Plato and as described by Aristotle and Cicero, [2] the meaning of eirōneia as ascribed by Platonic characters to Socrates, [3] the apparent use by Plato’s Socrates of what has been

18 For text and translation, see n.13.


20 As remarked in Morrison, 2007, p. 241: “There is no algorithm, no amount of brute force philology that will demonstrate the presence of irony to someone who doesn’t see it, or the reverse.”

21 Indeed, these questions are also linked to the debate over who is meant by “Socrates”: the historical Socrates, the Socrates of the “early” Platonic dialogues, if these can be securely identified and their “Socrates” discovered to be significantly different from the “Socrates” of other dialogues, as argued by Vlastos 1991, pp. 45–80; the Socrates of both Plato and Xenophon, and so on. This chapter focuses on Socrates in Plato, as noted earlier, and does not assume any hard and fast lines between the Socrates of some of the dialogues and those of others, while acknowledging certain commonalities in the dialogues structured by the elenchus compared to those which are not, a position defended in Lane 2000.
called "ironic praise." In a sceptical spirit, it will be argued that none of these straightforwardly or necessarily supports the imputation of irony to Socrates.

**SELF-DEPRECIATION**

The Aristotelian view that Socrates' irony, including his ironic praise of others, is closely related to his self-deprecation, has been extremely influential. Insofar as readers judge Socrates to be intellectually superior to his interlocutors, his praise of them as having something to teach him can seem to be ironically deprecating his own knowledge. When Socrates flatters others as having something to teach him, he seems thereby ironically to diminish his own claims to merit, since the irony-minded reader is likely to assume that it is far more probable that he has something to teach them. Yet does praising someone else always imply deprecating oneself?22 Not necessarily: imagine the woman who wins her Wimbledon singles final one day congratulating the man who wins his the next. But when what is praised is someone's knowledge, the praise might seem to imply that one has something to learn from him, and thereby to imply a diminishment or deprecation of one's own merits.

A similar phenomenon occurs when in dialogues that he narrates, Socrates sometimes describes himself as having strong emotional reactions to his interlocutors. For example, he recounts that he was "afraid" of Thrasymachus's outburst and was only able to reply "trembling a little" (Rep. 336d6, 341c2). Again, such reactions need not necessarily imply self-deprecation; they might flow naturally from the conversation's emotional currents without implying that Socrates has no basis for a considered response. But many readers find it difficult not to read such narrative aside ironically, as they find it difficult to believe that Socrates is really wrongfooted by such challenges.

Of course, Socrates in the *Apology* does explicitly make at least one self-deprecating claim: he recounts that when he heard that the Delphic oracle had proclaimed that no one was wiser than he, he averred that "I am very conscious that I am not wise at all" (Ap. 21b). Despite other instances in the dialogues where Socrates does claim to know something (e.g., Ap. 29b6-7: "I know that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man"; Sm. 177d7-8: "the only thing I say I understand is the art of love"), the self-deprecation of the *Apology* has been widely viewed as a disavowal of knowledge: a claim to know that he does not know. Interpreted as such, should it be read ironically?

The disavowal of knowledge certainly can seem to involve an ironic reversal. If Socrates alone knows that he does not know, then there is a sense in which he is [ironically] asserting himself to be wise, concomitant with a sense in which he [literally] asserting himself to be ignorant: "[The wise man who does not know that he knows is ignorant, and the ignorant man who knows only that he knows nothing is wise]" (Mackenzie [now McCabe] 1988, p. 350). Yet the question of how to understand the disavowal of knowledge, no less than the question of irony, requires settling a global interpretative framework for the dialogues. To take the disavowal of knowledge literally engenders one sort of reading of the dialogues, in which Socrates appears as the sceptical inquirer, genuinely seeking knowledge through elenctic examination and collaborative inquiry. To take it ironically engenders a very different sort of reading, in which Socrates appears as the sphinx who does not share his knowledge, presenting an ironic face for reasons of his (or rather, Plato's) own; or in which his concealment of his knowledge serves some specific purpose, whether benign or sinister. What is certain is that the concept of Socratic irony offers no firm foundation for deciding between these different interpretations.

**DOES EIRÔNEIA MEAN "IRONY"?**

Yet surely, the reader may wish to object, there is a firm foundation for imputing irony to Plato's Socrates: the use of the term *eirôneia* about Socrates in the dialogues. Socrates is called an *eiron* by three characters in Plato, all of them complicated and challenging figures: Callicles, the aggressive acolyte of power through rhetoric in the *Gorgias*; Thrasymachus, the belligerent defender of the claim that justice serves the interest of the stronger in the *Republic*; and Alcibiades, the glamorous and dangerous Athenian politician shown in the *Symposium* as a youth who has partially fallen under Socrates' spell. And in Plato's *Apology* (376c-382a1), Socrates himself imagines that if he were to pursue a certain course of action, he would be called an *eiron* by the Athenians. Does he mean that the Athenians would think him an "ironic," and does Callicles, Thrasymachus, and Alcibiades mean to say that he is? To answer this question fully would require detailed textual study of each case.

22 Clay 2000, pp. 93-94, puts the issue well — "either he [Socrates] is insincere, and, as a consequence, boastful and conceited; or he can be taken as sincere and as truly doubtful of his own knowledge" — although confusing *eirôneia* defined as "self-deprecation" with "irony.

23 For further discussion of the disavowal of knowledge, see Woodruff 1990, ch.2.
passage, but in brief, the view defended here is that they [and he] do not. To see why not, we need to review the changing fortunes of the word *eirôneia*.

There are two fixed points in the career of this word. We have seen that from Aristotle's fourth-century treatment of *eirôneia* as self-deprecation grew a rhetorical tradition in which *eirôneia* could at least sometimes mean "irony." Equally, scholars agree that two generations earlier, in the fifth-century comic playwright Aristophanes, *eirôneia* and its cognates certainly did not mean "irony," but were rather best translated by a phrase like "concealing by feigning." These two meanings must not be confounded: they are essentially different. The purpose of an Aristophanic *eîrôô* [hereinafter the Greek word will be restricted to its Aristophanic meaning] is to conceal what is not said, while the purpose of an ironist is to convey what is not said [to some audience, though not necessarily the addressee of the ironic statement]. Thus someone accused of being an *eîrôô* is accused of deception, whereas someone considered an ironist cannot be universally perceived as deceptive. The ironist may simply be conveying his meaning in a playful and modest way, and even if he is concealing his meaning from those too obtuse to understand the irony, it could not be ironic if there were not some audience who were intended to understand it as such.

Between Aristophanes and Aristotle, the only extant Greek author to speak of *eirôneia* is Plato. Debate has accordingly flourished as to whether the incidences of *eirôneia* in Plato are to be read in a backward-looking Aristophanic, or a forward-looking Aristotelian, way. Gregory Vlastos (1991) initiated the contemporary debate in work first presented in a Cambridge seminar paper in 1984. Vlastos acknowledged that Plato sometimes used *eirôneia* in its Aristophanic sense of dissembling or deceiving. But he contended that in the crucial contexts of the *Gorgias* (489e1) and the *Symposium* (216e2-5, 218d6-7)—where Callicles and Alcibiades respectively call Socrates an *eîrôô*—he was inaugurating its new meaning of "irony" and doing so in relation to Socrates. Indeed, Vlastos went further to argue that Socrates is shown in Plato to have initiated a new form of "complex irony," in which what is said both is [in one sense] and is not [in another sense] what is meant.

Vlastos's aim was to show that Socrates was not a deceiver; his strategy was to show that neither Callicles nor Alcibiades, in calling him an *eîrôô*, was accusing him of being so. But this strategy is flawed. The question whether Socrates is a deceiver is different from the question whether Callicles et al. believe that he is. More importantly, Vlastos's argument that Callicles and Alcibiades should be translated as calling Socrates "ironic" does not do justice to the attacking quality of Callicles' accusation of *eirôneia*, nor to the context in which Alcibiades presents himself as unveiling something deceptively hidden in Socrates (contrasted with the communicative intention of irony). In accusing Socrates of *eirôneia*, both Callicles and Alcibiades, and indeed Thrasyclus as well, deploy a rhetoric of stripping away attempted concealment that fits far better with the Aristophanic than with the Aristotelian meaning of the term. Just like Aristophanes' characters, they use *eirôneia* to mean, roughly, "concealing by feigning," in a context of implied attempted deception. In sum, the fact that some of Plato's characters call Socrates an *eîrôô* gives no warrant for the claim that he is an ironist.

**Ironc Praise**

Even if *eirôneia* should not be translated as "irony" in Plato's texts, other evidence might show that Socrates is an ironist. The alert reader of (say) the *Gorgias* may feel that Socrates is clearly shown there and elsewhere, as in the *Euthyphro* and *Hippias Major* passages with which we began, to be engaging in ironic praise [Nightingale 1995, p. 175, 179]. Many readers have felt that Socrates cannot possibly mean literally the compliments he pays to many interlocutors (for example, Socrates to Callicles: "you really do have good will toward me" [Grz. 487d2-3]), and to have surmised that he must mean them ironically instead. Before we turn to a general consideration of such ironic praise, we need to consider a special category within it: 'friendship terms of address.'

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24 For fuller argument, see the present chapter draws, see Lane 2006.
25 The most important uses in Aristophanes are *Birds* 1211 and *Wasps* 175; there is little context to go on in interpreting *Clouds* 449. Recent editions of Aristophanes concur that these uses do not signify irony (for example, Sommerstein 1983 on *Wasps*, Dunbar 1995 on *Birds*, both ad. loc.), and in the debate initiated by Vlastos as to when *eirôneia* came to mean "irony," it is taken as common ground that it did not do so in Aristophanes.
26 A may be perceived to be an *eîrôô* by B [that is, to be concealing her true meaning], when A is actually addressing herself ironically to a third party, C. While such cases are theoretically possible, Plato presents the two phenomena in distinct contexts: *eirôneia* is carefully segregated as an accusation made by a certain type of character, whereas ironic praise and self-deprecation are [when properly interpreted] addressed to a different type.
27 Vlastos 1991, pp. 24–35, allowed that Thrasyclus used the term to mean that Socrates was a deceiver, rather than to call him an ironist, but Nehamas 1998, p. 38, argued that Thrasyclus, like Callicles and Alcibiades, should be taken to be calling Socrates ironic rather than deceptive.
28 Unless otherwise noted, translations of Plato are from Cooper 1997.
FRIENDSHIP TERMS OF ADDRESS

Like many other works of Greek literature, Plato's dialogues are full of expressions such as "o marvelous one," "stranger," and so on. These are "terms of address" ranging from the use of their name in whole or part, to an age or gender relationship, to terms specifically referring to aspects of a friendship relation (to which genre "o marvelous one" belongs). In Attic as in other ancient and modern languages, such terms are used in culturally patterned ways which indicate and police the nature of the relationships they express. [In English, think of "howdy, pardner," "my good fellow," or "hello there, stranger."] The philologist Eleanor Dickey (1996) has made a study of the way terms of address function in ancient Greek in comparison with other languages, and the results are startling for the question of Socratic irony.

Most used in Plato's dialogues are friendship terms of address — that is, apostrophizing expressions that mean literally "o wonderful one," "o marvelous one," and so on. For modern readers, it is difficult to put aside the literal meaning of such phrases, but equally difficult to accept that literal meaning. The result is a strong inclination to read Plato's friendship terms of address ironically: to assume that when Socrates (who is the greatest, but not the only, user of such terms in Plato) calls someone "o marvelous one," he is being ironic. Insofar as readers judge most of Socrates' interlocutors to be of inferior intellectual standing to him, it is all the more tempting to assume that he cannot be serious in such positive terms of address.

Yet Dickey's analysis establishes that such epithets, including in particular the friendship terms, are (with only one exception) never in Plato to be read ironically. 36 Dickey's contention is that "friendship terms in Plato, rather than being complimentary to the addressee, show the dominance of the speaker" (Dickey 1996, p. 117). She argues that they are genuinely used as polite terms rather than insults or ironic put-downs. However, their politeness serves to demonstrate the speaker's control of the situation in a somewhat patronizing way [Dickey 1996, pp. 122, 126]. An exchange of friendship terms, such as those batted back and forth by Socrates and Callicles in the Gorgias, is not an indication of irony; it is rather an indication of the tussle over conversational dominance that marks the dialogue as a whole. Friendship terms of address may appear to be cases of ironic praise, but in fact they are not.

36 Dickey 1996, p. 143, mentions only a single instance of a friendship term used in Plato as in other authors in a "usually ironic" way: this is sophocra-
used five times by Socrates in Plato. But her full evidence and analysis shows how rare is such an ironic use of a friendship term in Plato.

Reconsidering Socratic Irony

IRONIC PRAISE OUTSIDE TERMS OF ADDRESS

Excluding friendship terms of address, then, the most striking and extensive examples of ironic praise are Socrates' interactions with people such as Hippias and Euthyphro. 30 He repeatedly praises Hippias as "fine and wise" [putting on the kalon ["fine"] which is the main subject of the Hippias Major], and praises Euthyphro as wise ("you are younger than I by as much as you are wiser." 1244–5), for example. Notice that those who are most lavishly praised in this way are those whom we might call the "complacent smug." 31 Socrates does not engage in anything like this level of praise with any of the young men whom he leads in conversation; he reserves it for these mature older men who are uniformly self-important. Moreover, none of those who are addressed with such lavish praise ever gets angry with Socrates for so addressing them. 32 Euthyphro and Hippias seem entirely impervious to any possibility that the praise could be ironic, accepting it as their due. While ironic praise is offered to a number of different kinds of interlocutors, from Agathon in the Symposium to Callicles in the Gorgias, the case of the complacent smug is the most developed and striking.

Why does Socrates flatter some of his interlocutors so egregiously? Most answers, as we shall see, involve a pedagogical purpose of some kind or other. There could be course be other interpretations divorced from any pedagogical framework. For example, ironic praise could be held to indicate that Socrates (who is implied to know Euthyphro and Hippias well already) knows that his encounters with them are doomed to fail. He could be laying it on so thick out of bitter despair. Or ironic praise could indicate the "savage" nature of Plato in his disdain for his own contemporaries and those whom he believed had misunderstood Socrates. 33 But the dominant lines of interpretation (we will consider
three of them) share the assumption that ‘ironic praise’ has a pedagogical purpose — to encourage at least part of its audience to engage in Socratic dialectic — although they disagree as to which is the audience to be so encouraged and just how the ironic praise is meant to accomplish the encouraging.

On the first line of this sort of interpretation, Socrates may be thought to intend his interlocutors to perceive irony in his flattery, because it is the perceiving of irony that will have a salutary pedagogical effect on them. Being wounded by Socratic irony will engage the pride of the interlocutors in a desire to prove it wrong. The sting of humiliation will prompt them into wishing to pursue philosophical discussion in order either to prove their worth and the worth of their current knowledge, or in order to learn what is true in order to better themselves. In this case, the relevant audience for the irony would be the interlocutors themselves (whether or not third parties or the reader of Plato also perceive it).

A second approach would be that Socrates is indifferent to whether his interlocutors perceive the irony or not (he probably expects that they won’t), but he (that is, Plato in writing his character in the dialogues) intends the audience third parties present, and the Platonic reader, to perceive it. That perception itself nullifies them into a false complacency about their superiority, as Nehamas suggested in connection with his interpretation of Socratic irony (1998, p. 62). On Nehamas’ account, if the reader is intended to perceive the irony in Socrates’ praise of Hippias, she may not only be intended simply to believe that Hippias is fatuous; she may also be tempted to place herself in an equally famous position in believing that she is superior to Hippias in perceiving the irony about him.

The third interpretation argues that it is the praise itself, not any irony in it, that is intended to serve a pedagogical purpose. In this case, the praise would not be meant to be perceived as ironic by the interlocutors themselves. They are meant to hear it as real praise so that they are encouraged to engage. The question of whether the audience perceives irony in this or not would be irrelevant to its pedagogical purpose: third parties, and the Platonic reader, may find such praise ludicrous, but that would not matter if it served its purpose of getting the smug to engage in philosophical debate. On this view, to ask whether strangers” (p. 107) he also remarks on Plato’s “savage” temperament is contrasted with Xenophon’s (p. 14).

34 Compare Vlastos 1991, pp. 138–9, in the paper “Does Socrates Cheat?” arguing that such “extra-elenctic Socratic capers” do not deceive those falsely praised because they are “already wallowing in self-deceit”; instead, he claims that such ironic praise prepares them for “painful elenctic surgery.”

35 But contrast McCabe 2006, p. 18: “for Plato logic and morality are inseparable, and I think Plato may be right.”

36 Plato’s most extensive discussion of lying, in which it is commended in certain contexts, is found in the Republic, see the discussion in Schofield 2006: pp. 284–309, and that running throughout Rosen 2005.

37 These different emotional routes are independent of the question of what pedagogical purpose, if any, that encounter might be intended to serve.
One might invoke friendship on both sides and so pursue dialectic out of good will and a mutual desire for success. One might seek to enlist the pride of the invitee by asking him to show off his ability and argumentative wares, while having to temper it sufficiently that he is willing to unbend into the dialectical exchange rather than stiffly defending an assumed position. Or one might elicit the pride of the invitee to prove himself by showing that he can do it against the invitee’s challenge that he can’t. The difficulty is to enlist pride on the side of entering the dialectic, while avoiding any anger that might militate against continuing the encounter. In a competitive and agonistic culture like that of ancient Athens, this was especially tricky.38

This framework offers a new perspective on the purported elements of Socratic irony considered earlier. Those Platonic characters who accuse Socrates of being an eiron do not (if the argument made above is correct) thereby call him an ironist. They are not indicating that they feel themselves to be the victims of his superior irony; instead, they are asserting a superiority of their own. The characters who make this accusation, after all, are not the hapless ones who are unable to cope with Socratic challenges (or at least at the point that they make the accusation, they still believe themselves well able to cope). Thrasygymnachus, Alcibiades, and Callicles are aggressive and self-confident, seeking not only to display their own knowledge but also to unmask what they take to be Socrates’ feints and manoeuvres. They believe themselves to have penetrated Socrates’ disguises and ferreted out a secret that he would wish to conceal — whether this is (as for Alcibiades) Socrates’ genuine philosophical knowledge and virtue, or (as for Thrasygymnachus) Socrates’ fear that he has no knowledge that could stand up to public examination. The vector of superiority in these accusations is entirely in their favour.

Contrast the very different characters, such as Euthyphro and Hippias, on whom Socrates seems to lavish ironic praise. They are complacent and smug, believing that they have great knowledge to display, but unable in their initial attitudes to Socrates. They are more interested in displaying their own merits than in attacking his, although they wish to do so on their own terms of public rhetorical display rather than elenctic cross-examination. These characters are also self-confident, but they are not aggressive; they are at least initially secure in their conviction of their own superiority. Here, ‘ironic praise’ by Socrates serves to reinforce their sense of their own superiority, while subtly reshaping it to encourage a willingness to engage with him on his terms. To the extent that the ‘ironic praise’ is read by them or by the Platonic reader as self-deprecating, this self-positioning as inferior also reinforces the terms on which the complacent smug are willing to enter the debate. Once interlocutors are engaged in argument, however, the task is to keep them on the right track. For this purpose, Socrates sometimes needs to assert his own superiority, which he does in part by strategically deploying the friendship terms of address which (as we saw earlier) assert and signify dominance of the conversation. The conversation will only continue to flow if people are willing simultaneously to try to demonstrate their superiority by persisting in it, and to play by the conversational rules. Maintaining this balance sometimes requires that Socrates subordinate his interlocutors in order to keep them on track.19

Is the praise of the complacent smug in fact ironically spoken by Socrates? That is, is it certainly praise, but is it really ironic praise? On the reading just sketched, Socrates would not be praising them with the intention that they would understand the praise as ironic: the praise is intended to take them at their own evaluation while getting them to engage in conversation on Socratic terms, an elenctic interchange that will attempt to discipline them into revealing whether or not they have the knowledge that they claim. So far as they are concerned, the praise is meant literally: Socrates is not trying to convey another meaning to them other than what he is literally saying. But is Socrates’ praise meant ironically with reference to Plato’s reader? Are these passages written to convey to the reader that Socrates does not mean literally the praise that he bestows?

To read such praise as “ironic” is to make it quite heavy-handed in its literary function. It would be the prose equivalent of nudges and winks: here is Socrates purporting to take seriously someone who claims to know, as he claimed to have devoted his life to doing in the apology, while surreptitiously signallng that he already knows that this person is a buffoon or ignoramus, not to be taken seriously at all. These dialogues would be over, from the reader’s point of view, before they even begin; they would be autopsies of the fatuous rather than

38 On the competitive nature of the Athenian speech context, see Allen 2000 and Ober 1999. My emphasis on the rhetorical situation is indebted to discussion with Karl Stevens of his own views of Socratic irony in relation to dialectic.

Similar conversational dynamics are identified by Michelini 1998, p. 52 and passim, but she conflates eiron with irony, and ignores the moments when Socrates must take the upper hand: “Through his eiron [sic] pose of inferiority, Socrates plays the role of and speaks for the losers in argument; and his reassuringly low posture has a protreptic effect, since it lessens the danger that beginners may abandon philosophy before they begin to learn.”
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opposed to occasional and casual imputation of Socratic irony, then those traditions positing its philosophical significance – however one evaluates its purpose, audience, and worth – need to be reconsidered.

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