

εἰρωνεία or *ironia*: On the Nature and Function of Socratic Irony

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The definition and function of Socratic irony has been much disputed in contemporary scholarship. This thesis identifies some methodological difficulties in interpreting and defining Socratic irony and attempts to narrow the field of interpretation in order to facilitate the formulation of a new definition of the concept. With reference to the primary texts of Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes, as well as some fragments, the different types of irony as employed by Socrates are identified as verbal, in the form of self-deprecation and knowledge disavowal, and physical. A review of late 18th, 19th and 20th century philosophical scholarship on the topic is done in order to gain a better understanding of the perceived functions of Socratic irony. On the basis of this, as well as the opinions of prominent classical scholars, it is argued that the function of Socratic irony in its verbal form is primarily heuristic, while the physical form is a political mode of being designed to criticise 5th-century Athenian politics. Socratic irony is then redefined to allow for these forms and functions, which are shown to be much more complex than previously thought.

OPSOMMING

Daar word baie gedebatteer oor die definisie en funksie van die Sokratiese ironie in die onlangse navorsing. Hierdie tesis identifiseer sommige metodologiese probleme in die interpretasie en die definisie van Sokratiese ironie en poog om die veld van interpretasie te beperk ten einde die formulering van 'n nuwe definisie van die begrip te fasiliteer. Met verwysing na die primêre tekste van Plato, Xenophon en Aristophanes, asook 'n paar fragmente, word die verskillende vorme van ironie soos deur Sokrates gebruik, geïdentifiseer as verbaal, in die vorm van self-afkeuring en ontkenning van kennis, en fisies. 'n Oorsig van die laat 18de-, 19de- en 20ste-eeuse filosofiese navorsing is gegee ten einde 'n beter begrip te verkry van die waargenome funksies van Sokratiese ironie. Op grond hiervan, asook die menings van vooraanstaande klassici, word aangevoer dat die funksie van die Sokratiese ironie in sy verbale vorm hoofsaaklik heuristies is, terwyl die fisiese vorm 'n politieke bestaanswyse is, met die doel om die 5de-eeuse Atheense politiek te kritiseer. Teen hierdie agtergrond word Sokratiese ironie dan herdefinieer om voorsiening te maak vir bogenoemde vorme en funksies wat blyk baie meer kompleks te wees as wat voorheen gemeen is.

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CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
OPSOMMING	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CONTENTS	v
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. SOME PROBLEMS REGARDING THE INTERPRETATION OF SOCRATIC IRONY	10
2.1. THE THEORY OF IRONY	11
2.2. THE HISTORICITY OF SOCRATES	17
2.3. THE RELATION OF εἰρωνεία TO IRONY	22
3. THE NATURE OF SOCRATIC IRONY	32
3.1. PLATO	32
3.1.1. IRONY IN PLATO'S <i>APOLOGY</i>	38
3.2. XENOPHON	42
3.3. ARISTOPHANES, AMEIPSIAS, AND FRAGMENTS	45
4. SOCRATIC IRONY IN RECENT PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOLARSHIP	49
4.1. THE LATE 18 TH AND 19 TH CENTURIES	49
4.2. THE 20 TH CENTURY	54
5. THE FUNCTION OF SOCRATIC IRONY	58
5.1. THEORIES OF THE GENERAL FUNCTION(S) OF SOCRATIC IRONY	58
5.2. SELF-DEPRECIATION AND THE DISAVOWAL OF KNOWLEDGE	59
5.3. PHYSICAL IRONY	62
5.3.1. WAR, POLITICS, AND THE (PUBLIC) LIFE OF SOCRATES	63

5.3.2. SOCRATIC IRONY AS POLITICAL MODE OF BEING	70
6. CONCLUSION	77
BIBLIOGRAPHY	82

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In a recent episode of the British television program *Quite Interesting* (commonly referred to simply by the initials *Q.I.*) which was aired on 23 September 2011 in Great Britain, host Stephen Fry briefly listed the various different types of irony: verbal, comic, dramatic and Socratic irony. The latter he described as “pretending to be dumber than you are”, a naïve yet common simplification. This reduction stems from the difficulty of defining ‘Socratic Irony’ in the first place, a difficulty manifested in much scholarly debate on the subject.

A cursory glance at some of the more widely used English dictionaries serves to enforce this point. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* describes Socratic irony as “dissimulation, pretence” and particularly a “pose of ignorance assumed in order to entice others into making statements that can then be challenged” (Stevenson 2007) and the *Chambers Concise Dictionary* gives an almost identical definition: “the method of discussing a subject by claiming ignorance of it, forcing those present to make propositions which may then be queried” (Aldus & O’Neill 2009: 1166). The *Collins English Dictionary* designates Socratic irony as belonging to the subject field of philosophy (no doubt thinking of the work of great philosophers such as Schlegel and Kierkegaard on the subject) and gives a similar (albeit slightly more explanatory) description: “a means by which the pretended ignorance of a skilful questioner leads the person answering to expose his own ignorance” (Black et al 2009: 1553). One last dictionary to drive the point home is *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, which again brings Socratic irony into relation with feigned ignorance in order to provoke an interlocutor, but here adds that it is also a “pretended... willingness to learn from others... for the sake of making their errors conspicuous by means of adroit questioning” (Gove 2002: 1195, 2163). What does become clear from these definitions is that Socratic irony, and therefore Socrates himself, is closely associated with an attitude of dishonesty or insincerity.

Even better to illustrate the argument made above, that Socratic irony is not easily defined, is the lack of coherence in the more specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias of philosophy and classics. For example, in Brill’s *Der Neue Pauly* there is no entry for Socratic irony, although brief mention of it is made under the general heading of ‘Irony’, bringing it into relation with maieutics. It also includes a brief discussion of Socratic irony under the

sub-heading “Romanticism”, which refers mainly to Schlegel’s conception of Socratic irony as both *dissimulatio* (feigning ignorance to conceal one’s own opinion; Walde 2007: 943) and an antagonistic attitude which causes feelings of contradiction (Barth 2007: 1144). This last entry places Socratic irony squarely in the realm of philosophy proper, which leaves little room for those of us who want to see a more practical definition of the concept.

But let us have a look at other similar sources. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* has no entry for Socratic irony and makes only brief mention that he is considered an ironist under the entry for Socrates himself (Nehamas 1996: 1419). *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (Gagarin & Fantham 2010) also does not consider it a concept worthy of an entry. There is however a short entry in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* which describes Socratic irony as “a form of indirect communication” used by Socrates in the dialogues of Plato to “praise insincerely the abilities of his interlocutors while revealing their ignorance” (Prior 1999: 861). While this definition, like all the other definitions I have already mentioned, may not be wrong in essence, it is still too simplistic a description for a concept which is clearly immensely complex, as is evidenced by the on-going debate regarding the nature, function and even the existence of Socratic irony. It especially does not explain the instances of physical irony pointed out by Lowell Edmunds in his paper “The Practical Irony of the Historical Socrates” (2004: 193-207).

The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* gives by far the most extensive account of Socratic irony in two separate entries: ‘Sokratik’ and ‘Ironie’. The first acknowledges the confusion concerning Socratic irony, but claims that Quintilian’s definition of irony as saying the opposite of what you mean (*Institutio Oratoria* 9.2.44; tr. Russell 2001) can easily be applied to the *Apology* and other Socratic dialogues of Plato, but that the same irony cannot be found in Xenophon, because of the absence of the word εἰρωνεία (Narcy & Zinsmaier 2007: 956). It goes on to say that εἰρωνεία should not be translated merely as irony and that when it is applied to Socrates by characters such as Alcibiades it should not be taken to mean ‘irony’ in the Quintilian sense, but rather a more subtle method which blurs the boundaries between rhetoric and dialectic (Narcy & Zinsmaier 2007: 957). The second entry makes mention of the dispute regarding the etymology of ‘irony’ and whether or not it can be traced back to εἰρωνεία, but does not expand on the matter (Behler 1998: 599). It is also generally agreed that in classical times Socrates was widely considered the master of irony by Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, a point that the *Historisches Wörterbuch* reiterates,

relating it to knowledge disavowal and the humiliation of the interlocutor with the purpose of bringing him to a new realisation of knowledge (Behler 1998: 600). What the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* thus in essence gives us is a fairly concise description of the academic work so far done on Socratic irony, but it refuses to argue in favour of certain arguments, preferring to present them as objectively as possible. Unfortunately this only adds to the confusion regarding Socratic irony, because the reader is presented with contradictory academic statements.

It may well be said that at the centre of the debate about the very nature and function of Socratic irony stands the late Professor Gregory Vlastos' book *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, published in 1991; at the very least it has been the catalyst for a great many responses in the years that followed its publication and is almost solely responsible for once again bringing Socratic irony to the foreground of academic discussion for many of those scholars for whom Socrates still retains an attraction.¹ The book was Vlastos' correction of his own earlier misconceptions of Socrates, both as person and as philosopher. In its introduction he admits that earlier in his career he had missed that certain strangeness of Socrates which is so hard to put a finger on, and that it took him more or less thirty years to finally realise what that strangeness was (Vlastos 1991: 2-5). The result of his attempt to fully describe what he felt was central to the understanding of the mysterious philosopher was the aforementioned book, and while it may have sparked some debate, Vlastos was not entirely mistaken in what he had written. Socrates was indeed an ironist, as will be shown in this thesis. The problem with Vlastos' account of Socratic irony is that it was too simplistic; he had still missed a very important aspect, notable in the very character of Socrates, without which I believe Socratic irony isn't anything special at all. I will return to this aspect in detail in Chapters 2, 3 and 5.

Vlastos starts the section on Socratic irony with an abbreviated study of the words that are held by so many to be the axis of the debate: εἰρωνεία, εἶρων, εἰρωνεύομαι. We will return to the importance of this word group for the current study shortly; however, what is of importance here is that Vlastos tries to show that an εἶρων is not necessarily a liar or a person who means to deceive others, but that the word had acquired an alternative

¹ Vlastos has been so influential in the recent scholarship on Socrates that Blackwell's *A Companion to Socrates* was dedicated to him in 2006 (Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar). Similar dedications abound in other publications dealing with Socrates.

meaning by the time Plato and others that wrote of Socrates started using it. This meaning was more akin to its etymological successor *ironia*, which was first used by Cicero in *De oratore* and from which our own word 'irony' stems, and the shift in meaning was in fact caused by the ironic conduct of Socrates (Vlastos 1991: 23-29). Vlastos conducts the rest of his study in much the same way as the bulk of my own study will be conducted: by looking at various extracts from Platonic texts and showing how they are ironic. He focuses almost exclusively on the words uttered by those speaking to or of Socrates, as well as Socrates' own words. In the end he rejects all "philosophically invented" (Vlastos 1991: 43) meanings of irony for the most common and simplest definition: "irony... is simply expressing what we mean by saying something contrary to it" (Vlastos 1991: 43). This sounds a lot like pure simple irony, in which we say one thing and mean another, but Vlastos makes the distinction that in this 'complex irony' of Socrates he both *does* and *does not* mean what is said. While this 'complex irony' is certainly different from simple verbal irony, it is still not sufficient to explain all the instances of irony related to Socrates, and as such has been the catalyst for a great many responses.²

It is this strict adherence to the linguist's definition of verbal irony (cf. Colebrook 2004: 22) which has led many scholars to argue against Vlastos' account of Socratic irony.³ The most common fault found is that his conception of irony is not "complex enough" (Gordon 1996: 131). Jill Gordon argues that the reason for this simple conception of irony is that Vlastos completely ignores the dramatic context within which the words are spoken (Gordon 1996: 131). To support this argument she also points out that the very dictionary definition (from *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*) which he quotes at the beginning of the chapter on Socratic irony, namely that "irony is the use of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, [their] literal meaning" (Vlastos 1991: 21), is only one section of a larger definition of irony which includes references to situational and dramatic irony as well (Gordon 1996: 132n4). Vlastos thus seems to have 'cherry-picked' the definition which suited his notion of Socratic irony and simply thrown a blind eye to the rest, which undoubtedly he deemed of no importance for his study. Gordon also rejects the dictionary's

² In fact, it seems that Vlastos' definition of Socrates' 'complex irony' led directly to Vasiliou's theory of 'reverse irony', in which Socrates means what he says but is taken as being insincere (Vasiliou 2002).

³ See Kleve 1997: 67 on Vlastos' Socrates not being strange enough; Kraut 1992: 354 against Vlastos' argument that Socrates both avows *and* disavows knowledge (Vlastos 1991: 241-42); Lane 2006 against Vlastos' argument that the meaning of εἰρωνεία had shifted because of Socrates; and Mathie 1992: 198 against Vlastos' treatment of the texts and the concept and function of irony itself.

definition of Socratic irony as “knowledge disavowal” because many instances of Socratic irony don’t involve any disavowal of knowledge (Gordon 1996: 133). The importance of this early criticism will become more apparent as this study progresses.

Another criticism levelled against Vlastos focuses on his claim that there was a shift in the meaning of εἰρωνεία at around the same time that Socrates was alive, and thus that Socrates was the cause of this shift, which resulted in the alternative meaning of the word as mentioned above. This was rejected by Paula Gottlieb as early as 1992 (278-279), with whom Jill Gordon (1996: 136) and later Iakovos Vasiliou (1999: 458), amongst others, agreed. The argument for this criticism (as given by Gottlieb) is that Vlastos overlooked another critical aspect of irony: that there will always be someone who doesn’t *get* it. Those who followed Socrates around regularly naturally understood the irony in his words and actions, but those who weren’t in this group – the outsiders – often didn’t get it. For the first group what Socrates was doing was ironic, but for the second group Socrates was an εἰρων – a deceiver. Thus, to see irony in εἰρωνεία is to be an insider, just as Cicero and Quintilian and Vlastos himself are insiders (Gottlieb 1992: 278-279).

Vasiliou, in the same paper as he rejects the above claim by Vlastos, attempted to better formulate what he saw as Socratic irony. He argued that Vlastos’ Socratic irony very rarely occurs in the Socratic dialogues and that furthermore the instances of irony cited by Vlastos in his book are rarely ironic at all, and if they are they’re irony of a different sort (1999: 457). This different sort of irony Vasiliou calls ‘conditional irony’, and as the name suggests, the irony relies on the presence of a condition. The setup is that Socrates makes a statement and *if* X is the case then his statement would be true. However, X is an antecedent which the reader already knows that Socrates believes *not* to be the case, and it is from this that the irony in the Socratic dialogues arises (Vasiliou 1999: 462-463). Vasiliou also claims that conditional irony is by far the most ubiquitous form of irony to be found in the Socratic dialogues (1999: 457).

In a later paper Vasiliou also argued for a ‘reverse irony’ which occurs frequently in one of the Socratic dialogues specifically: the *Apology*. In reverse irony, Vasiliou argues, Socrates actually sincerely believes what he has said, but the audience believes that he is εἰρωνεύόμενος – putting them on or lying to them. Vasiliou also makes it clear that he believes that Socrates knows that his remarks will be understood as being insincere, but he

makes them anyway. The function of this type of irony is to confuse and perplex the audience, thereby causing them to strive to discover whether or not Socrates really did mean what he had said and why he had said it (2002: 221).

While, as I have mentioned, many of the arguments on Socratic irony put forward in recent years have taken Vlastos as their basis and argued their own thesis from there onwards, some have paid little heed to Vlastos and have elected to rather start directly from their own standpoint. Nevertheless even these papers have for the most part cited Vlastos at some point. David Wolfsdorf's paper "The Irony of Socrates" (2007) takes such a stand and argues that Socrates very rarely makes use of verbal irony. His article focuses on the early Socratic dialogues of Plato, in which he believes Socrates was meant to be understood as being sincere. For his argument he uses a definition of verbal irony that he has argued for in the introduction of the paper, that verbal irony "occurs when a speaker deliberately highlights the literal falsity of his or her utterance, typically for the sake of humor" (Wolfsdorf 2007: 175). He also specifies that "the intent of the verbal ironist is benign, whereas the εἰρωνία is malevolent" (Wolfsdorf 2007: 175). The rest of the paper revolves around one passage in *Euthyphro* (2c-3e) and argues that if Socrates was being ironic *and* benign, Euthyphro's response to Socrates would have shown some form of recognition of the irony, but Euthyphro's response betrays no such thing. As such, Wolfsdorf argues, it is not a far stretch to imagine that Socrates was in fact being sincere (2007: 176-177).

As part of his argument Wolfsdorf takes on Vasiliou's theory of "so-called conditional irony" (2007: 177),⁴ as Vasiliou had also quoted this passage from *Euthyphro* as a case in point (1999: 468-469). Vasiliou's argument goes roughly as follows: Meletus charges Socrates with a case (corrupting the youth, amongst other things) which Socrates considers noble, because a young man could certainly have knowledge of virtue and therefore know when the youth are being corrupted:

Socrates: For the fact that, young as he is, he has apprehended so important a matter reflects no small credit upon him. For he says he knows how the youth are corrupted and who those are who corrupt them. He must be a wise man; who, seeing my lack of wisdom and that I am corrupting his fellows, comes to the State, as a boy runs to his mother, to accuse me.

⁴ Note the almost contemptuous manner of introducing Vasiliou's theory. It is clear from the start that Wolfsdorf does not agree with Vasiliou's theory of conditional irony.

(2c; tr. Fowler 1960)

The condition here is that *if* Meletus has knowledge of virtue his charge against Socrates is noble, because it is his duty to protect the youth first and the old only after that. Vasiliou argues that the reader knows that Socrates believes that Meletus does *not* in fact have this knowledge, and thus that Socrates must believe the charge brought against him to be ignoble. It is Vasiliou's claim that we know this because of Socrates' treatment of Meletus in the *Apology* (especially 24b-28b; Vasiliou 1999: 468) that really bothers Wolfsdorf. He argues that there is ample evidence in *Euthyphro* that Socrates has never, or only briefly, before met Meletus and as such that Vasiliou's claim cannot be taken seriously (Wolfsdorf 2007: 178).

Melissa Lane also criticizes Vasiliou's theories of both conditional and reverse irony in "The Evolution of Eirōneia in Classical Greek Texts: Why Socratic Eirōneia is not Socratic Irony" (2006: 49-83). Her objection is to his translation of εἰρωνεία as "shamming or false modesty" (Vasiliou 1999: 466) and she points out the inconsistency between his understanding of the term in 1999 (dealing with conditional irony) and his understanding of it in his 2002 article on reverse irony (Lane 2006: 50n4).

Lane's 2011 contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, "Reconsidering Socratic Irony", points out in great detail some very common problems in dealing with Socratic irony, although they are too numerous to mention here and will be discussed where applicable throughout the rest of this thesis. She also discusses possibilities for the purpose of Socratic irony, which will be dealt with in Chapter 4. Most significantly, however, is her rejection of some of the most prominent theories on Socratic irony, including that of Vlastos. For the most part she accepts only parts of different theories to support her own argument, but she refrains from giving a clear conception of what she considers Socratic irony to be. In conclusion she claims that while there certainly are moments of irony in the dialogues involving Socrates, Socratic irony is neither the central feature nor even a major feature of the character we know (Lane 2011: 237-259).

All of the theories I have thus far mentioned focus almost exclusively on irony as a verbal phenomenon, but there are other forms of irony which they have not taken into account. Lowell Edmunds argues for a practical irony of which the Greeks in the 4th century BCE were well aware. He describes it as "an irony of manner, or more broadly of style" (2004: 193).

Also notable in this account is that Edmunds does not strictly use only Plato's earlier Socratic dialogues, as is so often the case. His argument relies heavily on Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Not only that, but he argues that the Socrates he is treating is the historical Socrates (Edmunds 2004: 193-207; this is also clear from the title of the paper, "The Practical Irony of the Historical Socrates"). The Socratic problem remains a point of much debate and is exactly the reason why most scholars tend to stick to the early Socratic dialogues when working on Socratic irony.

What is clear from these accounts of Socratic irony is [1] that the previous conception as propounded by Professor Vlastos is simply not complex enough, and [2] that the criticism following Vlastos' book has resulted in various other attempts of defining Socratic irony, few of which are really in agreement and some of which deny the existence of Socratic irony altogether. One must then ask how Socratic irony could be properly understood, analysed and recognised without a working and generally accepted definition, or at least a circumscription, of what exactly it is. The aim of this thesis is to shed some light on the nature and function of Socratic irony and ultimately attempt to build a practical, working definition thereof.

The following chapters deal firstly with some methodological problems with regards to the analysis of Socratic irony. These matters need considerable clarification before a coherent study of the texts can be done. The first of these is the theory of irony, which is much more complex than scholars unfamiliar with it often realise. The second is the concept of εἰρωνεία. As I have already mentioned, there is some dispute regarding the exact original meaning of the word (and its cognate forms) and its direct or indirect etymological relation to our more modern term 'irony'. The last matter which poses, and will in all likelihood continue to pose, a rather big hermeneutical problem is the historicity of Socrates, better known as the Socratic Problem. These problems will be dealt with in Chapter 2 in an attempt to set up rules and boundaries for the interpretation of Socratic irony. Chapter 3 consists of an analysis of source texts. The sources that are used are primarily the early Socratic dialogues of Plato because these are generally accepted to deal with the historical Socrates.⁵ The main dialogues will be *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, *Apology*, *Gorgias*, *Symposium* and *Republic*.

⁵ Unfortunately the order of the dialogues is much disputed and certainly not set in stone. The dispute with regards to deciding which dialogues are earlier is discussed in more detail in section 2.2 below, especially pp. 17-18.

However, in order to formulate a full and comprehensive definition of Socratic irony other texts such as Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and *Symposium*, Aristophanes' *Clouds* and *Ameipsias' Konnos*, as well as Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* are included in the analysis, although to a lesser degree. I will also argue that Socratic irony is not – and indeed should not be – confined to the historical Socrates, regardless of the fact that the early works of Plato are our most fruitful sources for examples thereof.

Chapter 4 consists of an overview of philosophical accounts of the nature and especially the function of Socratic irony from the late 18th century to the end of the 20th century. Taking the Romantic era and the work of the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel as the starting point for further discussion, I consider the work of Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, which largely serves as the basis for future conceptions of Socratic irony, including my own. It is also noted that the 20th-century philosophical scholarship on the topic of Socratic irony, though more disparate, offers some radically new and fresh insights into the nature and function of the concept, particularly but not exclusively in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

Chapter 5 builds on the results of Chapters 3 and 4 by utilising the theory of irony and the philosophical theories of Socratic irony to investigate the purpose thereof, which I believe is closely connected to its nature, especially but not exclusively in the case of physical irony. In relation to this the ability of irony to reveal a deeper truth is discussed, as this is often claimed to be the function of Socratic irony. Further analysis of the primary texts and an overview of the historical circumstances in 5th-century Greece, particularly in a political sense and with special reference to Athens, will shed some light on the problem. The work of Cicero, Quintilian and Aristotle, as well as those philosophers discussed in Chapter 4 (most notably Hegel and Kierkegaard) will be taken into account when formulating the definition of Socratic irony. Finally, in Chapter 6 I present the results of this study, as well as the reformulated definition of Socratic irony.

CHAPTER TWO

SOME PROBLEMS REGARDING THE INTERPRETATION OF SOCRATIC IRONY

As is the case with reading any text (written, verbal, visual or aural), some meaning is always left open to the audience's interpretation, regardless of whether or not the author (though perhaps 'sender' might be a better term) had intended it to be so. The intention of the author isn't always apparent in the reading of the text, and often it seems irrelevant to even guess at the author's intentions (Schmitz 2007: 125), especially in the case of ancient texts. Not only that, but it is never guaranteed that the same text will be received in the same way by all the members of the intended audience ('recipients'). More often it is a case of several different interpretations coming to light for different recipients, and it is even possible that what the sender had originally intended doesn't come across to the recipient(s) at all (Schmitz 2007: 126-127). Reception theory has its roots in phenomenology and structuralism, but has continued, despite strong criticism, to carry some weight in our postmodern era (Burke 1998: 18-19). According to Barthes writing can only begin when the author enters into his own death. Foucault and Derrida likewise agree that the author is absent from and has no bearing on the meaning behind his text (Burke 1998: 17).

The onus of interpretation thus lies with the receiver, which could present some problems of exactly the kind we are currently faced with when it comes to the interpretation of Socratic irony. This thesis, however, is not a study of the various ways of interpreting Socratic irony. What I will instead attempt to do in this chapter is to clarify some points of confusion in order to (hopefully) narrow the field of interpretation a little. The problems I have identified are:

[1] The understanding of the theory of irony. Classicists, unfortunately, are often not linguists, and even a linguist would have to have made irony his field of specialty to fully grasp the complexity of the concept. However, we must try to gain as full an understanding of irony as we can if we hope to correctly identify and interpret instances of Socratic irony in the primary texts.

[2] The historicity of the character of Socrates as portrayed in various texts. Some scholars argue that the interpretation of Socratic irony should be confined strictly to what is widely considered historical accounts, that is, the early Socratic dialogues of Plato, some works by Xenophon and in rare cases those of Aristophanes. Others have

seen no problem regarding Socrates, and therefore Socratic irony, as a literary creation and have therefore found it easy to read irony into other texts such as Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Ameipsias' *Konnos*. Because the Socratic Problem is still unsolved and remains open for debate, restricting Socratic irony to texts dealing with the historical Socrates is too subjective and necessarily rules out certain texts that may offer us a much deeper understanding of Socratic irony. Not only that, but Socratic irony is then found in and restricted to different texts depending on the scholar, which makes the definition thereof problematic.

[3] The term εἰρωνεία and its etymological relation to *ironia* and therefore 'irony'. I regard this as a problem of interpretation simply due to the fact that many scholars deny that there is any irony in works dealing with Socratic irony if the word εἰρωνεία (which they then translate as 'irony') does not appear (cf. Nancy & Zinsmaier 2007: 956). It is a stance with which I strongly disagree and I will argue against using the theory of irony as support for a new approach: finding ironic instances that are independent of the word εἰρωνεία in all its forms.

Without proper understanding of the implications of these three concepts to our interpretation of irony, and therefore Socratic irony, I believe that a study of the latter will not be fruitful – or at least not sufficiently so.

2.1. THE THEORY OF IRONY

The word *ironia*, from which without dispute our modern English equivalent 'irony' is derived, was coined by Cicero in the following passage (Vlastos 1991: 23-23):

Irony too gives pleasure, when your words differ from your thoughts... when the whole tenor of your speech shows you to be solemnly jesting, what you think differing continuously from what you say... Socrates far surpassed all others for accomplished wit in this strain of irony or assumed simplicity.

De oratore 2.269-270 (tr. Sutton 1959)

From this passage it seems what Cicero is in fact describing is sarcasm, which is not to say that he is completely wrong. Sarcasm is indeed a form of irony, but it is also the most simple and overt of all ironies, and in this case the ironist makes no attempt to hide his true meaning (Muecke 1969: 20).

Irony, however, can be much more subtle and multi-faceted than sarcasm or the definition of Quintilian on which many theorists rely. Colebrook (2004: 1) notes that even though the most common definition of irony today is “saying what is contrary to what is meant”, modelled on the definition of Quintilian (*contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est, Institutio Oratoria* 9.2.44; tr. Russell 2001),⁶ there is much more complexity than is often allowed for in irony. This view of irony as more than just saying something other than you mean emerged only in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and along with this developed the notion that someone can be a “victim” (cf. Muecke 1969: 34) of irony. Furthermore irony became something other than just a literary figure, it became something that could be observed, studied and could even be a self-conscious way of life (Wolfsdorf 2007: 176). This shift in the attitude towards irony is fundamental to the differences in the interpretation of Socratic irony seen in recent scholarship.

We must then familiarise ourselves with this more recent theory of irony, which allows for far more ironic substance in the text than does the simple Quintilian definition. Unfortunately it’s not as easy as it sounds, because “there is no correct understanding of the word irony, no historically valid reading of irony...” (Dane in Hutcheon 1994: 9). Irony is notoriously difficult to grasp, but some attempt has to be made. It is also to be noted that even though this richer, more complex view of irony is a relatively recent change in the theory, we must by no means assume that before it was first noticed in the work of the late 18th century scholars, it did not still exist unnamed. To propose this is simply ludicrous. In fact, Muecke makes a convincing argument for exactly this point, saying that the word ‘irony’, the concept of irony and the ironic event itself have to be separated precisely because the latter precedes the former by quite a long way (1982: 15). For the purpose of the first part of this study little mention will be made of the philosophers that have contributed to the study of irony. While the work of Schlegel, Kierkegaard, Rorty et al. has certainly been invaluable to our understanding – especially of the function – of irony, for a more practical definition it is useful to refer to the linguists that have drawn their inspiration from these great men.

⁶ Also notable is that Quintilian distinguishes between εἰρωνεία (*ironia*) as a rhetorical trope and εἰρωνεία (*ironia*) as a figure. In the former the dissimulation occurs between the words that are said, while in the latter the dissimulation is between the words and the actions, so that the meaning is hidden in pretence. The trope is also much shorter, but the figure, which can arise from sustained use of the trope, can cover an entire life, as in the case of Socrates (*Inst.* 9.2.44-52).

Perhaps as a starting point it is easiest to go back to the beginning of this thesis and the various types of irony as listed by Stephen Fry: verbal, comic, dramatic, situational and Socratic irony. Verbal irony is saying something and meaning something else, but not necessarily the opposite. It is essentially a mode of politics through which shared transcendental values are discovered by considering both the explicit and the implicit meanings of the words uttered (Colebrook 2004: 36). In dramatic irony, which occurs most often in drama, the audience or reader is usually aware of the irony of a situation as presented by the dramatist before the characters become aware of it themselves (Wales 2001: 225), or the character says something early in the drama which later “comes back to haunt him” (Murfin & Ray 2009: 253). This is closely related to tragic irony and the latter refers to situations where the audience knows something terrible that the character doesn’t (Colebrook 2004: 14).

Tragic irony is a frequent occurrence in ancient plays, of which perhaps the most obvious and commonly cited example is Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. In the play Oedipus unknowingly kills his own father and marries his mother in an attempt to escape the prophecy of an oracle who had told him that that is precisely what will happen. In this case the audience knows exactly how this drama will end, yet they watch it unfold. Tragic irony is distinguished from dramatic irony through the fact that the latter is the ‘parent’ of the former, whilst comic irony is its sibling (Murfin & Ray 2009: 253). Tragic and comic irony are only different in the same way that tragedy and comedy are inherently different. Lastly, situational irony is again the parent of dramatic irony, through the fact that tragic and comic irony as constructed in drama often (but not always) are also reliant on the nature of situations to bring forth irony. Situational irony outside of drama and literature, however, is almost always unintentional and is sometimes referred to as irony of fate. It refers to a state of affairs in which the exact opposite of what was expected to happen has in fact happened (Muecke 1969: 42). When this kind of irony occurs outside of fiction it is often referred to as “Chance” or “Fate” or “Karma”.

If situational irony falls into the category of *unintentional* irony, verbal irony falls under *intentional* irony. The distinction between the two is quite simple, but becomes of rather great importance when one has to interpret a text. In intentional irony there is an ironist who creates an irony and intends for it to be read as such (Mateo 1995: 173). The intention is also often to be ironical at the expense of someone else. This person, who becomes an

outsider to the situation and is not meant to realise the irony, is called the 'victim' by Muecke (1969: 34). While calling the outsiders 'victims' might be a strong term, it does well to sum up the relation of the ironist and his audience to the outsider(s). It reveals a malevolent tendency in irony which is hard to deny (cf. Wolfsdorf 2007: 175). Muecke refers to this as the double level of irony (1969: 19), and his explanation recalls a pyramid of societal hierarchy. At the top of the pyramid sits the ironist and the situation as he sees it, as well as those in on the irony. At the bottom sits the unsuspecting victim and the situation as he sees it or as the ironist has presented it (Muecke 1969: 19).

This contradiction or incongruity brought about by the differences between the levels invokes a sense of innocence in irony as well. The victim does not realise that he is the object of irony or may not even realise the possibility of his being an outsider, while the ironist will feign innocence (Muecke 1969: 20). The ironist is usually very well aware of the innocence of his victim and the fact that he just doesn't *get* it. This allows him feelings of superiority and detachment, which are often associated with irony (Colebrook 2004: 18-19).

Irony, however, is not only a verbal phenomenon. It has been argued that situational irony is to an extent a sort of verbal irony, in that the writer or ironist has to verbally describe the ironic event (Brooks and Warren in Gray 1960: 221). Others, however, have argued that irony is a point of view, an attitude towards life (Colebrook 2000: 5, Wales 2001: 224) or the vocabularies we speak (Rorty 1989: 80). For Rorty, a culture or a person is the incarnation of a vocabulary. Ironists strive to criticise vocabularies that are considered final,⁷ because they constantly doubt the validity of their own final vocabularies (1989: 73). The only way for the ironist to criticise final vocabularies is with another vocabulary of its kind, thus a culture can only be criticised with/by another culture, a person by another person, and so forth (Rorty 1989: 80). What this means is that the ironist has to submerge himself in another vocabulary in order to criticise at all, and this, essentially, is more than just a verbal phenomenon. It is an attitude, a physical way of being. Consider for a moment a rich person dressing like a pauper in order to highlight the excesses of others in his position. It is ironic because there is incongruity between his appearance and his actual situation (and the

⁷ A "final vocabulary" is that vocabulary which is available to a person or a culture in order to justify their actions, beliefs and lives. Rorty argues that "it is 'final' in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" (1989: 73).

situation of those around him, those who share his vocabulary). Can it really be said that this irony is purely verbal? Certainly not.

We must then acknowledge that there is a physical or practical element to irony. This is the irony identified by Thirlwall as early as 1883, “which is independent of all speech, and needs not the aid of words” (Thirlwall in Hutchens 1960: 356). The irony in this case is a purposeful act of pretence which can be either benevolent or malevolent (Hutchens 1960: 356).

The last aspect of irony which we must pay attention to is Wolfsdorf’s claim that irony is typically employed for the sake of humour (2007: 177). It is true that irony often takes this form, but it is untrue that irony cannot be employed without humour. Irony can have a destructive element (Dane 1991: 78) or it can have a tragic element, seen typically in tragic irony. Irony is not synonymous with humour, nor is it a type of humour. The two are not mutually exclusive, but should nevertheless not be conflated (Hutcheon 1994: 5, 26). It should also not be assumed that because εἰρωνεία is often taken to mean mockery, irony is necessarily humorous. Even when irony does convey humour, it often serves to lay bare deeper, more serious material (Hutcheon 1994: 26). We should therefore not ignore clear cases of irony in the texts we are to deal with simply because the irony contains no hint of humour, or indeed seems to be harmful. Such an approach will rob us of a full understanding of Socratic irony and its function.

Regarding the function of irony, there is no simple answer. Irony can perform a range of functions depending on the type of irony and the context within which it is used. Lausberg identifies two “degrees of self-evidence” of irony (1998: 404). The first, and lower, degree has a tactical, political or dialectical function. This degree of irony aims to conceal itself in the present in order to be laid bare at some – more opportune – time in the future. The nature of the victory also depends on the type of irony employed: whereas *dissimulatio* (concealing one’s own opinion) aims at mutual agreement, *simulatio* (feigning an opinion which agrees with that of the opposing party) aims at concealing its true intention and creating a false sense of peace between the opposing parties. The latter is maliciously intended for some social gain or to distract the opponent long enough for the ironist to prepare a comeback (Lausberg 1998: 404). The second, and higher, degree of self-evidence is a rhetorical tactic in which the ironist aims to lay bare the absurdity of the opponent’s

argument. It thus aims to make itself evident in the present in order to appeal to the audience (judges) and thereby achieve victory (Lausberg 1998: 405).

Muecke sees irony as having a principally moral function (1970: 63), often the product of satirists aiming at exposing hypocrisy, pride, vanity and a range of other similar things (1970: 66). In such cases the ironist is 'right' and the victim is 'wrong', provided that there is a set of generally accepted values against which to juxtapose the victim's position (1970: 67). Irony can be less specific, though, and the entirety of mankind could be victims of a cosmic irony from which there is no escape. This irony is inherent in a society where there are diverging opinions on moral values and becomes apparent in speculation over the human condition (Muecke 1970: 67). In this case the purpose of the ironist is merely to point out this irony, knowing full well that he himself is a victim of the irony too.

Muecke admits, however, that irony doesn't always have a purely moral function. Within the moral purpose of irony fall three uses: satirical (discussed above), rhetorical (as a means of enforcing one's meaning) and heuristic (as a device to indicate that things are not as they seem). There is however a fourth use in which the morality of irony is left open to question. This use is self-regarding/self-protective and can sometimes be so extreme that we may term it 'hoaxing' or 'hypocrisy' rather than 'irony' (Muecke 1969: 233). This irony is not necessarily amoral; in some cases evasiveness can be seen as the best way to deal with a situation, as in the case of a man choosing not to side with one or the other side of an argument because he sympathises with both or with neither and refuses to make a rash decision. In this case irony serves a heuristic purpose, specifically as a form of problem-solving, but it can also be more purely self-regarding, as in the case of a man telling the truth to satisfy his conscience, even if telling the truth is dangerous. In this case the man will speak the truth ironically (Muecke 1969: 236). Muecke also speaks of the need to appear strong when one is weak and using this false strength to intimidate opponents or the need to always be right regardless of the outcome (1969: 239), reminding us of *simulatio* with a low degree of self-evidence (cf. Lausberg above).

Similarly, there are also those, like Jankélévitch, that argue that the function of irony is first and foremost to gain understanding (Clough 1939: 179). This view is especially associated with the irony of Socrates, who is often said to have used irony to lead his interlocutors to a new realisation of truth. This means that the heuristic function of irony is also educational,

and serves to enlighten the ironist or victim either of the self or of something outside of the self. Clough, in the preface to the translation of Jankélévitch's book,⁸ also mentions an "ironic conformity" (1939: 180) in which the ironist plays a game of outward conformity with a group/position in order to ridicule it, naming Socrates' proposal to be honoured in the Prytaneum as a case in point (Clough 1939: 180).

We can thus see that irony can have both 'good' and 'bad' functions. It can be used to ridicule, to expose, to conceal for personal or moral gain, to understand and educate. But these functions are bound to the nature of irony. It cannot simplify, it can only complexify. Irony always hides behind the pretence of something else. It can be too subtle for most to understand and so become meaningless. Perhaps this was the case with the irony of Socrates and is what ultimately led to his death. To understand the function of Socratic irony – and necessarily its success – we must understand its nature, and to understand its nature, we need to understand the factors that play a role in interpreting the source texts.

2.2. THE HISTORICITY OF SOCRATES

The historicity of Socrates, known as the 'Socratic Problem', is a much contested point, mainly because Socrates left no writings of his own. The question of how we could possibly know who the 'real' Socrates was poses some difficulty. While there are certain facts of Socrates' life that we can assert with relative confidence, such as his approximate birth date (469 B.C.E.), date and manner of death (399 B.C.E., hemlock), as well as his marriage to Xanthippe and certain other details (Prior 2006: 29), these facts tell us very little about the *character* of Socrates, and it is in his character that we will find his irony. The problem arises with the Socratic dialogues of Plato and the fact that at some point the philosophical view of Socrates as presented by Plato changes and becomes what we now identify as the philosophy of Plato himself. Some have argued that the later Socrates had merely become Plato's mouthpiece for his own philosophy (Rowe 2007: 54).

That is not to say that the chronology of the Platonic dialogues isn't disputed in itself. Rowe mentions that he considers all the dialogues that come after the *Gorgias* to refer to the later Socrates, thus that they are non-historical (2007: 54). He neglects to say

⁸ The article used here is a slightly altered version of that preface; see Clough 1939: 175n1.

which dialogues are in fact earlier than the *Gorgias* in his view, and this is a problem, because the exact order has still not been settled. Rogers argued that the dialogues fall roughly into 8 groups which follow each other from 1 through 8 in chronological order. These groups are as follows: (1) *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches* and *Ion*; (2) *Charmides* and *Lysis*; (3) *Cratylus*; (4) *Gorgias*, *Meno* and *Euthydemus*; (5) *Protagoras* and *Symposium*; (6) *Phaedo*; (7) *Republic* and (8) *Phaedrus* (1933: 53-54). Groups (3) and (4) belong somewhere in Plato's middle period, though where is hard to say (Rogers 1933: 32). Contrary to this, Wolfsdorf regards *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*,⁹ *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic I* as belonging to Plato's early dialogues (2007: 186n11) and Vasiliou accepts Vlastos' order: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras* and *Republic I* (1999: 457n3; cf. Vlastos 1985: 1n1). Rogers remains unconvinced that either the *Hippias Major* or the *Hippias Minor* are the works of Plato and as such removes them completely from consideration (1933: 188). Considering that Wolfsdorf regards *Protagoras* and *Republic I* as earlier, whereas Rogers regards them as fairly late, the time that has passed between Rogers' and Wolfsdorf's accounts, and the simple fact that Wolfsdorf feels the need to mention which dialogues he considers earlier, it is clear that there remains some disagreement on the chronology of the dialogues.¹⁰

As for the Socrates we see in the works of Xenophon, Rogers argues that this is *not* the historical Socrates, though other scholars have been inclined to take the opposite view due to the apparent sobriety and matter-of-fact nature of the writings (1933: 165). Vlastos agrees that Xenophon's Socrates is not the historical Socrates, but argues that the Socrates in Plato's early dialogues holds the views of the historical Socrates, presented by Plato in fictional conversations (1983: 511-512, 513n10). Others have argued that Xenophon presents a fairly reliable account of the historical Socrates (Gray 1989); Edmunds even takes this for granted and doesn't argue the point at all (2004: 193-207).¹¹ Even those who have

⁹ Wolfsdorf does admit that the authenticity of *Hippias Major* is debatable (2007:186n11).

¹⁰ See also Joyal: 2005 and Osborne: 2006 on contradictions in Plato's dialogues and the key to the historical Socrates. Some scholars have also argued that the *Phaedrus* is Plato's first dialogue because of the immaturity of the text, while the post-structuralists, in particular Derrida, argued that it may have been Plato's last work (Burke 1998: 130).

¹¹ Edmunds does, however, tell us *why* he accepts certain sources as historical: wherever he has found agreement in three or more sources he has treated it as a historical account. While this strategy may seem to have its merits, problems arise when taking into account the inter-dependency of ancient writers, which Edmunds is well aware of, and the fact that this method can only vouch for specific instances and not for an entire work. Edmunds also argues that his method is valid because he isn't dealing with the philosophy of

argued strongly against the historicity of the account of Xenophon and for Plato's version have made it clear that there is room for error (Dubs 1927: 288).¹²

The same can be said for the Socrates of the *Clouds*, who is presented as a Sophist and natural philosopher, for which there is little evidence elsewhere.¹³ Even if taking into account that Aristophanes may have meant to create a parody of the real Socrates it is doubtful that the character in the *Clouds* belies the true character of the historical Socrates (Rogers 1933: 144-147).¹⁴ On the other hand, due to the nature of parody we can infer *some* things about Socrates from the *Clouds*: that he was a public figure and that he was publicly associated with sophistry and natural philosophy. Socrates also refers to the *Clouds* in Plato's *Apology*; we thus know that Plato saw this play as a good source for understanding how Socrates appeared to the public in the 5th century B.C.E. (Prior 2006: 26). Edmunds notes that the scholarship on the historicity of Socrates in the *Clouds* is like a yes-no cycle which is still on-going (2004: 194).

Others too have disagreed on the historicity of Socrates and the Socratic Problem. For Shorey there is no "Socratic Problem", because we know too little about Socrates to extract a character of some sort from Plato's writings (1933: 138). There have been those who argued that very little (if anything) can be known of the historical Socrates (Gigon in de Vogel 1955: 26), and those that have argued that though we cannot know his philosophical doctrine, his philosophical attitude is open to us (Patocka in de Vogel 1955: 26). Some have found the historical Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, others have found traces of his philosophical doctrine in Euripides' *Hippolytus* or have argued for a reliable portrait in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (de Vogel 1955: 26). Others still, like Prior, have argued that we can in fact know a great deal about the life, character, philosophical interests and method of Socrates, but we cannot definitively know his philosophical doctrines (2006: 35). All of these scholars admit that there remains room for debate on the historicity of Socrates, and all of them equally admit that the Socratic Problem may never be solved.

Socrates, but with his physical behaviour, which he believes the authors of the texts had no reason to invent (2004: 206n59). This, too, is assuming too much and giving too little credit to the creativity of Xenophon, Aristophanes, Aristotle and Plato.

¹² "It *might* be that Plato is an exception to the almost universal rule [that ancient writers had little sense of history], and he *might* nevertheless be giving us a trustworthy account" (Dubs 1927: 288; his emphasis).

¹³ Socrates does mention that he was interested in natural philosophy in his youth in the *Phaedo* (96b-99d; tr. Fowler 1960).

¹⁴ For the sake of brevity I have elected not to recount the entire arguments for and against which works and authors deal with the historical Socrates. What is important here are the diverging opinions on the matter, and that is what I aim to provide.

Waterfield too discusses the Socratic Problem, and mentions that in some scholarship all Socratic writings by Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes and even those that didn't survive to this day have been condemned as historically unreliable. The argument is that all of these writers used Socrates for their own purposes and often wrote down what they thought he would have said had he been in a certain situation with certain other characters (2009: 26). Waterfield however tries to find some evidence for the historical Socrates through certain facts known about his trial and Athens at the time, but his findings are small: he concludes that Socrates' trial was a political trial because Socrates had anti-Athenian views with which Plato and Xenophon agreed, and thus that their accounts could be taken as historically reliable (2009: 29).¹⁵ While this may have some merit, it refers to the historical facts surrounding Socrates' trial, and not to the portrayal of Socrates the person. The problem persists.

On the other hand there are those, like Wolfsdorf, that believe that the debate over the historical Socrates is detrimental to the reading and interpretation of the dialogues of Plato, and as such prevents the reader to fully appreciate his skill as a writer. What Wolfsdorf suggests is that Socrates is a literary construction which may or may not owe a debt to the historical Socrates, but is essentially open to be subjected to the creative licence of Plato, who in all probability took countless liberties therewith (2007: 185). Most (2007: 15) says the following of Hegel's Socrates: "[Hegel] ended up falling into the trap of failing to distinguish sufficiently between Plato's Socrates and Socrates' Socrates, and confused the views of the author of the Platonic dialogues with those of the historical figure represented by one of the characters in them". While many may argue that Most has a point, there are also those that may say that Hegel was in fact an early forerunner of what was to become arguably the late 20th century's most famous literary theory: deconstruction. This theory's most (in)famous proponent also challenged the traditional view of Socrates, according to which Socrates only says what Plato wants him to say. This is most poignantly illustrated in Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, in which Plato stands behind a seated Socrates and dictates what he must write. Derrida's view of this Plato was unfavourable, describing him as a "wicked" authoritarian whose aim is to destroy Socrates. Derrida hints that one should reverse this view in which the postcard always reaches its destination (Zappen 1996: 68). Thus Derrida is arguing against the notion that the author's intention can always be excavated from the text.

¹⁵ C.f. Stone 1989.

I myself am inclined to agree with this last view when it comes to treating literary aspects such as irony in texts dealing with Socrates. The Socratic Problem is far from solved and could conceivably be debated for a very long time still. In all probability it will never be solved; we simply don't have enough information (Dorion 2006: 93). We would benefit more from treating Socrates as a literary construct, or at most as a character possibly based on the real Socrates. While we can say that a historical Socrates did exist (Aristophanes' *Clouds* would have been much less of a comedy if he didn't), we cannot know whether the historical Socrates was an ironist, because the concept of 'irony' did not yet exist in the time of Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes, and thus we have no written evidence that he was undoubtedly an ironist. Some may say that we do, that εἰρωνεία is 'irony', but that argument too, is still open for debate.¹⁶

If, however, we take into consideration that the ancient writers had (at least some of the time) put words into the mouth of Socrates that they believed he may have spoken in a certain situation, we can relatively safely assume that they would have tried to write these words in a way that Socrates would have said them in order to preserve the authenticity and to legitimise their work. Socrates was, after all, a well-known Athenian, and drifting too far from the characteristics of such a public figure would have garnered serious critique. The alternative, that they had made the character of Socrates propound their own views, can also be explained in this way. Because he was such a well-known intellectual with a large circle of followers, it is not too far-fetched to argue that the writer would have written the character in a manner that was similar to that of the historical Socrates in order to validate their own views. If it sounds like the real Socrates speaking, the idea one would get is that Socrates did in fact agree with these things, perhaps in a private conversation with Plato or Xenophon. At least that may have been the writers' intent.

But we cannot know these things for sure; the intent of the writer is lost to us today. I do however think that such a treatment of Socrates is valid and more useful for the purpose of this thesis than any of the alternatives. Socratic irony has become something we read into the Socratic dialogues and other Socratic writings, and the irony has been found amongst proponents of all the diverging opinions on the Socratic Problem. Socratic irony then has transcended the historical Socrates and has become a feature of the literary character.

¹⁶ See section 2.3 on p. 22.

2.3. THE RELATION OF εἰρωνεία TO IRONY

As I have previously mentioned, many scholars have argued that εἰρωνεία has no etymological relation to *ironia* and therefore to ‘irony’, whilst others have argued that ‘irony’ stems directly from the Greek term.¹⁷ Along with this we also often find the argument that there can be no instance of irony if the word εἰρωνεία is not present.

Many dictionaries and encyclopaedias merely state that ‘irony’ is derived from the Greek εἰρωνεία without mention of the controversy behind it. Von Wilpert not only makes the connection between the aforementioned terms, but also links irony with humour. He goes on to link this humorous irony as self-mockery with Socratic irony (1979: 377-378). Wales argues that ‘irony’ has come into English via the Latin *ironia* and translates εἰρωνεία as ‘dissimulation’, which she links directly to ‘irony’/*ironia* (2001: 224). Murfin & Ray similarly translates εἰρωνεία as ‘dissembling’. They also give an interesting account of the etymology of irony, arguing that it comes from the Greek εἶρων, which is derived from εἰρωνεία, rather than the other way around. For Murfin and Ray the εἶρων is the weaker opposite of the ἀλαζών,¹⁸ the braggart in Greek drama. The former always emerges victorious through misrepresentation of himself (2009: 251).

Both Vlastos and Ribbeck’s arguments for the change in the meaning of εἰρωνεία could be taken in support of these dictionary definitions, but there are those who argue otherwise. Lane has argued that εἰρωνεία does not translate to ‘irony’ in the texts of Plato, but that Aristotle had changed the meaning of εἰρωνεία for his own rhetorical purposes (2006: 49-82). She also argues that there is no basis for Socratic irony in Plato’s ascription of the term εἰρωνεία to Socrates, because an εἶρων aims to conceal what is not said (thus meaning an

¹⁷ “Die etymologische Ableitung... ist umstritten und zweifelhaft” (Büchner 1941: 340). In this article Büchner argues against Ribbeck (1876: 381-400), who sought to show that εἰρωνεία had developed from “Schimpfwort” (Bergson 1971:409) to the more sophisticated meaning attributed to it in Socratic irony and then again acquired a renewed pejorative aspect (Bergson 1971: 409). Büchner argued instead that εἰρωνεία had originally meant ‘belittling’ (in accordance with ‘mocking’, which is so often attributed to it) and that when ‘belittling’ did not fit, it could be explained by an analogy (1941: 339-358).

¹⁸ An interesting discussion on the opposition between εἶρων and ἀλαζών occurs in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.7. According to this account these two are the extremes of which the mean is ‘truthfulness’, but the εἶρων is still closer to truthfulness than the ἀλαζών. Aristotle mentions Socrates as an example of an εἶρων, but because Socrates is also his example of the μεγαλόψυχος the account seems almost to be a justification of εἰρωνεία. The redefinition of εἰρωνεία as something closer to irony which occurs in Aristotle could therefore be because of this passage and Aristotle’s admiration for Socrates. For a more detailed discussion of this point see Gooch 1987.

εἴρων is a liar), while an ironist aims to convey what is not said (2006: 51). From this argument it soon becomes clear that Lane considers all ascriptions of εἴρωνεῖα to Socrates (but also to anyone else) that came before Aristotle to mean ‘concealing’, ‘feigning’, ‘dissembling’ or ‘deceiving’ (2006: 52). This includes not only Plato, but also Aristophanes and Ameipsias (there are no references to Socrates as an εἴρων in Xenophon).

What I would like to suggest is that εἴρωνεῖα could very well have meant ‘concealing’, ‘feigning’, ‘dissembling’, ‘deceiving’ or even ‘mocking’ (in the most negative sense of the word) and still accompany an instance of irony. Socrates is referred to as an εἴρων four times in the dialogues of Plato (*Republic* 336e, *Gorgias* 489e, *Symposium* 216e, and *Apology* 38a),¹⁹ thrice by opponents and once by himself, and once in both Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (449)²⁰ and Ameipsias’ *Konnos* (fragment). Perhaps irony can even be found in this accusation of deceit, so that the very appropriation of the term becomes an irony in itself. But simply making this claim isn’t enough if some textual evidence cannot be found. To do so, let us take a look at the passages in the Platonic dialogues in which the use of εἴρωνεῖα with reference to Socrates occurs: *Republic*, *Gorgias*, *Symposium* and *Apology*.

In *Republic* 337a the accusation is made by Thrasymachus, who, having grown weary and irritated at Socrates’ constant questioning of Polemarchus, accuses him of pretending not to have an answer to his own question to what justice is. Thrasymachus believes that Socrates *does* have an answer which he keeps to himself because it is easier to ask questions than to answer them. We know this because Thrasymachus demands a clear and precise answer, not “such drivel” as “that it is that which ought to be” (336d; tr. Shorey 1943).²¹ When Socrates replies that they (himself and his followers) do not make mistakes willingly, for to do so would be foolish, and that it is their “lack of ability that is at fault” (336e), Thrasymachus replies:

Ye Gods! Here we have the well-known *irony* (εἴρωνεῖα) of Socrates, and I knew it and predicted that when it came to replying you would refuse and *dissemble* (εἴρωνεύσοιο) and do anything rather than answer any question that anyone asked you.²²

¹⁹ That is, on four separate occasions. The word itself appears in total six times with reference to Socrates if taken into consideration that both Thrasymachus and Alcibiades name him thus twice.

²⁰ The reference in *Clouds* is indirectly related to Socrates as the kind of person produced by the Thinkery.

²¹ All translations of the *Republic* are from Shorey 1943.

²² My emphasis.

It is interesting that Shorey here translates both words with the εἰρων- stem differently, first as 'irony' and then as 'dissemble'.²³ It demonstrates quite well the confusion regarding the meaning of εἰρωνεία in all its forms. But let us suppose that he had translated both in the same manner, so that "the well-known *irony* of Socrates" could be replaced with "the well-known *deceit* of Socrates". This translation would fit well with Thrasymachus' accusation that Socrates does have an answer to his own question.

Could it then be shown that there is any irony at all in this case? I believe that it is possible. Firstly, we must take into consideration that Socrates and Glaucon had gone to Polemarchus' house, and there they had found several other people, including Thrasymachus. We must thus assume that Thrasymachus is to count among the friends or acquaintances of Polemarchus (Socrates' interlocutor up until the point of Thrasymachus' accusation), and thus is not one of Socrates' followers. As I have shown in the discussion of the theory of irony, there are two groups involved in the irony, the insiders and the outsiders. It is not far-fetched to claim that Socrates and his followers are the insiders when it comes to Socratic irony, and thus that his opponent and his followers are the outsiders. Thrasymachus then falls into that group which, were there any irony, wouldn't *get* it.

So it remains only to be shown that there is irony to be found in this situation. We cannot take Socrates' disavowal of knowledge with which he replies to Thrasymachus' accusation seriously, because he had already indicated shortly before that he is aware that he has at least *some* knowledge. While speaking to Cephalus (shortly before Polemarchus interrupts) he had argued that men who have made their own money take it seriously, whereas those that inherit it seem to hold it in some disregard. Cephalus had said that he was right, upon which Socrates replied "I assuredly am" (*Rep.* 330d). How can we then say that when Socrates in 331c-d argues that it is not just to return borrowed weapons to a man who has gone mad, to which Cephalus utters the exact same reply as earlier (ἀληθῆ), Socrates does not hold the exact same opinion, that he is right? Cephalus and Socrates certainly seem to agree that the definition of justice is not "to tell the truth and return what one has received" (331d) and were Polemarchus not to interject and argue *for* that definition (at which point Cephalus leaves the house), we could well assume that they would have continued to agree

²³ For the rest of this chapter all instances of words containing the εἰρων- stem will be translated in its original sense as "lying" or "feigning" or "mocking" (in the negative sense of the word) for the purpose of the analysis, but in all quotations the translator's original translation of the word shall be given.

in the same way. Socrates has now, somewhat unwillingly,²⁴ entered into an argument with Polemarchus, Cephalus' son. When he says to Polemarchus that he (Polemarchus) doubtlessly knows what the definition means, whereas Socrates himself does not, there is already an air of the superiority which is common to the ironist in his words. Even more indicative that Socrates has taken a didactic approach to the conversation is the following passage (332c-d):

Socrates: In heaven's name! Suppose someone had questioned him thus: 'Tell me, Simonides, the art that renders what that is due and befitting to what is called the art of medicine?' What do you take it would have been his answer?

Polemarchus: Obviously the art that renders to bodies drugs, foods and drinks.

Socrates: And the art that renders to what things what that is due and befitting is called the culinary art?

Polemarchus: Seasoning to meats.

Socrates: Good. In the same way tell me the art that renders what to whom will be dominated by justice.

Firstly, Socrates exclaims in what could only be exasperation at an earlier question of Polemarchus, "In heaven's name!", but he continues to question Polemarchus systematically and when he gets the answer he is looking for, he replies with "good" in the same way a teacher replies to a student who has given a correct answer. From this it is clear that Socrates has assumed the role of educator through *elenchus* and thus that he also sees himself as having some knowledge that Polemarchus does not. Thrasymachus surely also believes that Socrates has knowledge of justice, but since he is an outsider to the method of Socratic *elenchus*, he does not realise that what Socrates is attempting is to bring Polemarchus to some realisation of his own. If Socrates wishes to continue in the conversation he cannot let on that he does have some knowledge, or at least some *idea*. His disavowal of knowledge then is meant ironically; he should indeed be understood to mean something other than what he says. But Thrasymachus as an outsider cannot know this and accuses him of lying. Does the accusation mean that Socrates *is* lying? Certainly not, in the same way that accusing someone of being an adulterer doesn't mean they are one, they

²⁴ 327c-328b, in particular Socrates' reluctant agreement to return to Polemarchus' house: "Well, if so be it, so be it".

might very well be innocent. If Socrates is not lying, then his words must be interpreted as ironic.

A similar case can be found in the discussion of justice in *Gorgias*. Callicles and Socrates both use forms of εἶρων- of each other:

Socrates: [...] Come now, tell me again from the beginning what it is you mean by the better, since you do not mean the stronger: only, admirable sir, do be more gentle with me over my first lessons, or I shall cease attending your school.

Callicles: You are sarcastic (εἶρωνεύη), Socrates.

Socrates: No, by Zethus, Callicles, whom you made use of just now for aiming a good deal of sarcasm (εἶρωνεύου) at me: but come, tell us whom you mean by the better.

(489e; tr. Lamb 1946)²⁵

Earlier in the conversation (481d) Socrates notes that in some ways he and Callicles are the same, because they both love two things. For Socrates it is Alcibiades and philosophy and for Callicles it is the Athenian *Demos* and Demos, the son of Pyrilampes. Undoubtedly there is some play on “Demos” here, as it refers to both the son of Pyrilampes (known for his extraordinary beauty) and the Athenian people, popularly referred to as the *demos*.²⁶ Socrates also says that they differ in one crucial way: Callicles will always agree with his two loves, and in that way is prone to contradicting himself, whereas Socrates speaks the views of philosophy, which “always holds the same” (482a). What Socrates seems to be implying here is that Callicles will agree with just about anybody. As such, he concludes, Callicles will always disagree with himself. Shortly thereafter Socrates exclaims that he is lucky in being able to converse with Callicles, because if the latter agrees with the former on a matter, what they agree on must be the truth. Yet this cannot be what Socrates truly believes, because he had just said that Callicles cannot even agree with himself; he changes his own opinion on a whim. Should we then believe that Socrates in all honesty thinks that he could learn from Callicles? I think not.

²⁵ All translations of *Gorgias* are from Lamb 1946.

²⁶ Cf. Aristophanes *Wasps*, 97 (Lamb 1946: 379n.1).

What then does Callicles mean when he says that Socrates is mocking him?²⁷ I believe he is referring to the following in 489d, which Socrates said shortly before the quote from 489e given above:

... it is because I am so keen to know definitely what your meaning may be.

Callicles is clearly growing tired of Socrates' questioning by this time ("what an inveterate driveller the man is!"; 489b), admonishing him in 489c for taking a slip of the tongue as a stroke of luck which allowed him to misinterpret Callicles' words. Callicles seems to be becoming indignant at this ("are you not ashamed to be word-catching at your age"; 489c) and no longer takes his conversation with Socrates seriously. Thus when Socrates says that he wants to learn from Callicles, the latter doesn't believe him.

The irony, however, is in Socrates' reply to this accusation. He denies it thus: "No, by Zethus ... whom you made use of just now for aiming a good deal of mockery at me". Callicles mocked Socrates by saying he felt towards Socrates as Zethus did towards Amphion in Euripides (*Antiope*), thus that Socrates is too childish and simple for his own good despite having a noble soul (485e-486a). When Socrates swears by Zethus that he is not mocking Callicles, he is using Callicles' own tool to mock him ironically.

In *Symposium* we get a glimpse of a more physical irony. When Alcibiades is making his speech praising Socrates he tells the men how much he loves him and proudly exclaims that "not one of you knows him" (216c; tr. Lamb 1946),²⁸ but that he, Alcibiades, will reveal him. He goes on to say of Socrates that:

He spends his whole life in chaffing (εἰρωνεύόμενος) and making game of his fellow men.

(216e)

but he himself has seen what is underneath this pretence of Socrates, which he describes as

...divine and golden... perfectly fair and wondrous...

(217a)

This glimpse into the serious nature of Socrates is what inspired Alcibiades to seek his attentions. When his hints didn't work Alcibiades decided to confront Socrates in a straight-forward manner and tell him everything. Of Socrates' reply he remarks the following:

When he heard this, he put on that innocent air (εἰρωνικῶς) which habit has made so characteristic of him...

²⁷ See p. 18 n.9 above.

²⁸ All translations of Plato's *Symposium* are from Lamb 1946.

(218d)

Here we then have two instances of εἰρων- being applied to Socrates. Vlastos argues that the second instance can only be translated to mean 'ironic' (1987: 89), but I don't believe that is true. If we were to translate both instances as 'deceiving', the irony becomes more complex. To find it we need to break it down into sections.

We know that Socrates has a weakness for male beauty, and thus we can say that an extremely attractive youth such as Alcibiades should be hard for him to resist. In fact, Socrates admits in *Gorgias* that he is enamoured with Alcibiades (481d). But we also know, from Alcibiades' own account, that Socrates made a habit of resisting the things that he desired or was expected to want. Consider that he insisted on sleeping on Alcibiades' couch (217d), that he wore his usual cloak even in the coldest weather when all the soldiers around him were wearing as much as they could (220c) and that he reportedly stood in the same place for one whole day and one whole night because he had a problem to solve (220c-d). Perhaps he felt he gained something from denying himself ordinary pleasures, but we shall return to what he gained from his actions in Chapter 5.

Furthermore, while there is nothing in Plato to suggest that Socrates has an aversion to physical/sexual love, there is nothing to suggest the opposite. One might argue that those persons who shy away from this kind of contact with others are extraordinarily rare and thus that it is to be assumed that Socrates had perfectly normal physical desires and acted on them as any normal person would, but assuming anything in the case of Socrates is a pitfall any scholar should know to avoid. Socrates clearly is not like any normal person, and that is exactly the reason why he is so problematic. It is thus possible that Socrates denied Alcibiades for the same reasons he denied himself the comforts discussed above. There is however, some evidence in Xenophon that Socrates would have rejected Alcibiades' physical advances regardless of his attraction: in *Memorabilia* 1.3.1 he says that "... kissing a pretty face [will cause you to] lose your liberty in a trice and become a slave" (tr. Marchant 1968) and in *Symposium* 4.27-8 the brush of his nude shoulder against that of a beautiful youth "affected [him] like the bite of a wild animal" (tr. Todd 1968).

We also now know that Socrates and Alcibiades had known each other for some time prior to this speech in the *Symposium*, as is clear by the stories that Alcibiades tells. We can also with fair certainty say that they were very close, as evidenced by their spending long

stretches of time in elenctic discussion (217b-c), Socrates' refusal to leave the wounded Alcibiades on the battlefield (220d-e) and Alcibiades' frankness when he speaks of both the good and the faults in Socrates (222a). Thus when Alcibiades calls Socrates a liar or a dissembler, we can be sure that Socrates is well aware that Alcibiades does not mean this literally. What we have here instead seems to be an inside joke, an irony meant only for those who knew both Socrates and Alcibiades – and the relationship they shared – very well. The irony functions much in the same way as that of two lovers jokingly accusing each other of various transgressions; clearly the literal meaning of their words is not to be understood here.

In the second instance Socrates is apparently reacting mockingly to Alcibiades' straightforward advance. He says that Alcibiades is smarter than he seems (218d), because he sees some wisdom (beauty) in Socrates which he wants to access by offering his beauty in return for it. At the same time, however, Socrates says that Alcibiades is scheming in order to exchange his own reputed beauty in return for genuine beauty, thus that he is trying to con Socrates into receiving bronze in return for gold (219a). Socrates doesn't really mean to say that Alcibiades is really smarter than he seems if he expects Socrates to accept this exchange. What he means is that Alcibiades is quite stupid for thinking he could pull it off.

This is a simple verbal irony; Socrates means the opposite of what he says, and on this I agree with Vlastos (1987: 89), but Vlastos takes εἰρωνικῶς to refer to this irony, whereas I think the reference is external to the situation. If, as I had argued, Socrates and Alcibiades were very close friends, εἰρωνικῶς could now betray the fact that Alcibiades, being a fair bit older than he was when the incident on his couch occurred, had retrospectively realised that Socrates had not meant that he really was smarter than he seemed. Alcibiades is ashamed of this story ("I would not have continued in your hearing were it not... that wine, as the saying goes... is 'truthful'"; 217e), probably because he realises, as perhaps everyone does at some point, how foolish he was in his youth. But now, in saying that Socrates put on a deceptive air he is telling Socrates that he has seen the irony. At the same time, though, he can salvage at least some of his reputation amongst those on the outside of Socrates' circle, as it will appear to them that Socrates fooled this young man into thinking he had a chance. This double meaning is thus where irony can be found, even if we are to take εἰρωνικῶς as meaning 'deceitful'.

The last instance of εἰρων- being applied to Socrates appears in Plato's *Apology* and is used by Socrates of himself. He is explaining that he cannot leave Athens and live "without talking" (38a; tr. Fowler 1960)²⁹ because to do so would be to disobey the god. He admits that in saying this he realises

...you will think I am jesting (εἰρωνευομένῳ) and will not believe me; and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you will believe me still less.

(38a)

Vasiliou argues that this is a case of Socrates' reverse irony (2002: 225). He argues that according to Socrates' philosophy, virtue is the greatest good and that every man should aim to act virtuously by seeking knowledge of virtue and examining one's own life³⁰ (2002: 223), but that Socrates, even as he is saying this, knows that the jury cannot or will not understand this principle. Therefore, Vasiliou argues, the jury and audience will take Socrates as being ironic, and Socrates knows this (2002: 225-6).

However, Vasiliou's argument rests on εἰρων- meaning irony.³¹ The case looks rather different if we take εἰρωνευομένῳ to mean 'lying' or 'dissembling'. Socrates' words can then be translated as "you will think that I am *lying*", and whether or not Socrates means that he cannot live without talking is inconsequential.³² He simply means exactly what he is saying, that is, that the people of Athens will think that he is dissembling when he says he cannot live without talking. It would seem that there is no irony in this passage; Socrates simply means exactly what he's saying. Coincidentally, that only serves to reinforce the theory that εἰρωνεία can mean 'mocking', 'dissembling' or even 'lying', as it does in this case, yet in some cases still accompany an instance of irony, as shown in the examples from *Republic*, *Gorgias* and *Symposium*.

What this means for the present study is that the relation of εἰρωνεία to 'irony' makes no difference to the interpretation of irony. It cannot be argued that Cicero derived *ironia* from

²⁹ All translations of the *Apology* are from Fowler 1960.

³⁰ Cf. *Apol.* 28a: "You are not right, Sir, if you think a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death, and not rather regard this only, when he does things, whether the things he does are right or wrong and the acts of a good or bad man."

³¹ "...to the jury it must appear as an extreme example of εἰρωνεία. Socrates must seem to the jurors to be joking – *to be saying something other than what he really means*" (2002: 225; my emphasis). From this it is clear that Vasiliou translates εἰρωνεία as 'irony'.

³² Of course, it is another question altogether whether we can really know if Socrates is being sincere, though I doubt anyone will argue that he isn't.

the Greek word. However, if εἰρωνεία only came to mean something closer to 'irony' in Aristotle, then it could mean 'lying' or 'dissembling' etc. in Plato and his contemporaries and 'irony' for later readers, including Cicero. The irony is then independent of the word, which has clearly undergone an evolution between its first use in Plato and its Latinisation, and is therefore retrospectively imposed on the texts. Plato may have intended some ironies, while others may have been unnoticed by him, but open to the interpretation of the reader.

I have also in this section shown that Socrates is indeed at times ironic. What remains is to ascertain the nature of this irony, and to establish whether or not it is any different from simple verbal irony. If it is not different from verbal irony, Socratic irony will be rendered obsolete in all but one aspect: that Socrates is the first recorded example of an ironist. However, we do get a glimpse of a physical irony in *Symposium*, and perhaps it is this irony which will distinguish Socratic irony from simple verbal irony.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NATURE OF SOCRATIC IRONY

I have already shown in Chapter 2 that there is irony to be found in the Socratic dialogues of Plato. But can this irony justifiably be called ‘Socratic irony’? And is there a similar irony to be found in Xenophon, Aristophanes and Ameipsias? If there is any sort of Socratic irony, and if it is to be found in these texts, it must be limited to irony employed by, brought about by or coming into being because of the character Socrates. Ironies in the text that are brought about by other characters cannot be taken as belonging to the category of Socratic irony. There is one exception though. If an irony is brought about by a follower of Socrates with Socrates present, it can also be taken as an instance of Socratic irony. I argue thus because it is likely that Socrates’ followers, who admired him so much, tried to imitate the style of Socrates in his presence so as to show their devotion and, more importantly, that they have gained some knowledge or skill from their association with him.

3.1. PLATO

Because the basis for a verbal irony in Plato has already been laid, I will start from that point and look at instances of verbal irony that occur independently of the εἰρων-words. Let us start with the case of Meletus in *Euthyphro* over which Wolfsdorf and Vasiliou disagreed.³³

Socrates: For the fact that, young as he is, he has apprehended so important a matter reflects no small credit upon him. For he says he knows how the youth are corrupted and who those are who corrupt them. He must be a wise man; who, seeing my lack of wisdom and that I am corrupting his fellows, comes to the State, as a boy runs to his mother, to accuse me.

(2c; tr. Fowler 1960)³⁴

This is an example of what Vasiliou calls ‘conditional irony’, in which the statement can be either true or false, depending on the presence of a condition. In this case the condition is *if* Meletus has knowledge of virtue his charge against Socrates is noble and just, whereas if he does not have knowledge of virtue his charge is ignoble and Socrates’ words in this passage are ironic (Vasiliou 1999: 468-469). Vasiliou’s argument is that we know that Socrates does

³³ See the brief discussion on p. 6.

³⁴ All translations of *Euthyphro* are from Fowler 1960.

not believe that Meletus has knowledge of virtue because of his treatment of Meletus elsewhere, in particular in the *Apology*:

But I, Men of Athens, say Meletus is a wrongdoer, because he jokes in earnest, lightly involving people in a lawsuit, pretending to be zealous and concerned about things for which he never cared at all.

(24c; tr. Fowler 1960)

However, if we are to take Vasiliou's conditional irony seriously at all, we must take a closer look at what it really means. Vasiliou is presupposing a condition that brings about irony, but the truth is that every verbal irony has an inherent condition. Taking an example from Vlastos, if I were to say to a friend over the phone "What lovely weather we're having" in the midst of a thunderstorm, my statement would certainly be taken as ironic. But surely even here there is an inherent condition. My statement is only ironic *if* my friend knows that there is a thunderstorm where I am. Furthermore, what if I sincerely think that thunderstorms are nice weather? Certainly then I'm not being ironic. Verbal irony then cannot be separated from the condition, and therefore what Vasiliou calls conditional irony is nothing more than the verbal irony he argues so fervently against (Vasiliou 1999: 462).

Nonetheless, Vasiliou is right in saying that the passage from *Euthyphro* is ironic, but for a different reason. Wolfsdorf's argument that there is evidence in *Euthyphro* that Socrates has never before met Meletus, and therefore that Socrates must sincerely mean what he says (2007: 178) also has one flaw. Wolfsdorf ignores Socrates' philosophical attitude towards virtue. We know that Socrates regarded virtue as a form of knowledge (Guthrie 1969: 257). We also know that he devoted his life to the search for knowledge, but at the same time that he denied having any certain knowledge.³⁵ In fact, Socrates did not believe that anyone can have certain knowledge of anything, but that the search for knowledge was the greatest good (*Apology* 38a). Therefore, if Socrates denies that any one person could have certain knowledge of virtue, then he must think that Meletus does not have knowledge of virtue, and therefore he doesn't believe that Meletus' case against him has any merit. This is only strengthened by his

³⁵ Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is perhaps one of his most famous characteristics. For more on this topic see Vlastos 1985, MacKenzie 1988, Graham 1997, and Wolfsdorf 2004. As for the discussion of the disavowal of knowledge as ironic, those instances that are ironic will be treated when applicable, but will not be specifically referred to as instances of ironic disavowal of knowledge. For more on Socrates' disavowals of knowledge, see especially sections 3.1.1 on p. 37 and 5.2 on p. 59 below.

comment on Meletus at *Apology* 24c. The statement at *Euthyphro* 2c is ironic, but it's a verbal irony: Socrates means the opposite of what he says.

Another instance of verbal irony comes from the end of the *Euthyphro*. When Euthyphro tells Socrates that he must leave, Socrates responds thus:

You go away and leave me cast down from the high hope I had that I should learn from you what is holy, and what is not...

(15e)

This case is much the same as that of Callicles in *Gorgias*, whom Socrates accused of changing his opinion too easily.³⁶ At 15b-c Socrates says to Euthyphro:

Then will you be surprised... if your words do not remain fixed but walk about, and you will accuse me of being the Daedalus who makes them walk, when you are yourself much more skilful than Daedalus and make them go round in a circle? Or do you not see that our definition has come round to the point from which it started?

How can Socrates hope to learn from Euthyphro if he knows that Euthyphro cannot keep his own words straight? As with the case of Callicles, we must infer that Socrates knows he cannot learn from such a person. His statement at 15e must then be ironic. Given the fact that this last statement of Socrates at 15e-16a is the end of the dialogue it would seem that Plato was well aware of this irony, and Socrates' last words act as the 'punch-line' of the dialogue. There is certainly some humour in this exchange, but we must not confuse the irony of Plato with the irony of Socrates. Socrates' irony means to show Euthyphro something about himself, whereas Plato's irony presents the former in a humorous way. We thus cannot on the basis of this instance say that Socratic irony aims at humour, but we can say that Platonic irony does.

There is a similar irony in the *Republic*. Just before Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of being deceitful³⁷ Socrates says to him:

But you see it is our lack of ability that is at fault. It is pity then that we should far more reasonably receive from clever fellows like you than severity.

(337a; tr. Shorey 1943)

Thrasymachus then accuses Socrates of being deceitful and evading the question (337a), to which Socrates replies:

That's because you are wise, Thrasymachus, and so you knew very well that if you asked a man how many are twelve, and in putting that question warned him: don't you be telling me, fellow, that twelve is twice six or three times four or six times two or four times three, for I won't accept any such drivel as that from you as an answer – it was obvious to you that no one could give an answer to a questioned framed in that fashion.

³⁶ Refer to p. 26 of this thesis for the full discussion of the case of Socrates and Callicles.

³⁷ See the discussion of this case in section 2.3 on p. 22 above.

(337b)

Once again the irony here is fairly overt, with Socrates telling Thrasymachus that he is wise, and then immediately (but indirectly) offering the reason why he is not wise: his question is ridiculous, it is framed in such a way that it cannot possibly be answered in a way that will satisfy the questioner, and if Thrasymachus were at all wise, he would have realised this before he made the request. The irony here is crude (and rude) and gives the impression that Socrates is annoyed at Thrasymachus for interrupting his unfinished conversation with Polemarchus. After all, how is Socrates supposed to accomplish anything if he keeps getting interrupted?³⁸

In the *Meno* we find a much more subtle and complex form of irony at 80b-d (tr. Lamb 1946).³⁹ Meno has compared Socrates to the flat torpedo-fish which “benumbs anyone who approaches and touches it” (80a) just as Socrates has left Meno at a loss for words. He also in the same passage tells Socrates that where before he had thought him in as much doubt as anyone else, he now believes him to possess some knowledge of virtue (80a-b). Meno has thus simultaneously insulted Socrates by comparing him to the torpedo-fish (Socrates was reputedly not a very attractive man, and neither is the torpedo-fish very pretty; Jacquette 1996: 124) and given him the compliment of asserting that he has knowledge. Socrates immediately replies to Meno that he is a “rogue” and that he had almost deceived him. What he means by this we can only guess at, but Meno doesn’t understand either and Socrates explains:

I perceive your aim in thus comparing me... that I may compare you in return. One thing I know about all handsome people is this – they delight in being compared to something. They do well over it, since fine features, I suppose, must have fine similes. But I am not playing your game...

(80c)

Socrates earlier in the dialogue already complimented Meno on his looks, but he juxtaposed this compliment with what can only be considered an insult, by saying that Meno gives orders “after the fashion of spoilt beauties” (76b). We thus already know that Socrates thinks that Meno has a high opinion of himself, and what Socrates is saying at 80c is that he refuses to “play the game”, that is, to contribute even more to Meno’s opinion of himself. We also know that Socrates has told Meno that he (Socrates) has “a weakness for handsome people” (76b). He seems to be implying that

³⁸ See Chapters 4 and 5 on what exactly it is that Socrates is trying to accomplish.

³⁹ All translations of the *Meno* are from Lamb 1946.

he has a harder time of it when his interlocutor is more attractive and he doesn't want to give Meno even more of an advantage by admitting it (Jacquette 1996: 126).

The problem with this exchange is that it doesn't seem to be ironic at all unless we consider what we know about Socrates' philosophy. The truth that he seeks must necessarily be universal and unchanging, eternal and external (Armstrong 1981: 32). We thus cannot believe that Socrates seriously cares about looks in the midst of an intellectual inquiry. Looks (though perhaps 'appearances' would make the point clearer) are forever changing and thus cannot have an effect on the eternal and unchanging truth of virtue. But why is Socrates being ironic in this way? Jacquette suggests that Socrates is wary of inflating Meno's ego and thus distracting the youth from the conversation at hand (1996: 127), preventing him from gaining any real insight from their encounter.

One more simple verbal irony from Plato's *Gorgias* is in order before we move on to ironies other than verbal. At 461c Polus tells Socrates that he considers his humiliation of Gorgias in the preceding argument "very bad taste". Socrates replies with words that one would struggle not to read as sarcastic:

Ah, sweet Polus, of course it is for this very purpose we possess ourselves of companions and sons, that when the advance of years begins to make us stumble, you younger ones may be at hand to set our lives upright again in words as well as deeds.

(461c; tr. Lamb 1946)

Socrates refrains from pointing out that Polus' remark was itself in bad taste for two reasons: firstly, it is rude to draw attention to the rudeness of others; and secondly, by responding in this way Socrates is keeping his side of the argument clean, while still displaying an open hostility (Michelini 1998: 51). In responding as he does he prevents Polus becoming angry, which would disrupt the conversation (Michelini 1998: 52). Socrates doesn't really mean that Polus, who is considerably younger than he, should be setting the older people right, because doing so is in bad taste.

At 462e Socrates again speaks ironically, but this time he does so much more subtly. His comment that "it may be rude to tell the truth... lest [Gorgias] suppose I am making satirical fun of his own pursuit" is aimed at Gorgias, whom he has only very shortly before bested in conversation. He is implying that he may very well be making fun of Gorgias, but that he hadn't intended Gorgias to know this. This is the nature of the

victims of irony; they are unaware that the joke is on them. In fact, it seems that Gorgias remains oblivious to the irony and takes Socrates to be sincere, asking him sincerely in return to “tell us, without scruple on my account” (463a).

It is clear from these examples that Socrates is frequently verbally ironic, so much so that we may say that being ironic is a central feature of the character in Plato. But there are indications that Socrates also engages in a different form of irony, which is more physical and more difficult to identify. The first instance of this appears in the *Symposium*, where Alcibiades quotes a verse from Aristophanes’ *Clouds* 362-3, commenting that he noticed it in Socrates:

...how there he stepped along, as his wont is in our streets, “strutting like a proud marsh-goose, with ever a sidelong glance” ...

(221b; tr. Lamb 1946)

Edmunds prefers to translate the verb βρενθύει, which is here translated as “stepped along”, as “swagger”, because the etymology of the word possibly comes from βρένθος, the water bird,⁴⁰ and thus means “to walk like a *brenthos*” with one’s chest out (2004: 195). The translation by Lamb here supports this argument and serves to explain the significance of walking like a βρένθος, that is, proudly. This is possibly a reference to the general air of superiority which is inseparable from the attitude of the ironist (Colebrook 2004: 18-19; cf. p. 13 of this thesis). As for the second part of the quote, there is a possibility that the “calm” (*Symposium* 221b) sidelong glance conveys a mocking attitude, as is explained in Philodemus’ *On Vices*. These two characteristics, swaggering and glancing slowly sideways, are characteristic of the superior attitude an ironist might have.

Another common characteristic of Socrates is his habit of going without shoes, regardless of how cold it is outside. We see an example of this in *Symposium* 229a:

Phaedrus: I am fortunate, it seems, in being barefoot, you are so always.

There is also reference to this in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* and Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, to be discussed later in this thesis.⁴¹ Alcibiades says of this habit (and his single cloak):

The soldiers looked askance at him, thinking that he despised them.

(*Symposium* 220b)

⁴⁰ Cf. Frisk 1960: 266 on the etymology of βρένθος and its relation to the verb βρενθύει. The relation is uncertain, but βρένθος does also mean ‘Stolz’ (‘pride’). LSJ translate βρενθύομαι directly as ‘swagger’.

⁴¹ See sections 3.2 on p. 42 and 3.3 on p. 45 below.

This too can convey an attitude of superiority to those around Socrates (Edmunds 2004: 197).

However, there is also the possibility that this air of superiority was an irony in itself. Socrates was well aware of his reputation in Athens, both amongst his friends and his enemies. There was a general feeling among the latter group that Socrates was somehow misleading or deceiving those around him; he was seen as an εἰρωνεύων. If Socrates was a true ironist he would have deliberately put on these airs *ironically*. Those who knew him and followed him would have realised that this isn't the true Socrates, while those outside of this group would have thought him to be naturally so. The joke would have been on them, the victims of Socrates' irony.

We have seen that there is ample evidence for a Socratic irony of some sort, but there are certain dialogues that provide us with far more insight, not only into the nature but also the function of Socratic irony, than others. One such dialogue in which Socrates is especially ironic is Plato's *Apology of Socrates*.

3.1.1. IRONY IN PLATO'S *APOLOGY*

From the very beginning of the *Apology* Socrates steeps his speech in irony. He claims that he is astounded by the accusation against him that he is a clever speaker and that he will immediately refute them by showing that he is "not in the least a clever speaker" (17b; tr. Fowler 1960), and yet the speech he then gives is very clever indeed. Socrates also says that "they... have said little or nothing true; but you shall hear from me nothing but the truth" (17b) and that he will tell this truth through "things said at random with the words that happen to occur to me" (17b). The speech that follows is, however, anything but random (Leibowitz 2010: 22-23) and in fact is delivered in the perfect style of courtroom rhetoric, which Socrates claims himself to be unfamiliar with (M. Zuckert 1984: 273). Socrates thus seems to be lying. It may be argued that Socrates, seeker of truth, surely cannot condone lying and will not do so himself when he had even refused to disobey the laws and escape from Athens. But there is ample evidence that Socrates in actual fact has no problem with lying if it serves a purpose. Leibowitz names a few examples (2010: 14):

[1] *Republic* 450d (tr. Shorey 1943): “There is both safety and boldness in speaking the truth... to those who are wise and clear. But to speak when one doubts himself and is seeking while he talks, as I am doing, is a fearful and slippery adventure.”

Cf. *Apology* 29e: “Most excellent man, you who are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power, not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation or honour, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul?”

Socrates says that it is safe to speak the truth among “wise” people, but he is implying at *Apology* 29e that there are many unwise men in Athens.

[2] *Republic* 382c: “But what of falsehood in words, when and for whom is it serviceable so as not to merit abhorrence? Will it not be against enemies?”

Cf. *Apology* 28a: “...great hatred has arisen against me and in the minds of many persons.”

Socrates is saying that it is acceptable to lie out of fear of one’s enemies; he has many enemies among the jurors.

[3] *Republic* 382c-d: “And when any of those whom we call friends owing to madness or folly attempts to do some wrong, does it not then become useful to avert the evil – as a medicine?” (This follows directly from the discussion at point [2]).

Cf. *Apology* 30d: “I think he does himself a much greater injury by doing what he is doing now – killing a man unjustly.”

Socrates approves of lying to prevent a friend from making a mistake, and the jurors are making a mistake in prosecuting him.

We also know that Socrates’ view of the court will not prevent him from lying to the jurors. In *Gorgias* 521e he says that if he is brought before the court he will be “like a doctor tried by a bench of children on a charge brought by a cook” and he would be “utterly at a loss what to say” (522a-b). The jury will be unable to realise the truth of his words and in that respect would be like children, but Socrates cannot refrain from speaking and thus he will have no choice but to lie (Leibowitz 2010: 15). Socrates will not lie outright, however, he will speak the truth in a manner that those inclined to see

it will recognise. Socrates tells the jury what he knows they want to hear, because he knows that his case is very nearly hopeless. As he says in *Gorgias* 521d: “it would be no marvel if I were put to death”. He also knows that there are those in the audience, however few they may be, that care about the truth, and he is willing to point them in the direction thereof.

Let us then look at a few examples of Socratic irony in the *Apology*, starting with the most famous example, the story about the Delphic Oracle:

Well, once he [Chaerephon] went to Delphi and made so bold as to ask the oracle this question; and gentlemen, don't make a disturbance at what I say; for he asked if there were anyone wiser than I. Now the Pythia replied that there was no one wiser.

(21a)

Socrates tells the court that he immediately thought that he knows that he is not wise and that he started pondering what the Oracle could have meant by this. He proceeded to investigate those who have a reputation for wisdom and found that they seemed wise only to others and to themselves, but were not in truth wise at all (21b-c). Socrates found that he was indeed wiser than all of them, because he at least knew that he was not wise at all (21d-22e).

If Socrates is so convinced of his lack of knowledge (which necessarily means that he doesn't have knowledge of virtue), he cannot mean what he says at *Apology* 29b:

But I do *know* that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and to disobey him who is better than I, whether he be god or man.⁴²

But this is not the only case of Socrates asserting some sort of moral knowledge. Consider the case already mentioned on p. 24 of this thesis. At *Republic* 330d Cephalus tells Socrates that he is right and Socrates replies “I assuredly am”. From this we can deduce that when Cephalus tells Socrates that he is right once again, Socrates must hold the same opinion. It is the second case which is of interest here, as it is where Socrates argues that returning borrowed weapons to a friend who has gone mad and might use them to do harm is certainly not just (331c-d).

We can thus say that when Socrates says that he knows he is not wise at all, he means something other than what he says, though not exactly the opposite. Socrates'

⁴² My emphasis.

knowledge that he does not have wisdom is a sort of wisdom in itself, which he admits at *Apology* 21d:

I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man, for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either".

Socrates is here telling the court that he does in fact know *something*, that he knows he does not know anything, but he knows that only a few will see that this is what he means. The rest will take him to be sincere in saying he has no knowledge; they will have something to agree with him on and this will win him some favour (Leibowitz 2010: 17).

Another instance of irony near the beginning of the *Apology* occurs at 19e-20a, when Socrates says the following:

Although this seems to me to be a fine thing, if one might be able to teach people, as Gorgias of Leontini and Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis are. For each of these men, gentlemen, is able to go into any one of the cities and persuade the young men, who can associate for nothing with whomsoever they wish among their own fellow citizens, to give up association with those men and pay them money and be grateful besides.

This might seem sincere, but we know that Socrates doesn't take money for teaching (*Apology* 19e) and upon reading the *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Euthydemus* and *Protagoras* it becomes clear from Socrates' treatment of these characters that he doesn't truly think them capable of teaching virtue (Vasiliou 1999: 222). This is an example of what Vasiliou calls 'conditional irony', discussed on p. 30 of this thesis.

Socrates' treatment of Meletus in the *Apology* once again reveals to us his sarcastic side. When he asks Meletus to point out those who are improving the young (as the opposite to Socrates' apparent corrupting of the young) since he clearly cares about it, or otherwise he would not have brought the case against Socrates in the first place (24d), Meletus is silent for a moment and Socrates accuses him of not having cared about it at all. As the conversation goes on Meletus finally says that the judges make the young better (24e), to which Socrates replies, "Well said, by Hera, and this is a great many helpers you speak of." Yet we know that Socrates regards the jury as unwise.⁴³ Not only can we say that Socrates doesn't mean this, but from the form of his reply he is certainly being sarcastic, mocking Meletus for suggesting that the judges are wise enough to teach the young.

⁴³ Cf. *Apology* 29e, as quoted at [1].

Most of the examples of irony pointed out so far have been either simple or complex verbal ironies, but Socrates does occasionally cross over into another form of irony: situational irony. Consider his words uttered shortly after hearing that he has been sentenced to death in *Apology* 29a:

It is no long time, men of Athens, which you gain, and for that those who wish to cast a slur upon the state will give you the blame of having killed Socrates, a wise man; for, you know, those who wish to revile you will say I am wise, even though I am not.

The irony here is rather complex and occurs on several levels. On the first level is the irony that Socrates points out in so many words: those against Athens will say that he was wise, but he is not. This irony is unintentional, and as ironist Socrates merely plays the role of pointing it out. On the second level is an irony possibly intended by Plato: those against Athens will say that Socrates is wise even though Socrates himself says he is not, but in fact he *is* wise in the eyes of those who follow him. On the third level lies the true irony intended by Socrates himself: that those against Athens will say that Socrates is wise and those for Athens will say that he is not, but those on Socrates' side – the side that has already lost – will be right. Socrates has already admitted that he is wise, though perhaps not in the manner expected, so we can safely argue that this irony is intentional. What lies implicit in this last statement is that even though an injustice is now being done, justice will follow in the future, and that is enough for Socrates.

We now have irony in different forms occurring in Plato's dialogues, verbal and situational, intentional and unintentional, as well as physical. From this it is clear that Socratic irony is not simply verbal irony. However, a fuller and more exact picture of the nature of Socratic irony can only be found by examining the character as he appears in the works of others.

3.2. XENOPHON

While Plato is by far our most fruitful source of examples of Socratic irony, this is due simply to the fact that he was the more prolific writer, especially when it comes to works in which Socrates plays a major or starring role. Xenophon was Socrates' contemporary as well, and thus it would be useful to examine his version of the character for instances of Socratic irony. It is true that Xenophon's Socrates is much more serious than Plato's, but that does not make him incapable of irony. To assume

this would be to conflate irony with humour to such an extent that the two can no longer be separated, and irony can in fact be a very serious matter (Dane 1991: 78).

Yet the first instance of irony we come across in the *Memorabilia* is actually rather humorous. Socrates goes to the house of Theodoté, a prostitute not quite described as such in as many words,⁴⁴ where he suggests she devises some contrivance for attracting ‘friends’ (3.11.5-15; tr. Marchant 1968).⁴⁵ Theodoté asks Socrates to stay with her or visit her often, to which he replies:

Ah! It’s not so easy for me to find time. For I have much business to occupy me, private and public; and I have the dear girls, who won’t leave me day or night; they are studying potions with me, and spells.

(3.11.16)

Here Socrates does not mean that there really are girls waiting for him.⁴⁶ The girls in this case are his interlocutors and fellow-philosophers to whom he must attend before anything else:

Theodoté: Oh, I’ll come : only mind you welcome me!

Socrates: Oh, you shall be welcome – unless there’s a dearer girl with me!

(3.11.18)

This is a simple verbal irony and it seems there is no victim. Socrates means something other than what he literally says and means for it to be understood as such.

The *Symposium* yields much better results in the search for irony, and this Socrates seems much more akin to the Socrates of Plato. Here again Socrates seems to be using irony for comic effect, firstly in a discussion about beauty. Socrates and Critobulus engage in a beauty contest and Socrates argues that his – clearly uglier – features are more beautiful than those of Critobulus. He says his eyes are finer, because “while yours see only straight ahead, mine, by bulging out as they do, see also to the sides” (5.5; tr. Todd 1968).⁴⁷ He says the same of his nose, “for your nostrils look down toward the ground, but mine are wide open and turned outward so that I can catch scents from all about” (5.6). Socrates knows that he will lose as soon as the ballots are counted and doesn’t expect to convince anyone that his features are the more beautiful. What he instead seems to be doing through his ironic comments is proposing a re-evaluation of the meaning of ‘beauty’ as ‘functional’.

⁴⁴ See *Memorabilia* 3.11.4: “I live on the generosity of any friend I pick up” (tr. Marchant 1968).

⁴⁵ All translations of the *Memorabilia* are from Marchant 1968.

⁴⁶ Perhaps ‘girlfriends’ makes the point clearer, as translated by Vlastos (1987: 85).

⁴⁷ All translations of Xenophon’s *Symposium* are from Todd 1968.

Another example directly follows this episode. While everyone is celebrating and Critobulus is collecting his kisses (his prize for winning the contest), Hermogenes “even then... kept silent” (6.1). Socrates proceeds to ask him “Hermogenes, could you define ‘convivial unpleasantness’ for us?” (6.1). Immediately it is clear that Socrates aims this comment directly at Hermogenes, but he doesn’t seem to realise it, answering that he will tell Socrates what he thinks it is. To the onlooker it should be clear (unless they are as obtuse as Euthyphro) that Socrates is asking this because Hermogenes is being exactly that – unpleasant. In this instance Socrates lets Hermogenes off easily by telling him straightforwardly only a few lines later that he is participating in ‘convivial unpleasantness’ at that very moment (6.2). This too is a crudely executed irony, but an irony nonetheless. Moreover, it’s clear that Xenophon’s Socrates is much fonder of light-heartedly mocking others⁴⁸ than Plato’s Socrates is, but still the mocking is part of the *elenchus* and not mere laughter for laughter’s sake.

This is however not the only irony to be found in Xenophon. There is reference to some physical traits of Socrates that could point to an irony. At *Memorabilia* 1.6.2-3 Antiphon accuses Socrates of “living a life that would drive even a slave to desert his master”. This includes poor quality food and drink, the single cloak that he wears all year round and not wearing any shoes or a tunic. He also says that “the professors of other subjects try to make their pupils copy their teachers” (1.6.3), therefore if Socrates wants to make his followers do the same he must be a “professor of unhappiness”. There is also reason to believe that his followers did indeed follow his example, for instance in Plato’s *Symposium*:

...Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum... who went always barefoot. He was... one of the chief among Socrates’ lovers at that time.

(173b)

This attitude that Socrates adopted is probably an ironic expression of superiority, as discussed in the case of Plato’s *Symposium* on pp. 37ff. above. The specific characteristics mentioned here (that is, going hungry, the single cloak and being barefoot) were all associated with Laconophilia, which was a sincere attitude in itself, but appropriated ironically by Socrates.⁴⁹ The Athenians were well aware that there were groups with Spartan sympathies in the city (Edmunds 2004: 200). The significance

⁴⁸ Cf. *Memorabilia* 4.4.9: “...it’s enough that you mock others...”

⁴⁹ See Chapter 5 below.

of this ironic attitude will be discussed in full in the next chapter. In the same category of physical irony denoting an attitude of superiority falls the following description in Xenophon's *Symposium* of Socrates' facial expression when Callias asked him what he is proud of:

Socrates drew up his face into a very solemn expression and answered, "The trade of a procurer."

(3.10)

This is clearly a joke on Socrates' part, but the question is how he draws up his face. The words μάλα σεμνῶς ἀνασπάσας τὸ πρόσωπον, translated here by Todd as "drew up his face into a very solemn expression", could also be translated as "very haughtily drawing up his face" (Edmunds 2004: 197). ἀνασπάω, the verb meaning 'to draw up', gives the impression of giving off an important air (LSJ) and σεμνῶς ('solemn') can also be translated in a negative sense as 'haughty', 'pompous' or 'grand' (LSJ). Once again Socrates appropriates an air of superiority which is synonymous with irony.

It is now clear beyond doubt that Socrates was an ironist. More importantly, he wasn't simply a verbal ironist, but there were also physical forms of irony in his manner. While it may be said that these characteristics were merely an invention of Plato that Xenophon copied to give his own texts some credence, this is probably not the case. Xenophon certainly wrote his *Memorabilia* after Socrates' trial and death in 399 B.C.E. and the *Symposium* some years later in 380 B.C.E. (Todd 1968: 530). Likewise Plato's *Euthyphro* was written only after Socrates' death, and the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and the other dialogues probably followed thereafter (Fowler 1960: 3). The latest of his dialogues, arguably the *Laws*, was said to have been unfinished at his death in 346 and published posthumously. Conversely, Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which we will see also mentions some of Socrates' ironic mannerisms, was first produced in 423, long before Socrates was due to stand trial, but after he had become a public figure (Henderson 1998: 3). Ameipsias' *Konnos*, which also mentions certain physical characteristics of Socrates, was produced in the same year and took first place at the Dionysia, whereas *Clouds* took second (Storey 2011: 68). It is thus likely that certain of these characteristics were those of the historical Socrates and are indicative of his public image at the time. Whether or not what the public saw and what the case in

actuality was agree is once again an unanswerable question, and Socrates necessarily remains a fictionalisation.

3.3. ARISTOPHANES, AMEIPSIAS, AND FRAGMENTS

Socrates was a very popular character in the late 5th and early 4th centuries B.C.E., not only for dialogues such as those of Plato and Xenophon, but also for comic playwrights. Finding irony in plays such as those of Aristophanes and Ameipsias is a rather more difficult enterprise due to the nature of the genre. Aristophanes' *Clouds*, for example, is a parody of Sophistry and uses Socrates as its main protagonist. Vlastos firmly denied that any sort of irony is to be found in the *Clouds* (1991: 29), because he was looking for purely verbal irony. Aristophanes does show us some Socratic irony in the guise of a parody, but it isn't verbal irony that we see. The problem with identifying the irony in comedies such as those of Aristophanes and Ameipsias is that they're often exaggerating or even inventing things for the sake of humour. However, for a parody of a historical character to work, there needs to be some recognition of the person in the parody,⁵⁰ and while there may not be much, I believe there is irony to be found in Aristophanes' characterisation of Socrates.

The clearest example of irony in Aristophanes' *Clouds* appears at 362-3 (tr. Henderson 1998):

...you [Socrates], because you strut like a popinjay through the streets and cast your eyes sideways and, unshod, endure many woes and wear a haughty expression *for our sake*.⁵¹

Here we see some of the physical habits already mentioned in the discussions of Plato and Xenophon: strutting like a *brenthos*, casting the eyes sideways, wearing a haughty expression⁵⁰ and constantly going without shoes, all signs of an attitude of superiority. Doubtlessly the audience would have recognised these things as things that were said of Socrates. Aristophanes makes mention of another thing which has been noted before but not discussed in detail, and that is Socrates' ability to "endure many woes". It refers in part to Antiphon's accusations at *Memorabilia* I.6.2-3 and to the description of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* 219-220. Socrates consumes only the poorest quality meat and drink,

⁵⁰ Cf. Prior 2006: 26. From the *Clouds* we can glean a few facts about Socrates, namely that he was a public figure associated with the sophists and the natural philosophers. Hegel also argued that the *Clouds* would have had no comic effect had there not been an element of truth in it, and therefore it must be seen as a "hyperbolic exasperation of the truth about Socrates" (Most 2007: 13).

⁵¹ My emphasis.

going without shoes and, of course, wears a single threadbare cloak all year round. We see a similar description of what it takes to be a follower of Socrates at *Clouds* 412-7:

...if you're retentive and a cogitator, if endurance abides in your soul, if you don't tire out either standing or walking, if you're not too annoyed by the cold or too keen on having breakfast, if you stay away from wine and gymnasiums and all other follies...

These were all things that members of the audience could recognise as typically Socratic.

Diogenes Laertius says that Socrates "could afford to despise those who scoffed at him" and says of the passage in Aristophanes (362-3) that he was "disdainful" and "lofty" (2.27-9; tr. Hicks 1925). And Socrates *chose* to live like this, it was not forced upon him as one might expect:

...I [n]ever exacted or asked pay of anyone. For I think I have a sufficient witness that I speak the truth, namely, my poverty.

(Pl. *Apology* 31c)

To fully understand the nature of this irony it must be read with the function of Socratic irony in mind, and on that more will be said in the next chapter. Note, however, how Aristophanes includes the last three words "for our sake" at *Clouds* 362-3 and how easy they could be missed if the audience isn't listening attentively enough or if the words aren't pointed out. What does this mean? I believe it means that Aristophanes had seen something in the historical Socrates which made him believe that Socrates acted as he did for moral and political reasons (Petrie 1911: 519).

Ameipsias mentions the same characteristics in his *Konnos*, produced in the same year as the *Clouds* and which only survives in fragments. One such fragment is mentioned by Diogenes Laertius:

Socrates... You are a robust fellow. Where can we get you a proper cloak?

Your sorry plight is an insult to the cobblers.

And yet, hungry as he is, this man has never stooped to flatter.

(*Lives* 2.27-28)⁵²

Again we see agreement between the comic poets and their more serious counterparts Plato and Xenophon. From this we can in all confidence say that these caricatures must have been true to the historical Socrates to some extent. According to Storey the jokes about Socrates tended to first praise him and thereafter ridicule him for living by what for most people are impossible standards and means (2011: 73).

⁵² Though Storey's translations are newer they refer only to the fragments and not the full text of Diogenes Laertius. For uniformity I have decided to use Hicks' translations of the text except when expressly stated otherwise.

There is mention of Socrates' haughty expression in Callias' *The Captives* as well, though this too only survives in fragments.

A: Pray why so solemn, why this lofty air?

B: I've every right; I'm helped by Socrates.

(*Lives* 2.18)

Once again Socrates is associated with an air of superiority common to the ironist. Socratic irony is then not simply verbal irony, but incorporated elements of situational irony as well as a physical irony. Speaking of Socratic irony as a purely verbal phenomenon is oversimplifying the complexities of the person underlying the character. Though it might be near impossible to distinguish the historical Socrates from the character based on him, we can say something about both. That Socrates was an ironist is something we cannot doubt. We must then ask ourselves why Socrates put on these airs and spoke in the ironic manner that was so characteristic of him. What was the purpose of walking around barefoot in the cold and denying oneself⁵³ the ordinary pleasures of life? Far from being a personal decision made inwards upon reflection of himself, I believe this attitude of Socrates was the result of outward reflection of the world and was meant to tell those around him something they might not have considered before. I also believe that Socratic irony has more than one purpose, as will be shown in Chapter 5, and that these functions were closely connected to his philosophy. It is possible that these very different functions are the reason for the radically different views of Socratic irony in more recent times. After all, where some see irony, others may not, and that may be a deciding factor in the view of Socratic irony taken throughout history.

⁵³ Including here those followers of Socrates that agreed with his principles and followed his example.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOCRATIC IRONY IN RECENT PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Since the Romantic era many of the great philosophers have taken a renewed interest in Socrates. Some, like Kierkegaard in his Master's thesis *On the Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, have written extensively on Socratic irony. Romantic irony, against which philosophers like Hegel and Kierkegaard reacted, served as the starting point for this debate. Philosophers like Schlegel did not see irony (and therefore Socratic irony) as a deceptive device, or even a simple rhetorical device which serves a dialectical function (Nehamas 1998: 65), but rather as a playful way of dealing with serious matters, or a serious way of dealing with trivial matters. They stressed the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of irony to conceal and to expose simultaneously, however impossible that may seem to be (Albert 1993: 830). As a result Socratic irony is fluid and confuses its onlookers, because it continually offers two opposing and incompatible meanings (Albert 1993: 834). Schlegel himself serves as the starting point for a much more complex conception of irony than that definition which was common previously (that is, saying one thing and meaning another). In his view irony was an antagonistic attitude against the fundamental contradictions we are faced with. It is a response to an ever-present epistemological problem; it gives form to what cannot be represented but it can only succeed temporarily (Barth 2007: 1144-1145). This, however, is about as much as Schlegel says on the topic, and it is the reactions to this Romantic conception of Socratic irony that will help elucidate its function(s).

4.1. THE LATE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

It was Hegel who started the 19th-century conversation about Socratic irony in earnest, and it is on his ideas that Kierkegaard and all those who followed him built (Most 2007: 3). Like most of his contemporaries, Hegel held Socrates in rather high esteem and referred to him in several of his lectures. For him Socratic irony is only a part of Socrates' method (Nehamas 1998: 71). Nonetheless, Hegel's Socrates became the archetypal ironist as a reaction to the historical situation in Athens at the time. According to Hegel, the Greeks before Socrates were unreflective and followed tradition

blindly,⁵⁴ but Socrates insisted on an examination of the moral life, which necessarily brought him into conflict with the Athenian people, who were his unwilling, or rather unknowing, students (Most 2007: 7-8). Socratic irony, then, is a necessary result of this clash between the Pre-Socratic Greek attitude and the Socratic attitude. For this same reason Socratic irony is necessarily deconstructive and critical; it perplexes and bewilders Socrates' opponents, thereby causing them to doubt and showing them that their knowledge isn't as absolute and infallible as they think it is, yet at the same time it doesn't provide any positive knowledge in return. This, for Hegel, is Socrates' greatest defect; he himself doesn't even have concrete answers to the questions he asks (Most 2007: 11-12). His irony is thus pure negativity, a criticism of the current system without a constructive substitute for it.

For Hegel, then, Socrates isn't being ironic at all when he claims he doesn't know, because he genuinely didn't. Yet he refused to accept that Socratic irony is purely negative, primarily because he rejected Romantic irony and argued against it so fervently. In particular it was Romantic irony's infinite changing of position from one stance to its opposite that Hegel opposed, calling it an infinite negativity without any positive content. For this reason he tried to dissociate Socratic irony from Romantic irony by Platonising Socrates. Hegel claimed that, even though it was widely accepted that Plato had introduced the Idea of the Good, Socrates had held the same insight to some degree, thus attributing to him philosophically positive content (Most 2007: 14). It is a controversial statement and no doubt the result of his admiration for Socrates. Nonetheless, this means that Hegel at least later in his career felt that Socratic irony, which in this case refers almost exclusively to his disavowal of knowledge, had a pedagogical function which could, if successful, impart positive knowledge.

Kierkegaard's Master's thesis *On the Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*⁵⁵ was by and large a response to many of Hegel's theories about Socrates. Kierkegaard's own philosophical beginnings were decidedly Hegelian, but by the end of his career he had managed to remove himself far enough from Hegel's philosophy that

⁵⁴ Hegel seems to have ignored (or perhaps simply missed) the fact that there were those before Socrates, like Heraclitus, who lived a life of inward self-reflection and that there is ample evidence in the Homeric epics and Greek tragedy *before* Socrates that the Greeks were in fact deeply reflective on matters such as the justification of religious and moral beliefs/practices (Most 2007: 6-7).

⁵⁵ Hereafter referred to simply as *The Concept of Irony*.

the latter would probably have denied that he had ever been an influence on the former upon reading what he had written. Most notably, where Hegel had seen irony as a part of Socrates' method, Kierkegaard claimed that irony *was* his method, "more he did not have" (Kierkegaard 1841: 269). Throughout Kierkegaard's work it becomes apparent that he aims to identify himself with Socrates and at the same time distance himself from Hegel. This much is clear from an unpublished and unfinished satirical sketch in which Socrates and Hegel meet in the Underworld. In short what one can gain from it is that Hegel protests that he has much to say – he has written 21 volumes! – while Socrates demands short answers in his customary manner (Watts 2010: 23), clearly indicating that the two have very little to talk about. In his last work Kierkegaard even went so far as to say that "the only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates" (Pattison 2007: 19).

Regardless of his distaste of the Hegelian Socrates, Hegel still remains a big influence on Kierkegaard's early work, and there are some similarities in their views. In fact, Kierkegaard starts *The Concept of Irony* from the point where Hegel left off. After establishing Socrates as a radical ironist whose true nature is to remain concealed, he turns to Hegel's view of Socrates. He argues that Hegel's view is compatible with his own, that Socratic irony is inherently and absolutely destructive. This much we have seen, but where Hegel tried to assign some positive value to Socratic irony, Kierkegaard at this stage in his career absolutely rejects it. For him, Socrates knew that there is no absolute knowledge of virtue, that it is indefinable (Watts 2010: 29-30). Kierkegaard also argues that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge was not merely a ploy to lure interlocutors into conversation and a false sense of security, but that they were the negative result of Socratic enquiry (Watts 2010: 30). Yet he also admits that Socrates' aim, through *elenchus*, was to show the interlocutor that he doesn't know what he thinks he knows. Again, unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard says that Socrates' aim was never to find answers to his questions, but to show that some things are inherently questionable (Watts 2010: 37), thus showing that there is a need for the search for an objective definition. But he stresses that Socratic irony and Socratic *elenchus* cannot go beyond this function, it cannot provide positive knowledge (Watts 2010: 38). Kierkegaard thus finally in *The Concept of Irony* describes Socrates' stance as "irony as infinite absolute negativity" (1966: 287), a phrase he borrowed from Hegel (Frazier 2004: 423).

That irony is also an “existential stance” (Frazier 2004: 418) of “infinite absolute negativity” is essential to Kierkegaard’s understanding of Socratic irony. This stance can also be called “pure irony” which forces the radical ironist to be critically disengaged not from any given thing, but from society and existence as a whole (Frazier 2004: 418), as was the case with Socrates. Notably, *all* ironists do not become alienated, but the radical ironist’s desire for negative freedom – that is, freedom to live within a certain community without being restricted by its rules – leads to the continued retreat from taking anything too seriously, which in turn results in alienation (Frazier 2004: 422). Kierkegaard argued that this stance is purely negative and that the radical ironist doesn’t search for a better alternative to the societal conventions from which he has disentangled himself, but instead admits that there is nothing better (Frazier 2004: 423).

However, pure irony is not a desirable stance, it is “unstable, self-defeating and psychologically unhealthy” (Frazier 2004: 424), but nonetheless the early Kierkegaard associated Socrates with this stance. Later in his life Kierkegaard revised this view of Socrates and Socratic irony somewhat, saying that where before he had resented Socrates for focusing too much on the individual and not on the whole, he now thought of that view as decidedly Hegelian (Pattison 2007: 20). In this new view Socratic irony was essentially a criticism of the status quo, the purpose of which was to bring his interlocutors to the realisation of the contradictions inherent in their way of life (Sarf 1983: 264). Because of this Kierkegaard’s later Socrates did have some value in that he negatively paved the way for others to find the positive moral knowledge that he himself could not give them (Pattison 2007: 23). Through his ironic stance and his apparent inhumanity (refusing to take money for teaching, denying himself simple pleasures, distancing himself from society, etc.) his humanity revealed itself; to take from others would mean depriving them of the freedom they needed to find self-knowledge (Pattison 2007: 26). The Socratic irony of this later period is also lighter and more humorous than in *The Concept of Irony* (Pattison 2007: 28). Kierkegaard had come to terms with the double nature of irony, and thus Socrates could be both serious and playful, truthful and deceptive, logical and abstruse at the same time (Sarf 1983: 265).

Kierkegaard’s Socrates, then, had no positive knowledge to impart directly. Instead he adopted a negative ironic standpoint through which he paved the way for his

interlocutors to reach some positive moral content. Kierkegaard's Socratic irony thus ultimately had a heuristic function.

It was Nietzsche who first moved away from the pedagogic function of Socratic irony and into altogether different territory. In a fragment from 1875 Nietzsche writes:

Socrates, to confess it frankly, is so close to me that almost always I fight against him.
(in Kaufmann 1948: 479)

Walter Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche's admiration for Socrates is central to the understanding of several of his writings, not least of which is the *Ecce Homo*, which he argues was Nietzsche's attempt to trump the absurd irony of Plato's *Apology* (1948: 489). Among those philosophers that take Socrates as a sort of role model, Nietzsche stands alone in his appraisal of his death. For him Socrates was playful, yet he demanded to be taken seriously. Eventually Athens did take him seriously and the result was a death sentence for corrupting the youth. Socrates must then have wanted to die, Nietzsche argues (Conway 1988: 257). Yet he isn't outraged that Athens condemned Socrates, in fact he applauds the verdict, saying that Socrates deserved it because he *was* corrupting the youth. The problem here is Socrates' moral negativity. His inability to provide a political alternative for the system he had criticised had caused him to fail in his divine mission and therefore he deserved his death (Conway 1988: 258).

The purpose of Socratic irony, for Nietzsche, is political. Through irony Socrates presented Athens with two facades: the first was directed at those involved in the political life and who did not see Socrates as a threat because they didn't take him seriously, and the second was an alternative political orientation directed at those removed from or too young for the politics of the *polis* (Conway 1988: 260). Because of the difficulty of gauging the success of teaching virtue, Socrates (or any teacher of virtue) couldn't take himself seriously lest he descended into cynicism. As a result, both the politicians and the general public were right in the assumptions they made about Socrates, which in turn meant that he posed a challenge to the status quo, but not a direct threat (Conway 1988: 260). By engaging the youth in the way he did, as an ironic fool, he diverted attention from them and allowed them space to evolve their political alternative. Yet Socrates was unable (or unwilling) to keep both facades up and was eventually convicted of corrupting the youth (Conway 1988: 262). Socratic irony according to Nietzsche thus ultimately failed in its political mission.

4.2. THE 20TH CENTURY

In the mid-20th century philosophical scholarship Socrates again experienced a revival in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida, among others. The scholarship in this century again took a decidedly different view of Socratic irony, and the results are fascinating. Bakhtin in particular proposed a different reading of Socrates, a Socrates who doesn't just listen to the one divine voice but to many voices, who is above all concerned with *living* instead of *knowing*, and who tests people through his irony and rhetoric instead of trying to persuade them⁵⁶ (Zappen 1996: 66).

For Bakhtin the Socratic dialogue is a search for the truth, a search in which Socrates actively takes part rather than simply playing the midwife. Socrates is only one of the voices in the dialogue, not *the* voice of the dialogue (Zappen 1996: 72). However, the Socrates who lives in Bakhtin's "carnavalesque world of everyday experience" is less concerned with knowing the truth, because he acknowledges that the search is infinite (Zappen 1996: 72-73). It is for this reason that Socrates never claims that he alone possesses the answer to his own questions (Peace 1993: 142). Therefore he turns his attention to living, he becomes the ironic, and often humorous, Socrates of the Socratic dialogues. Bakhtin's Socratic irony is liberating, a way to subvert not only power, but the socially accepted forms of language and thought (Neubauer 1996: 543). The Socratic ironist is sceptical of everything that is deemed acceptable and is constantly testing the validity of social conventions. Furthermore, Socrates lived his life fearlessly and in full view of the public, something which had become near impossible in the 20th century, with its emphasis on privacy and the individual. The cold, detached, mocking irony which results from this life lacks the freedom that Bakhtin holds in such high esteem (Gardiner 2012: 56). Bakhtin sees Socratic irony as "a truly free investigation of the world" (Bakhtin in Zappen 1996: 73).

Henri Lefebvre also sees Socratic irony as a way of investigating the world; a way of finding truth through constant doubt and questioning of the status quo. It does not, however, look for a universal and eternal truth, but for a series of possible truths. Interestingly, he notes that Socrates was speaking to a privileged group of people, the

⁵⁶ That Socrates was trying to bring his interlocutors to a predetermined realisation of knowledge through carefully worded questions was a general assumption handed down in the tradition. Cf. Vitanza 1991: 166; Zappen 1996: 66, 70.

aristocrats of Athens, and therefore his irony was not accessible to the everyman, but in modern times irony has been generalised and popularised. It belongs to everyone, and the result is an inherently sceptical society (Gardiner 2012: 64). According to Lefebvre the value of Socratic irony lies in the attitude of Socrates, an attitude which is becoming ever more common. This attitude takes no knowledge system as a given, it goes through life constantly questioning everything and exposing falsity in its efforts to find some sort of truth which is as yet unknown to the ironist (Gardiner 2012: 64). Just as Socrates did not know where his dialogues with his interlocutors would end, so the modern ironist is in the dark, groping for light. The purpose of Socratic irony is to break down the boundaries between what *is* and what *ought to be* in order to transform the world (Gardiner 2012: 66)

Contrary to this, Derrida's Socratic irony "consists of not saying anything" (Derrida 1995: 76). The Socratic ironist insists that he has no knowledge in order to force someone else to speak or think. A frequent criticism of this interpretation of Socratic irony is that we know that Socrates is being ironic, and Socrates knows that we know (Mileur 1998: 228), yet this is exactly what Derrida is arguing against in his interpretation of Socrates. Derrida views Socratic irony as considerably less serious than those who came before him did. For him Socratic irony is often humorous, as in the case of Socrates' meeting with Theodoté in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.⁵⁷ In this incident Socrates plays the satyr who meets with a beautiful woman, yet it is Theodoté who asks Socrates to come visit her sometime and it is Socrates who plays coy. There is a clear reversal of roles here, the kind of reversal which is central to much of Derrida's philosophy.⁵⁸ Socrates becomes the desirable man, while Theodoté becomes the one who desires him (Liszka 1983: 241). The reversal is based on the assumption that she is the desirable of the two, especially considering Socrates' lack of good looks, an assumption anyone would make. Similarly, when Socrates claims ignorance in contrast to the Delphic oracle's words that he is the wisest man alive, he again reverses roles. This time he shows the wise to be ignorant, but in realising himself to be ignorant, he proves himself wise. Yet if he is wise, then he is ignorant, and thus he can be neither (Liszka 1983: 242). Derrida's Socrates

⁵⁷ See the full discussion of this meeting in section 3.2 on p. 42 above.

⁵⁸ This is in reference to Derrida's either/or, neither/nor, which refers to these inherent contradictions or inconsistencies and the possibilities that spring from them. Socratic irony in this way comes very close to being deconstructive (Long 2010: 96).

affirms knowledge simply by searching for it, and he risks his life for this mission (Liszka 1983: 242). By showing others that they are ignorant Socrates laughs at and ridicules them, yet simultaneously he shows them the value of inquiry, and it is the inquiry itself which is the purpose of Socratic irony.

For the Russian philosopher Aleksei Losev, who was arrested and sent to a labour camp in 1929 on charges of counter-revolution,⁵⁹ Socrates offered an escape from the Soviet regime. From 1930 onwards he started adopting Marxist ideologies in his academic work, praising Lenin in several papers. At the same time he took a negative view of Socrates in his academic work, characterising him as “decadent” and criticising his insistence on being absolutely rational as well as his inability to correct life through logic (Kessidi 2003: 38). While he himself never gave away the true intent behind these writings, some scholars argue that he adopted the ironic method of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues. This attitude would have allowed him the pretence of appearing obedient while not actually being so, and in this way would have saved his life. Socratic irony thus offered him a way of assimilating and dealing with any information, subject matter and ideology he was faced with (Emerson 2004: 103-105).

As we have seen in the work of Nietzsche, the political nature of Socrates’ teachings had been observed long before Losev’s appropriation of the Socratic ironic attitude. This is notable in the work of John Stuart Mill as well. Lianeri, taking cues from Mill’s translation of the *Protagoras*, questioned whether Socratic irony had an objective other than simply the acquisition of knowledge, i.e. whether it had the ability to “intervene in a situation” (2007: 167). Lianeri notably criticises Mill’s translation of the *Protagoras* for effacing Socratic irony, saying that he suppresses Socrates’ criticism of himself, thus making philosophy the creator of politics and ignoring Socrates’ own criticism of both the former and the latter (2007: 173, 175). Mill also subtly separated the social sphere from the political sphere in his translation, a position which contradicted that of Socrates (Lianeri 2007: 179). Lianeri’s own conclusion is that Socratic irony criticises not

⁵⁹ Bakhtin himself was also arrested at more or less the same time, but was exiled to Kazakhstan for six years, whereas Losev was freed a few years later. For both philosophers this experience played a major role in the development of their thought (Emerson 2004: 100).

only the political system,⁶⁰ but also the mode in which it operates (that is to say, critical debate that is not free from coercion; 2007: 184).

The philosophers dealt with in this section all focused on Socratic irony to varying degrees and have over the course of 200 years contributed diverging views of Socrates' irony, views that differ considerably from the much earlier discussions of Socratic irony found in the work of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian.⁶¹ Even within the last 200 years opinions on Socratic irony have changed a great deal, and especially the advent of 20th-century scholarship has offered us radically different ways of interpreting the irony of Socrates (and irony in general). With these theories in mind I will now turn to aspects of Socratic irony as they have been identified in Chapter 3 of this thesis (verbal irony, especially in the form of knowledge disavowal, and physical irony). The aim is to discover what the function of these individual aspects of Socratic irony is, before attempting a conciliation of all aspects and functions of Socratic irony into a single whole.

⁶⁰ See section 5.3 on p. 62ff., especially 5.3.2.

⁶¹ See the brief discussion of the ancient theories of (Socratic) irony in Chapters 1 and 5 of this thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FUNCTION OF SOCRATIC IRONY

Bearing what has been said regarding the nature of Socratic irony in mind we now turn to the function thereof. Although they are treated separately, I must stress that the nature and function of Socratic irony are necessarily mutually inclusive and one cannot be fully and comprehensively understood or described without reference to the other. This is especially true of the physical aspect of Socratic irony, as will be shown in this chapter. In Chapter 2 a brief summary of some of the functions of irony was given,⁶² and in Chapter 4 a review of more recent philosophical theories of the nature and especially the function of Socratic irony was done. Before examining the relevance of these theories for the present study, it will be useful to consider also the older views of Socratic irony as well as the more pervasive theories of classical scholars with regard to the function of Socrates' irony in order to consolidate them with my own hypothesis.

5.1. THEORIES OF THE GENERAL FUNCTION(S) OF SOCRATIC IRONY

In her 2011 article, "Reconsidering Socratic Irony", Melissa Lane deals with some possible functions of Socratic irony. When considering my own account of the function of Socratic irony it will be useful to take these into consideration in order to form a comprehensive theory which does justice to the complexity of Socratic irony. I will recount those theories here very briefly.

According to the first theory Socratic irony is meant to be completely transparent to both his audience and his interlocutors. Socrates is meant to be playful in his attributions of wisdom to his interlocutors, and he should never be taken seriously. This view was especially dominant in the 18th century, but still carries some weight today, especially with those scholars predisposed to liking Socrates and reluctant to attributing to him any purposeful deception (Lane 2011: 242). Opposed to this is the theory of the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders', which links irony to the natural class divisions among men. According to this theory Socrates means to exclude his interlocutors from understanding his irony so as not to show off his own superiority. This makes Socratic irony not only a rhetorical device but also a political one, which could be very useful or

⁶² See section 2.1 on p. 11 above.

even necessary at times. The truth behind irony is thus only available to a select few. Those outside of the irony are judged incapable of understanding either it or the philosophy behind it (Lane 2011: 242).

Others have seen irony as an inherent part of Socratic philosophy, as a device to reveal the critical nature of the discipline (Lane 2011: 243). This view, in which Socratic irony serves some dialectical or heuristic function, is still dominant today. Socratic irony thus serves as a way to disprove the argument of an interlocutor. Some hold that the purpose of irony is to offer knowledge in return, while others have argued, much like Hegel and Kierkegaard,⁶³ that it cannot offer anything positive in its place (Lane 2011: 243). Socratic irony as pedagogic device will, if successful, eventually lead the interlocutor to a new realisation of knowledge, but its success in this regard has been doubted as early as Epicurus. Not only is it seen as too indirect a method of philosophical instruction, it has also been accused of being harmful because it often humiliates its victims (Lane 2011: 144).

Lastly, Alexander Nehamas has argued that it might not be possible to guess at the function of Socratic irony. Irony does not necessarily mean the opposite of the literal meaning, which makes it much harder to decipher. Irony can even be directed at the ironist himself, knowingly or unknowingly (Nehamas 1998: 66-67). The meaning behind the irony is thus a grey area which we might never reach, but we shall benefit from trying. Keeping these theories and those discussed in Chapter 4 in mind, the rest of this chapter thus deals with the two main types of Socratic irony and investigates their purpose.

5.2. SELF-DEPRECIATION AND THE DISAVOWAL OF KNOWLEDGE

The fundamental problem with Plato's characterisation of Socrates is that he is often understood to be insincere (cf. *Apology* 37-38) regardless of whether he is being honest or ironical. Yet he demands honest answers from his interlocutors, and this seems inconsistent, both morally and philosophically (McCabe 2007: 18). At the root of his insincerity is his disavowal of knowledge, often taken to be the crux of his irony, which I

⁶³ See section 4.1 on p. 49 above.

treat under the broader category of his self-deprecation; Socrates claims he does not know, but there are clear signs that he does.⁶⁴

I have already shown that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge can often be shown to be meant ironically, but this raises the question: 'Why does Socrates pretend he does not know, when in fact he does'? Aristotle tries to give us an answer in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In an attempt to justify Socrates' εἰρωνεία he states that it is better to be an εἰρων (traditionally a deceiver, but in Aristotle a self-deprecator) than to be an ἀλαζών (a boaster). Aristotle says that the εἰρων does this because of a habitual dislike of ostentation, since understatement is in better taste than overstatement. Aristotle's account, however, is problematic because he tries to show that Socrates is a good example of an observer of the mean between the two extremes, which is the virtue in question, truthfulness. Yet he simultaneously says that understatement (specifically εἰρωνεία) was a habit of Socrates,⁶⁵ and that those who dress like Spartans (single cloak, bare-footedness) are actually ostentatious in their understatement (*NE* 4.7). Despite the fact that Aristotle doesn't offer much on the function of Socrates' self-deprecation, his account is valuable because it is here that the tradition of Socratic irony starts.

Cicero furthers the tradition, but views Socratic irony in a rather different light. For him, Socrates' "assumed simplicity" (*De oratore* 2.269-271) is the wittiest irony of them all. Irony is bound to humour (*De oratore* 2. 274), yet is also rather austere in nature and therefore is suited both to public and general talk (*De oratore* 2.271).

It is Quintilian who first offers us a detailed exposition of the meaning and function of irony, both as a trope and as a figure.⁶⁶ Irony as trope is the simpler and more obvious form, in which the meaning and the words are incompatible. In this case the secondary meaning (that which is unsaid and implicit, as opposed to the literal meaning of the ironist's words) is often belied by the context in which the words are uttered (*Inst.* 8.6.54-55). The main function of irony as a trope is to ridicule, hence its alternative names *illusio* and *simulatio*,

⁶⁴ Cf. section 3.1 on p. 32 above.

⁶⁵ Aristotle distinguishes between those who disclaim trifling or obvious things and those who disclaim esteemed qualities. The former is "contemptible", while the latter "has not an ungraceful air", and this is the group to which Socrates belongs (*NE* 4.7.14-16).

⁶⁶ Tropes are positive shifts in the meaning of a word or phrase, so that another meaning comes to light (*Inst.* 8.6.1) for the sake of embellishment (*Inst.* 9.1.4). Quintilian argues that figures differ from tropes in that figures can be formed without shifts in the meaning of a word or phrase (*Inst.* 9.1.7).

the former of which means ‘mockery’ and the latter ‘pretence’ (*Inst.* 8.6.58-59; Russel 2001: n. 76). As figure irony doesn’t differ much from the trope; the opposite of what is said is meant to be understood in both cases. The figure, however, is longer and more covert, and is not meant to be understood so easily (*Inst.* 9.2.45). The figure irony can be found in the life of Socrates, who pretended at ignorance (*Inst.* 9.2.46). The implication here, it seems, is that Socratic irony pokes fun at serious matters (and in this case we should take the pretended wisdom of others to be a serious matter) to draw attention to them (*Inst.* 9.2.51-53).

More recently the common view of the function of Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge has been that it serves some sort of didactic purpose. In this line of argument some scholars have taken Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge to be sincere in some manner and have tried to explain it in a variety of ways. For Vlastos Socrates uses the word ‘know’ in two senses: in one sense it means that we know only what we are infallibly certain of, in the other sense it means we know what has survived elenchic examination (1985: 12-20). Brickhouse and Smith suggests that rather than using the word ‘know’ in two different senses, there are two different kinds of knowledge: the first makes it’s possessor wise, the second does not (Brickhouse & Smith in Matthews 2006: 115). Benson does not presume to determine the nature of the knowledge Socrates claims himself ignorant of (2000: 168). Others, however, have argued that Socrates’ claims of disavowals must be insincere for them to hold any didactic value. As Charles Kahn says (in Matthews 2006: 116), if Socrates is to successfully examine his interlocutor on the subject of virtue and the good life, he himself must already have some knowledge of virtue, and of good and evil. Considering his words at *Apology* 29b we must necessarily assume that Socrates has *some* knowledge of what is evil, and therefore also of what is good:

But I do *know* that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and to disobey him who is better than I, whether he be god or man.⁶⁷

It is, however, not enough simply to state that there is some didactic purpose to Socratic irony in the form of knowledge disavowal. We must dig deeper. What does Socrates mean to teach,⁶⁸ and how is irony supposed to help him do it? The answer to

⁶⁷ My emphasis.

⁶⁸ I doubt that anyone would argue that when Socrates ‘teaches’ he is not also a student himself. We cannot argue on the basis of his avowal of knowledge, as at *Apology* 29b, that his knowledge of virtue is absolute. It

the first part of the question is relatively straightforward. Socrates means to discover what is *kalon k'agathon*, 'fine and good'; he is looking for the content of virtue. He does this through conversations with just about anyone he can convince to engage with him. It may be that he uses irony as a way to keep his interlocutors in the conversation. There are two ways of doing this. In the first he means for his opponent to perceive the irony in his words; the conversation with Calicles in *Gorgias* is a good example of such a case.⁶⁹ The interlocutor is wounded by Socrates' irony and this inculcates in him a desire to prove his point (Lane 2011: 252). In other cases Socrates may not mean for his interlocutor to grasp the irony, and thus by belittling himself and praising his opponent he gives them confidence to engage in the conversation (Lane 2011: 252). Some may argue that praising his opponent falsely is amoral, but we have already seen that Socrates sees no problem with lying if it serves a purpose, and what purpose could be more worthy than fulfilling the divine task he has been given?

By using irony Socrates gives off an air of superiority which his interlocutors pick up on. In this way he asserts that he is dominating the argument. Yet at the same time he reinforces the superiority of his opponent, thereby encouraging him to continue to try and assert his own superiority within the framework of the elenctic conversation (Lane 2011: 255). By continuing the conversation both Socrates and his interlocutor will, hopefully, learn something about what *kalon k'agathon* is. This pedagogic function of Socratic irony has many proponents,⁷⁰ but it cannot be said that that is all there is to Socratic irony. To argue thus is to assign it a rather shallow function, as well as confining it to the realm of verbal irony. Yet we have seen that there is a physical aspect of Socratic irony as well, and it is in this aspect that we will see Nietzsche's political irony.

5.3. PHYSICAL IRONY

To fully understand the implications of Socrates' physical irony we must take the political atmosphere of 5th century B.C.E. Athens within which it originated into account. Socrates was born during the Persian wars, which carried on until he was some 20 years

might be better to substitute 'teach' with 'discover', keeping in mind that both he himself and his interlocutors are meant to 'discover' together by means of elenctic enquiry. Bakhtin argued that Socrates was concerned with living in the world, and discovering knowledge with other people. It would perhaps be more useful to think of Socrates in this sense. Cf. section 4.1 on p. 49 above.

⁶⁹ See the discussion at section 2.3. above.

⁷⁰ Cf. Vlastos 1991; Morrison 1987; Nehamas 1998.

of age.⁷¹ During Socrates' lifetime Athens also clashed with Sparta in the First (460-445 B.C.E.) and Second (431-404 B.C.E) Peloponnesian Wars, in which the Persians also played a role. A brief overview of the political changes in Greece, and more specifically Athens,⁷² leading up to and during the life of Socrates will shed some light on the nature and function of this physical aspect of Socratic irony.

5.3.1. WAR, POLITICS, AND THE (PUBLIC) LIFE OF SOCRATES

During the 5th century B.C.E. there was a general movement in Greece towards more equal systems of political administration (Mitchell 2006: 367). The Greeks had largely abandoned tyranny, monarchy and oligarchy in favour of greater participation of the populace by way of magistrates (*archai*), who ruled the city-states according to the unwritten law of tradition (Mitchell 2006: 367). It was, however, also a time of great political upheaval, and we cannot doubt that the political atmosphere of the time had some effect on the life and philosophy of Socrates.

It is then no surprise that early in the 5th century the Ionians revolted against the tyrants Persia had sponsored to rule over them. The wars were essentially a revolt against tyranny, a system of government that was already in decline when the Persians started conquering Greek city-states (Davies 1992: 27). Though the Ionian Revolt failed, there were general egalitarian tendencies in Greece at the time. There were also, however, city-states that successfully resisted the change, of which Sparta was one (Davies 1992: 27). Following the Persian success in suppressing the revolution Darius moved to conquer other city-states in 492 B.C.E. (Pomeroy et al. 2008: 207-208; Fearenside 1919: 44). Athens, which had offered only nominal aid in the Ionian Revolt, along with Sparta rallied her army and fought and defeated the Persians at Marathon in 490 B.C.E. – a battle which the Spartans joined too late (Pomeroy et al. 2008: 21; Fearenside 1919: 46).

The second Persian invasion of Greece started in 480 B.C.E. under the leadership of Darius' son, Xerxes. In the years between the first and second invasions the Greeks

⁷¹ "The Persian Wars" here refers to both the first and the second of these wars and thus includes the battles fought after the Greek victory at Plataea and Salamis 480/479 B.C.E.

⁷² Here I will refrain from including (possible) explanations for the actions of every individual/ city-state for every turn of events. It does not matter here why exactly certain decisions were made, but the repercussions of those decisions do matter. Where motives are applicable to the present study, they will be included.

continued their inter-state rivalries as before (Pomeroy et al. 2008: 215; Fearenside 1919: 46). Were it not for Themistocles the Athenian, who prepared a fleet strong enough to meet the Persian fleet, the Greeks might have succumbed to the Persians. As it happened the Greek city-states put aside their differences and joined forces against the Persians, who were eventually defeated at Plataea in 479 B.C.E. (Pomeroy et al. 2008: 220; Fearenside 1919: 50-55), ten years before the birth of Socrates.

By 478 B.C.E. Athens had taken charge of the Greek alliance, which had decided to continue the war by reclaiming Greek territory under Persian rule (Hornblower 2002: 11). Neither Sparta and the other Peloponnesian city-states nor Aegina were willing to submit to Athenian leadership (Rhodes 1992: 35), owing to prior disagreements (Pomeroy et al. 2008: 228; Fearenside 1919: 46-47). A large number of other city-states, especially those from Ionia, then formed the Delian League under leadership of Athens. The League was to have a treasury on Delos; some of the allies provided the League with ships, the rest paid tribute (Rhodes 1992: 37; Hornblower 2002: 13). The treasury accumulated a large amount of wealth and was moved to Athens in the middle of the 5th century (Rhodes 1992: 38). Athens, the strongest member of the League, originally had an equal vote in decisions, though implicitly the balance of power was tipped in its favour, as it provided by far the largest number of ships (Rhodes 1992: 41). At some undetermined point in the latter half of the 5th century Athenian leadership of the Delian League crossed over into Athenian rule over its own empire (Hornblower 2002: 15).

As for Athenian politics, Cimon (whose father was Miltiades, the victor of Marathon), undertook several campaigns successfully in the 470s and 460s, thus pushing Themistocles out of the political centre (Hornblower 2002: 19). When Sparta tried in 478 B.C.E. to expel Persian sympathisers from Delphi, Themistocles was the one who opposed them, and thus the Spartans tended to favour Cimon, who was known to support Sparta (Hornblower 2002: 21). In 472 B.C.E. Aeschylus produced the *Persians*, a play which showed his own sympathies towards Themistocles and which was funded by a young Pericles (Hornblower 2002: 22). The latter was a rival of Cimon's and had prosecuted him for bribery in Thasos (Hornblower 2002: 25).

Sparta first began to show its discontent against Athens in 465 B.C.E. when it secretly offered to help the Thasians, who were revolting against Athenian rule. The secret did not stay hidden and Sparta retracted the offer to deal with a revolution of its own subjects, the helots in Messenia. Sparta was forced to ask Athens for assistance, which Cimon secured (Hornblower 2002: 23). This was to be the proverbial nail in Cimon's coffin, because the Spartans sent him and 4000 hoplites home out of fear of the democratic reform slowly taking place in Athens (which would have caused subversion amongst the hoplites). Cimon was ostracised and Athens adopted an aggressively anti-Spartan stance (Hornblower 2002: 23). During his absence Athens reformed into a more democratic city-state: the Areopagus was divested of most of its political and legal functions, which were then given to the Council of 500, the Assembly and the courts of law (Hornblower 2002: 24). By this time Pericles had already built himself a political reputation and garnered public support by introducing pay for juries (Hornblower 2002: 26).

In 460 B.C.E. Athens aligned itself with Megara in Attica, which had a long-standing quarrel with Corinth. The rapprochement ended the good relations between Corinth and Athens and the first battle of the First Peloponnesian War was fought between these two city-states (as well as the Epidaurians and Sicyonians on the side of Corinth) at Halieis in 459 B.C.E. (Lewis 1992: 112). Athens proved itself too strong for the Corinthian armies, at which point the Spartans stepped into the war in ca. 457 B.C.E. and defeated the Athenians at Tanagra. Two months later the Athenians defeated the Spartans at Oinophyta in Boiotia (Hornblower 2002: 34). Though the Athenians now had power over Boiotia, they supported the oligarchies there, though it may be because these rulers would continue to divide Boiotia, thus keeping it weak, rather than being an ideological decision on the part of Athens (Hornblower 2002: 34-35).

Due to the Egyptian uprisings against Persian rule during the First Peloponnesian War Athens could no longer fight wars on two fronts and decided instead to sign a peace treaty with the Persians under the guidance of the Athenian Callias, but did not disband the Delian League (Hornblower 2002: 36). Shortly thereafter, in 446 B.C.E., Athens also signed a treaty with Sparta, now known as the Thirty Years' Peace (Hornblower 2002: 35). The Thirty Years' Peace lasted only 14 years, and Athens and Sparta clashed openly in 431 B.C.E. (Lewis 1992: 370). The Spartan strategy was ostensibly to liberate Greece

from Athens, who no longer had any real reason to lead the Delian League. Sparta had a reputation of being opposed to tyranny and had deposed Hippias from Athens in the 6th century (Hornblower 2002: 154-155). Athens continued in its western expeditions and tried to take several city-states, including Megara, which had in the meanwhile rejoined the Peloponnesian League (Hornblower 2002: 156). In 425 B.C.E. the Spartans landed at Sphakteria south of Pylos, which was occupied by Demosthenes at the time. The force was captured by Cleon, who convinced the Athenians to reject the Spartan offer of peace. It was only after Cleon's death that Athens and Sparta signed the Peace of Nicias in 421 B.C.E. (Hornblower 2002: 160).

An unstable period of peace which left the Athenian empire intact lasted until 415 B.C.E. Both sides were unhappy because they had lost territory, and Corinth unsuccessfully tried to incite Sparta back into the war (Hornblower 2002: 161). However, the new ephors in Sparta, Kleoboulos and Xenares, opposed the peace with Athens and Corinth took the opportunity to gather allies for Sparta. The Argives (out of fear, presumably) aligned with Sparta but were persuaded by Alcibiades to switch sides (Hornblower 2002: 162). Adding to Spartan discontent was the fact that in 420 B.C.E. the Spartans were banned from taking part in the Olympic Games for not paying a sacred fine (Hornblower 2002: 162). Following this the Spartans felt the need to re-establish their reputation, and thus they marched against Argos, who then re-aligned with Sparta and adopted oligarchy, which was then promptly overthrown and a return was made to the side of Athens. Sparta had, however, managed to prove that militarily they were still unmatched (Hornblower 2002: 162).

Athens then turned their attention to Sicily, an expedition which did not go well. In 413 B.C.E the fleet was lost and Alcibiades defected to Sparta. This loss was the main cause of the downfall of Athenian democracy through the oligarchic revolution of 411 B.C.E. (Hornblower 2002: 149). The Athenian people reacted against the orators who initially proposed the conquest of Sicily. It became clear that government by the people was not suited to war. The result was the appointment of *probouloi* to supervise the Assembly (Hornblower 2002: 173).

Both Athens and Sparta started to rebuild their fleets. At around the same time one of the Persian satraps promised aid to the Peloponnesians (Hornblower 2002: 174). In the

beginning of 411 B.C.E. the Four Hundred (oligarchs) briefly seized power in Athens and subsequently also imposed the same system of government on their allies (Hornblower 2002: 176). The revolution as a whole, however, failed because of internal disagreements. One of these disagreements was on the subject of whether to continue warring with Sparta; those in favour of the war included Theramenes and Kleitophon, both of whom were associated with Socrates and Plato (Hornblower 2002: 178). Because of the internal strife Sparta managed to attack the Athenian force at Eretria, which led to Athens losing Euboia. This in turn led to the deposition of the Four Hundred and the installation of the Five Thousand, which governed with a more moderate form of oligarchic rule – or rather, a less liberal form of democracy (Hornblower 2002: 179-180).⁷³ This regime lasted eight months, during which they cast Phrynichus'⁷⁴ body out of Attica and released his killers from prison (Ostwald 1986: 376, 421).

In the first quarter of 410 B.C.E. Athens achieved a great victory in the Hellespont under the leadership of Alcibiades (amongst others), and Sparta sued for peace. This caused the fall of the Five Thousand and a return to democracy, as such tight government was no longer necessary. The new democratic regime had its faults, going so far as to confer high honours on Phrynichus' killers and some of its leaders were accused of condemning people without trial to enrich themselves (Ostwald 1986: 421). Alcibiades, by now widely associated with anti-democratic sentiments, returned to Athens in 407 B.C.E. (Hornblower 2002: 181).

In 406 B.C.E. Athens defeated the Spartans at Arginusae (Hornblower 2002: 182). It was at this battle that the generals failed to recover the survivors and dead bodies from the sea (according to them a storm had prevented them from doing so). They were subsequently sentenced to death, and Socrates was the only man who voted against this decision (Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.18, 4.4.2.; Plato, *Apol.* 32b, *Gorg.* 473e). Oddly enough, Socrates is known to have recommended Archedemus, one of the first to proceed against one of the generals of Arginusae, to Crito as an honest watchdog (Ostwald 1986: 425, Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.9.4-8).

⁷³ Voting rights were denied to classes lower than hoplites (Hornblower 2002: 180).

⁷⁴ Phrynichus and Scironides attempted to besiege Miletus in 412 B. C. E., but were advised against it due to the arrival of a new Spartan fleet. Phrynichus opposed the return of Alcibiades from a military expedition in Sicily and was removed from his post on suspicion of treason. He later became one of the 400 who overthrew Athenian democracy and ruled as an oligarchy. He was murdered in plain sight in the latter half of 411 B. C. E. (Schmitz 2007: 199-200).

Patrocleides moved a blanket amnesty (with certain restrictions) in 405 B.C.E. for those disfranchised unjustly since the Persian wars (Ostwald 1986: 422). Under the new democracy property taxes on capital was levied twice, a measure which would necessarily have affected the upper classes more severely than the lower classes (Ostwald 1986: 425). Shortly thereafter the Athenians lost the Peloponnesian War and joined the Peloponnesian League under leadership of Sparta (Hornblower 2002: 183). At this time a large number of aristocratic proponents of oligarchy and the Four Hundred returned to Athens (Ostwald 1986: 460-461). Upon their return they found a fairly large group of supporters and moved to overturn the democracy in 404 B.C.E (Ostwald 1986: 466, 468). Most of the Thirty (Tyrants) were associated with Sophistry, which was already regarded unfavourably in 420 B.C.E.⁷⁵ Initially, however, their rule was not illegal, as they had been appointed by the people on the motion of Dracontides (Ostwald 1986: 478), and their shift to oligarchic rule happened only sometime after their appointment (Ostwald 1986: 480). Their rule was particularly violent and many Athenian aristocrats were killed during this time. In all probability they were attempting to restructure Athenian society according to the Spartan model (Ostwald 1986: 484-485). The Thirty were overthrown in October 403 B.C.E. by a group of people who gathered at the Piraeus to send a delegation to Sparta. Among them was Meletus, one of Socrates' accusers, in a move that was probably meant to distance himself from the Thirty, with whom he was also involved (Ostwald 1986: 494-5). Athens sent its own representatives to join the negotiations at Sparta and democracy was reinstated (Ostwald 1986: 497-499).

By this time Socrates' reputation in Athens had been cemented in the public mind. Judging by the characterisation of him in the *Clouds* in 423 B.C.E, he was no favourite of the lower classes and was closely associated with sophistry. He himself was probably born into an aristocratic family, and was known to be associated with many Athenian aristocrats who were supporters of oligarchic rule over democratic rule (Wood & Wood 1978: 83, 86). Perhaps most importantly Socrates was known to have met and mentored Critias (Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.2.18, 3.14), the leader of the Thirty Tyrants and Plato's cousin, who were among those who returned from exile in 404 B.C.E. (Wood & Wood

⁷⁵ Cf. Aristophanes' *Clouds*. The comedy would have had no effect were the sophists regarded as wise and upstanding citizens by the large majority of Athenians.

1978: 86; Ostwald 1986: 462). There is ample evidence in both Plato and Xenophon⁷⁶ that Socrates and Critias remained in close association between 433 B.C.E. and the start of his exile some twenty years later (Ostwald 1986: 463). Furthermore, Critias was among those young aristocrats in 5th-century Athens who were known to have a certain affinity for all things Spartan, including moral maxims and clothing (Ostwald 1986: 235-236, 464).

Publically, however, Socrates denied any active involvement in Athenian politics (“Polus, I am not one of your statesmen”; *Gorgias* 473e; tr. Lamb 1946) and openly criticised both the politics and politicians of the time (Wood & Wood 1978: 94). We do know of two political episodes in which he had been involved (one being the trial of the generals of Arginusae), his necessary involvement in his own trial in 399 B.C.E. (which had a distinct political flavour), and of his military service during the Peloponnesian War in the battle of Delium, where he was nearly killed (Wood & Wood 1978: 94; Pomeroy et al. 2008: 327). His conversation with Polus in *Gorgias* also deals extensively with matters of justice and government, and he even declares himself the only true statesman in Athens:

I think I am one of few, not to say the only one, in Athens who attempts the true art of statesmanship, and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state...

(*Gorgias* 521d)

Interestingly, Socrates seems to contradict himself in these last two quotations from the *Gorgias*, first saying to Polus that he is not a statesman and then saying that he is the only true statesman in Athens. Yet I do not think that this is a contradiction. At 473e he says to Polus “I am not one of *your* statesmen (τῶν πολιτικῶν)”.⁷⁷ By this I believe he means that he is not a statesman like all the other politicians operating in Athens at the time, like for example Callicles,⁷⁸ whose opinion is easily swayed by his lover and by the Athenian people. Instead, Socrates is what a politician *should* be; he is critical, constantly seeking for the nature of virtue through philosophical inquiry, a law-abiding citizen and interested in learning from and with others. It is thus undeniable that

⁷⁶ The latter’s evidence is attested in the fact that he tried so hard to deny Socrates’ involvement with Critias and Alcibiades. See *Mem.* 1.2.12-16, 24-39 (Ostwald 1986: 463n.14).

⁷⁷ My emphasis.

⁷⁸ See the discussion at section 2.3 on p. 22 above.

Socrates did get involved in Athenian politics to some degree, though the basis for his involvement may not have been political, but rather moral.

If Socrates' life was filled with political turmoil in which he himself from time to time got involved, we must ask to what extent his experience of the world influenced his philosophical and existential attitude. Can it be shown that Socratic irony is a result of, a response to, or a criticism of the political atmosphere of the time?

5.3.2. SOCRATIC IRONY AS POLITICAL MODE OF BEING

The problem with the interpretation of Socrates' political views is that the large majority of what we know is from the *Republic*, and of that, much is taken to be Plato's view, not Socrates'. However, for the purpose of this study what is said of Socrates' political persuasions in the *Republic* will be taken as Socratic to at least *some* extent for the following reasons: [1] *Republic I* is often argued to be amongst the earlier works of Plato;⁷⁹ [2] I have argued that it may not be possible to distinguish the historical Socrates from Plato's Socrates at all;⁸⁰ and [3] since Plato was Socrates' pupil, I will take Plato's own views to be an extension of those of Socrates, and as such I will focus on broader ideas rather than on the specifics of the philosophy. I will take these ideas to be a general characteristic of the Socratic school.

The generally accepted version of Socrates' political philosophy is, in short, that he opposed both the Athenian democracy and tyranny (Wood & Wood 1978: 95). His opposition to the form the former had taken in Athens can be seen in his refusal to judge collectively and sentence the Arginusae generals to death, because it was against the law:

...you wished to judge collectively... the ten generals who had failed to gather up the slain after the naval battle, this was illegal, as you all agreed afterwards. At that time I was the only one of the prytaneis who opposed doing anything contrary to the laws.

(*Apology* 32b; tr. Fowler 1960)

As for the latter, his opposition to tyranny is attested to in *Gorgias*:

...neither of them will ever be happier than the other – neither he who has unjustly compassed the despotic power, nor he who pays he penalty... but still the more wretched is he who goes scot-free and establishes himself as despot.

(473d-e; tr. Lamb 1946)

⁷⁹ See section 2.2 on p. 17 of this thesis.

⁸⁰ See section 2.2 on p. 17 above.

In fact, Socrates suggested that no political order would be necessary if people were content to live with the bare essentials (C. H. Zuckert 1988: 3). According to this argument, if every person does what he is most talented at and trades with others to meet his needs, a natural equality will reign. It is the desire to have excesses, to possess more and be better than his neighbour that necessitates government (C. H. Zuckert 1988: 4). However, a problem arises the moment a system of government steps in to protect and keep in check those less able to do so: who will prevent the stronger (that is, the rulers) from using their advantage to gain more than they need from their own subjects? The answer to this, Socrates⁸¹ argues, is that rulers must be trained to act justly towards their fellow citizens (C. H. Zuckert 1988: 5). Simple education is not enough, though, laws must also be formulated to deprive the ruler of everything, including family and property, for those times when the desire to have more than one needs proves stronger than the willpower of the ruler (C. H. Zuckert 1988: 6). In Xenophon we find evidence of the kind of ruler that is Socrates' ideal:

Kings and rulers, he said, are not those who hold the sceptre, nor those who are chosen by the multitude, nor those on whom the lot falls, nor those who owe their power to force or deception; but those who know how to rule. For once it was granted that it is the business of the ruler to give order and of the ruled to obey, he went on to show that the one who knows, rules, and the owner and all the others on board obey the one who knows... in fact everybody concerned with anything that needs care, look after it themselves if they think they know how, but, if not, they obey those who know...

(Mem. 3.9.10-11)

Vlastos argues that this is an example from Xenophon that Socrates was against the Athenian democracy (1983: 502);⁸² however, I think he has misunderstood the passage. In simplified form, Socrates is saying that those with knowledge are the true rulers (that is, by rights they *should* be the rulers). We must ask what knowledge he believes these rulers must possess. If they are to be taught to be rulers, what would he teach them? If we take into account that Socrates regarded virtue as a form of knowledge (Guthrie 1969: 257), then it seems entirely reasonable to infer that the knowledge rulers must have is knowledge of virtue. And according to Socrates "no one does wrong of his own wish, but that all who do wrong do it against their will" (*Gorgias* 509e). Therefore, rulers

⁸¹ What Socrates argues is very much like Plato's own theory of the "philosopher-King", and it is difficult to distinguish to what extent Socrates agreed with Plato on this point. However, taking into account Socrates' actions in 406 B.C.E. we can assume that he would have held much the same view as Plato on the education of rulers.

⁸² This might seem inconsistent with his argument discussed below, from p. 72 onwards, but in fact he is trying to show that to argue that Socrates was anti-democracy one has to rely solely on evidence from Xenophon and ignore the contrary statements in the dialogues of Plato (Vlastos 1983: 502).

who have knowledge of virtue will have knowledge of what is right and wrong, and as such they will not do wrong; Socrates' ideal rulers will be just in a way that the politicians he sees every day are not.

This brings us to the heart of Socrates' physical irony. One of the few historical facts that we do know about Socrates is that his father was a stonemason and he himself fought in the Peloponnesian War as a hoplite, which immediately affords him a certain (fairly high) social rank (Wood & Wood 1978: 83). It is thus very possible that his poverty was self-inflicted. He always went barefoot, he wore a single threadbare cloak and he ate poor quality food and drink (*Clouds* 412-7). Socrates didn't need to do any of these things, but he did them ironically. His Spartan dress was a deliberate reaction to the political situation of the time.

Socrates clearly did not agree with the conduct of those of his associates, like Critias, who were known to have anti-democratic leanings. Yet at the same time he experienced first-hand the injustice done to the Arginusae generals under the democratic system. We can, however, argue that he may have to some extent preferred one system over another, knowing that his ideal would not be reached soon, if ever. He refused to sentence the generals to death because it was "illegal, as you all agreed afterwards" (*Apology* 32b). Surely, then, a democracy under stricter and more just laws that force the leaders to stay in check, as was to follow the deposition of the Thirty, is closer to Socrates' ideal than oligarchic rule that allows the ruler(s) to do what they wish. In fact, it has been a common argument in more recent scholarship that the view that Socrates was vehemently anti-democratic is false. This of course rests on what we know of his trial. The problem is that we don't know what the prosecution said on the day he made the famous ironical speech of the *Apology*. We know only that he was convicted and sentenced to death, although the margin was small (Irwin 1989: 184), and that public opinion was that he had been the teacher of the oligarch Critias, one of the Thirty (Vlastos 1983: 497). This view is closely connected to the common misconception that Socrates was a sophist, as is attested to in Aristophanes' *Birds*, because the latter were known to teach prominent politicians and were often credited (or blamed) for the political leanings of their pupils (Vlastos 1983: 496). This assumption is also well attested to in ancient literature, including Xenophon's *Memorabilia*:

But, said his accuser, he taught his companions to despise the established laws by insisting on the folly of appointing public officials by lot... Such sayings, he argued, led the young to despise the established constitution and made them violent.

(*Mem.* 1.2.9; tr. Marchant 1968)

Among the associates of Socrates were Critias and Alcibiades; and none wrought so many evils to the state.

(*Mem.* 1.2.12)

Yet Vlastos argues that Socrates had the utmost respect for the Athenian laws, hence his refusal to escape from captivity in the *Crito* as well as his refusal to leave Athens even if only for a day (1983: 498). Socrates thus must have loved the city and preferred its laws over the laws of other city-states; Athens in the 5th century B.C.E. was, after all, exceptional in its democratic constitution. What he did disapprove of was the level of law-abiding in Athens, as well as the public conduct of the city-state's citizens (Vlastos 1983: 500), as is evident from his refusal to sentence the Arginusae generals collectively because it was illegal (*Apology* 32b). That he refers to oligarchic cities such as Sparta as well-governed (*Crito* 52e) is not a contradiction, because he is simply referring to the fact that the citizens are more law-abiding in those cities than in Athens (Vlastos 1983: 502). Socrates' problem with democracy is that he is strongly against the ability of rhetoric to sway public opinion (that is, the opinion of a populous which does not adhere to their own laws) and the general changeability of the Athenian politicians he is familiar with:

In the Assembly, if the Athenian Demos disagrees with some statement you are making, you change over and say what it desires... but philosophy always holds the same.

(*Gorgias* 581e-582a)

In his ideal world every citizen would do his part to keep the city running as it should by inquiring into the nature of virtue through philosophical investigation and, having found it (or something close to it), abiding by the laws of the city-state. Socrates is thus strongly critical of the Athenian democracy; he sees where its shortcomings lie, yet he is still hopeful that it might succeed one day, because of his reverence for its laws.

T. H. Irwin agrees with this argument that Socrates was not against the Athenian democracy, but on a different basis. According to him, the fact that there is literature attesting to the fact that Socrates was regarded as the teacher of Critias has little to do with the official reasons for his convictions in 399 B.C.E. (1989: 187). At the same time, however, he argues that the references to his associations with figures like Critias and Alcibiades do not mean that Socrates was pro-oligarchy. Another factor which he takes

into account is that shortly after the fall of the Thirty in 403 B.C.E. the new democracy instated a law against recalling past crimes in order to prevent any further violence. It is probable that most citizens abided by this amnesty, and especially that Socrates' accusers would have shied away from appearing to disregard it, as it may have damaged their case (Irwin 1989: 187). What this means is that the official charges against him had nothing to do with his association with Critias and Alcibiades, although there is every possibility that the knowledge of this association influenced the jury and the prosecutors (Irwin 1989: 188). Furthermore, a large part of the evidence for Socrates' oligarchic leanings is often misread from the works of Xenophon, and where Xenophon mentions Socrates' oligarchic sympathies it is for the most part simply to set the stage for the apologetics that are to follow (Irwin 1989: 194). Even more indicative of the discrepancies in the view that Socrates was against Athenian democracy is the common ignorance of the Socratic Problem, particularly when it comes to the interpretation of Plato's Socratic dialogues. If this is taken into account we are faced with not only the possibility, but also the probability, that those views that can be construed as pro-oligarchic and anti-democratic are the views of Plato himself, put into the mouth of Socrates. Especially in the early dialogues there is ample evidence to support Professor Vlastos' argument as mentioned above, that Socrates was critical of Athenian democracy, but did not suggest that another system of government would be any better (Irwin 1989: 196).

My argument is thus that Socrates' physical irony is aimed at his anti-democratic associates. The irony, as has already been shown,⁸³ manifests itself in two elements: the first is his Spartan dress and attitude, the second is his 'swagger'. As I have mentioned, the younger Athenian aristocrats in the 5th century adopted a Laconian style in which they imitated many things the Spartans were known to do. This included the short cloak which Socrates wore and was seen as an outward expression of their oligarchic sympathies (DeBrohun 2001: 19). If Socrates was against tyranny and oligarchy, it must follow that his appropriation of Spartan dress and habits is ironic. Dressing like the aristocrats he interacted with so often would have allowed him a place in their circle, and thus the chance to converse with them on a regular basis. Yet it wasn't so much that he was an insider of their circle, but that they were the outsiders of his irony, in

⁸³ See Chapter 3, especially pp. 44-46.

much the same way as Losev was assimilating the Soviet regime's ideals into his own ironic system. Many of his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues are pro-Spartan, yet he doesn't agree with them as one would expect him to do if he was really one of them. Instead he argues fervently against them. Not only does dressing like them and speaking like a sophist allow him access to their ranks, but it allows him to openly ridicule them.

As for his 'swagger', that too is an ironic jab at the Athenian oligarchic aristocrats, who by the end of the reign of the Thirty had reformed Athens into a Spartan government in which they were the elite and everyone else were lower classes (equated with the helots of Sparta). The attitude of superiority that Socrates was known for was an exaggeration of what he observed in his friends, and a way to mock them in plain sight.

The physical irony of Socrates, which is thus clearly political, can now also be linked with another verbal irony: his insistence that he does not take part in politics. It is clear that Socrates has some political ideal which can be satisfied by neither Athenian democracy nor oligarchy. In terms of politics, 5th-century Athens was fairly ambiguous, both in its own systems of government, moving between tyranny, oligarchy and democracy, and in its dealings with other city-states such as Sparta. Socrates thus does not – cannot; he has been involved in too many political events – literally mean that he doesn't take part in politics, but that one should not need to take part in politics; there should be no need for politics in the first place. Moreover, this ironic attitude offered him a way to show that he disapproves of the political situation in Athens during his lifetime without offending the ruling class. It gave him a way to survive, which Losev appropriated in the 20th century. Those in Socrates' innermost circle, however, would have been able to recognise what Socrates meant by his words and actions. Perhaps he also meant for his aristocratic-oligarchic friends to see the truth behind the façade he presented, to lead them to a realisation of deeper moral knowledge.

Unfortunately here Socratic irony fails in imparting any positive value to the situation. Kierkegaard argued that he had only "infinite, absolute negativity" to offer and nothing more, but Hegel, who originally held the same view, came to see something more in Socrates. Hegel believed that he could offer some knowledge. If Socrates were successful, his associates would have recognised that the joke was on them, and would subsequently have reflected on their actions and come to realise what Socrates was

actually trying to say. But, as Nietzsche observed, they didn't take him seriously and thus didn't pay close enough attention to his political message. Perhaps, however, Hegel was right, and Socrates didn't fail completely. What of the youth he was convicted of corrupting? Did they pay close enough attention to learn from Socrates' actions? One may argue that there may be some validity in this claim, as Athens reformed into a democracy with more stringent laws after the Thirty. For Socrates, however, it was too late by then. He was already nearing old age and was inextricably linked with those oligarchs with whom he had so ironically associated himself. His failure to convey his message to those who needed to hear it and to those who would succeed them led directly to his execution in 399 B.C.E.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to arrive at a more complete and coherent definition of Socratic irony. The present state of scholarship regarding Socratic irony varies in opinion from denying its existence at all (Wolfsdorf 2007; Lane 2006, 2011) to arguing that it not only does exist, but that it is an integral part of Socrates' philosophical stance (Vlastos 1991). Of those scholars that do agree that Socratic irony does appear in the Socratic dialogues, many disagree on which dialogues should be included in a study of Socratic irony, and even more disagree on whether to use the works of Xenophon and Aristophanes when working with Socrates/Socratic irony. Even with all of these difficulties, there is one more: scholars don't agree on individual instances of irony in the texts; where some see irony, others do not. This is also reflected in dictionaries and specialised encyclopaedias of classics, rhetoric and philosophy.

The main argument of this thesis is that Socratic irony is more complex than it is often taken to be, e.g. in the conceptions of Vlastos (1991), Vasiliou (1999, 2002), Edmunds (2004), Wolfsdorf (2007), Lane (2006, 2011) et al. In order to fully understand the nature and function of Socratic irony an analysis of textual sources needed to be done. However, some problems regarding the methodology presented themselves and were dealt with in Chapter Two. The first of these is the theory of irony, which in itself is much more complex than is often understood. I argued that to fully understand Socratic irony, it is necessary first to gain a more complete understanding of irony as a whole. A careful examination of the theory of irony shows that it is much more intricate than simply saying the opposite of what one means, and that this will have a direct influence on the interpretation of Socrates as ironic. Furthermore, irony must not be limited to verbal irony, as it also entails a physical aspect, which can function without the aid of words and which is often overlooked in the case of Socrates. It is also not necessary for irony to be humorous; irony and humour are not mutually inclusive or exclusive. Ironic remarks can be humorous, but often serves a deeper, more serious or political purpose.

The second methodological problem is the historicity of Socrates. Due to the fact that the Socratic Problem is still being debated today and that very little agreement has been

reached in terms of the order of Plato's Socratic dialogues and which of those deal with the historical Socrates, and the reliability of Xenophon and Aristophanes as sources of information on the historical Socrates, I have argued that the debate surrounding the Socratic Problem is detrimental to the understanding and interpretation of Socratic irony. The problem of the historicity of Socrates has not and possibly will never be solved, and as such limiting ourselves to only the early Socratic dialogues of Plato, of which the order is not yet agreed on and will in all probability continue to be disputed, and excluding Xenophon and Aristophanes, will necessarily constrain our understanding of Socratic irony. For all practical intents and purposes Socrates as we know him today has become a literary character who is possibly based on a historical person to some extent; more than that we cannot say. It is thus useful to see Socratic irony as both a characteristic of the character Socrates and as a creation of Plato/Xenophon. This will allow us to build a more comprehensive definition of Socratic irony.

Attention has also been given to the debate surrounding the term εἰρωνεία, the third and last of the methodological difficulties in interpreting Socratic irony. While it is generally believed by a large group of scholars to be etymologically related to *ironia* and therefore to 'irony', there are those who dispute this point. The original meaning of εἰρωνεία is 'concealing', 'deceiving' or 'dissembling', and it is probable that it meant just that when Plato wrote his Socratic dialogues. It does not mean, however, that there is no irony to be found in cases where the word εἰρωνεία is applied to Socrates, nor does its absence imply that there is no irony in the dialogues. Muecke argued that irony existed long before it had been named (1982: 15), and therefore there is no reason to disregard instances of irony simply because they are not accompanied by the word itself. With reference to the instances of the word εἰρωνεία (or its cognates) appearing in the dialogues I have shown that even if it means 'concealing' or 'deceiving', it can still accompany instances of irony. The result is that εἰρωνεία does not always mean that there is irony in the text, because in its earliest usage it had not yet acquired the meaning which Aristotle gave it, i.e. 'irony'. It is purely coincidental that often in cases where Socrates is accused of being an εἰρων, there is irony in the text, and it has been shown that this is not always the case.⁸⁴ Socratic irony, thus, is not εἰρωνεία, but *ironia*.

⁸⁴ As in the case of the passage from the *Apology* discussed in section 2.3 on p. 30 above.

I then turned to the Socratic dialogues of Plato, including but not limited to those already used in the study of the meaning of the word εἰρωνεία and its cognates, as well as the work of Xenophon, to show that Socrates is often verbally ironic, despite claims by scholars such as Wolfsdorf that this is not the case. As part of this analysis I also showed that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge can be taken as ironic, a point which is also often disputed. Furthermore I have shown that there is evidence in Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes and Ameipsias, as well as in at least one other fragment by the Athenian playwright Callias, of a physical irony associated with Socrates. This physical irony finds its expression in Spartan dress and habits and an attitude of superiority for which Socrates became notorious. It is not immediately clear that there is irony in this attitude, as it was common amongst the aristocrats of 5th-century Athens to show a certain affinity for all things Spartan. However, the fact that Socrates was so well known for his extreme austerity is indicative of the fact that his attitude seemed to many an exaggeration,⁸⁵ which is supported by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which states that this kind of understatement, particularly that of Socrates, is excessive.

Following this a short overview of the more pervasive theories of the function of Socratic irony was given, as well as a brief consideration of (primarily) Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's views of Socratic irony, all of which had been taken into account in the sections which followed. For reasons of convenience and form I sub-divided Socratic irony into two categories: verbal irony, which finds its expression in self-deprecation and disavowal of knowledge, and physical irony, which is seen in Socrates' Spartan dress and superior attitude.

The function of verbal irony is first and foremost heuristic. By pretending that he does not know anything Socrates relieves himself of any duty to provide answers to the questions he so persistently asks. This forces the interlocutor to attempt to find the answers for himself. Often this involves Socrates disproving the answer his opponent already thinks he has, in order to convince the latter to rethink his own stance and thereby arrive at a new realisation of deeper meaning/ truth. It does not necessarily mean that Socrates already has a definitive answer for the question he asks, but merely that he has an idea of what that answer might

⁸⁵ Further support for this theory can also be found in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, through the mere fact that Socrates' austerity was so well-known that it could be parodied.

be. This means that Socrates is not only a teacher, but also a student and seeker of truth in this process.

There is however more to Socratic irony than its simple pedagogical function. In physical form Socratic irony becomes more complex; it becomes a political mode of being aimed at those who think themselves part of his circle. Physical irony thus serves a double function: it allows Socrates entry into a group (the aristocrat-oligarchs with whom he was associated) and it allows him then to openly ridicule that same group. Socratic irony is a criticism of the political atmosphere of the 5th century B.C.E., both of democracy, which ended up turning Athens into an empire for much of the latter half of the century, and of oligarchy. Even more than that, Socrates managed to criticise Athens' moral political ambiguity during his lifetime, a criticism aimed at the constant changing of government and laws. Are these the only functions of Socratic irony? Of that I am not sure. What this study has shown is that Socratic irony is more complex, both in nature and function, than is generally allowed for in recent scholarship.

In conclusion to the findings of this thesis, the aim of which was to redefine Socratic irony in such a way that its complexity is more accurately presented, I propose the following definition of Socratic irony:

Socratic irony is a philosophical and political mode of being which finds its expression in self-deprecation, disavowal of knowledge and a physical attitude of austerity and superiority, the purpose of which is to lead its victims to a deeper self-realisation of knowledge and to criticise the status quo, particularly in a political sense.

As a last note, I have argued that at first glance Socratic irony failed in its mission. It never positively states its own views, because it knows that they might be refuted and are subject to change. The Socratic ironist realises that knowledge is built on other knowledge, and its quest is to seek out as much of this knowledge by whatever means possible. As a result the heuristic function of Socratic irony is largely negative and relies on the interlocutor to find positive knowledge on his own. The problem with this strategy is that the Socratic ironist may misunderstand the willingness of his interlocutor to actively seek this positive knowledge. Furthermore the ironist may misjudge the transparency of his ironic words or deeds. For irony to work it relies heavily on the target recognising the irony and 'getting' it. Should the irony be lost on its target it will be unsuccessful in its didactic and political mission. Is this failure a necessary outcome of the method employed? That question has not

yet been answered. It will also be useful to study whether Socratic irony can be fruitful, and what conditions are needed to make it so. This might include a study on whether any other historical figures employed Socratic irony, and to what end. I believe that as a critical tool applied to the world Socratic irony can have its merits. It was an integral part of Socrates' philosophical attitude, and could fulfil the same role for others.

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