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# Socrates

Ironist and  
Moral  
Philosopher

SOCRATIC IRONY<sup>1</sup>

"Irony," says Quintilian, is that figure of speech or trope "in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood" (*contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est*).<sup>2</sup> His formula has stood the test of time. It passes intact in Dr Johnson's dictionary ("mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words" [1755]), and survives virtually intact in ours: "Irony is the use of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, [their] literal meaning" (*Webster's*). Here is an example, as simple and banal as I can make it: a British visitor, landing in Los Angeles in the midst of a downpour, is heard to remark, "What fine weather you are having here." The weather is foul, he calls it "fine," and has no trouble making himself understood to mean the contrary of what he says.

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

A third possible use of irony has been so little noticed<sup>3</sup> that there is no name for it. Let me identify it by ostension. Paul, normally a

<sup>1</sup> Originally written for the B Club of the Classics Faculty of Cambridge University, this essay has been presented and discussed at Cornell (as a Townsend Lecture) and Columbia (at a Trilling Seminar). I thank those whose comments have influenced the essay's present form.

<sup>2</sup> *Institutio Oratorica* 9.22.44. Much the same definition occurs at 6.2.15 and 8.6.54.

<sup>3</sup> The samples in Muecke, 1969: 15–19, several of them perfect gems, include no pure specimen of this variety. Neither in this nor in that other excellent book, Booth, 1974, is this dimension of irony noticed, far less explored.

good student, is not doing well today. He stumbles through a tutorial, exasperating his tutor, who finally lets fly with, "Paul, you are positively brilliant today." Paul feels he is being consigned to the outer darkness. But what for? What has he done that is so bad? Has he been rambling and disorganized, loose and sloppy in his diction, ungrammatical, unsyntactical, ill-prepared, uninformed, confused, inconsistent, incoherent? For which sub-class of these failings is he being faulted? He hasn't been told. He has been handed a riddle and left to solve it for himself. Though certainly not universal, this form of irony is not as rare as one might think. Only from its most artless forms, as in my first example, is it entirely absent. There is a touch of it in the second. Mae West puts us off teasingly from her reasons for declining that gilt-edged invitation. She is implying: "If you are not an utter fool you'll know this isn't my real reason. Try guessing what that might be."

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

This is so basic that a further example may not be amiss. A crook comes by a ring whose stone he knows to be a fake and goes round saying to people he is trying to dupe, "Can I interest you in a diamond ring?" To call this "irony" would be to confess being all at sea about the meaning of the word. Our definition tells us why: to serve his fraud the literal sense of "diamond" has to be the one he intends to convey. To see him using the word ironically we would have to conjure up a case in which he did not have this intention –

say, by his saying to his ten-year-old daughter with a tell-tale glint in his eye, "Luv, can I interest you in a diamond ring?" Now suppose he had said this to her without that signal. Might we still call it "irony"? We might, provided we were convinced he was not trying to fool her: she is ten, not five, old enough to know that if that trinket were a diamond ring it would be worth thousands and her father would not let it out of his sight. If we thought this is what he was about – testing her intelligence and good sense – we could still count it irony: a pure specimen of the riddling variety. It would not be disqualified as such if the little girl were to fail the test, for the remark was not made with the intention to deceive. Similarly, the tutor might have said "brilliant" well aware there was a chance Paul might miss the irony and mistake censure for praise – knowing this and for good reasons of his own willing to take the chance.

Once this has sunk in we are in for a surprise when we go back to the Greeks and discover that the intention to deceive, so alien to our word for irony, is normal in its Greek ancestor *eirōneia*, *eirōn*, *eirōneumai*.<sup>4</sup> The difference is apparent in the first three occurrences of the word in the surviving corpus of Attic texts, all three of them in Aristophanes. In *Wasps* 174, ὡς εἰρωνικῶς refers to Philocleon's lying to get his donkey out of the family compound to make a dicast out of him. In *Birds* 1211, it is applied to Iris for lying her way into the city of the birds. In *Clouds* 449, εἰρων, sandwiched in between two words for "slippery," figures in "a catalogue of abusive terms against a man who is a tricky opponent in a lawsuit."<sup>5</sup> We meet more of the same in fourth-century usage. Demosthenes (*1 Phil.* 7) uses it of citizens who prevaricate to evade irksome civic duty. Plato uses it in the *Laws* (901E) when prescribing penalties for heretics. The hypocritical ones he calls the *eirōnikon* species of the class: for them he legislates death or worse; those equally wrong-headed but honestly outspoken are let off with confinement and admonition. In the *Sophist*, pronouncing Socrates' dialectic a superior form of *sophistikē*,<sup>6</sup> Plato contrasts it with the run-of-the-mill *sophistikē* practiced by ordinary sophists: these are the people he puts into the *eirōnikon* species of the art. Not Socrates, but his arch-rivals, whom Plato thinks imposters, are the ones he calls *eirōnes* (268A–B).

4 On εἰρων as a term of abuse (*Schlingfuort!*) in the classical period see the groundbreaking paper by Ribbeck, 1876: 381ff.; it has not been superseded by the later studies, which I shall not be undertaking to review.

<sup>5</sup> 5 Dover (1968) *ad loc.* in his invaluable edition of the *Clouds*.

6 ἡ ἕνεκα γενεᾶς σοφιστικῆς ("the sophistry of noble lineage"), 321B.

How entrenched in disingenuousness is the most ordinary use of *eirōn* we can see in the picture of the *eirōn* in Aristotle and Theophrastus. Strikingly different though he is in each – odious in Theophrastus, amiable in Aristotle<sup>7</sup> – in one respect he is the same in both<sup>8</sup>: he willfully prevaricates in what he says about himself. Aristotle takes a lenient view of such dissembling in the case of Socrates. Casting him as an *eirōn* Aristotle contrasts him with his opposite, the braggart (*alazōn*), and finds him incomparably more attractive because the qualities he disclaims are the prestigious ones and his reason for disclaiming them – “to avoid pompousness” – is commendable (*N.E.* 1127b23–6), though still, it should be noted, not admirable in Aristotle’s view. When he expresses admiration for Socrates’ personal character he shifts to an entirely different trait: it is for indifference to the contingencies of fate (*apatheia*), not at all for *εἰρωνεία*, that he reckons Socrates “great-souled” (*megalopsuchos*, *Po. An.* 98a16–24; cf. *D.L.* 6.2). In Theophrastus the *eirōn* is flayed mercilessly,<sup>9</sup> portrayed as systematically deceitful,<sup>10</sup> venomously double-faced,<sup>11</sup> adept at self-serving camouflage.<sup>12</sup>

This is how Thrasymachus views Socrates in that famous passage in which he refers to Socrates’ “customary” *εἰρωνεία*:

Τ1 *R.* 337A: “Heracles!” he said. “This is Socrates’ habitual shamming (*εἰωθυῖα εἰρωνεία*). I had predicted to these people that you would refuse to answer and would sham (*εἰρωνεύσοιο*) and would do anything but answer if the question were put to you.”

Thrasymachus is charging that Socrates lies in saying that he has no answer of his own to the question he is putting to others: he most certainly has. Thrasymachus is protesting, but pretends he hasn’t to keep it under wraps so he can have a field-day pouncing on ours and tearing it to shreds while his is shielded from attack. So there is no

7 In the references to Socrates in the *N.E.*, *E.E.*, and *M.M.*, but perhaps not in the *Rhet.*, where *εἰρωνεία* is reckoned a “disdainful” trait (*καταφρονητικόν*, 1379b31–2).

8 The same at the core: *προσοπίστις ἐπὶ τοῖς ἑλλανοῖς* in Aristotle (*N.E.* 1108a22), *προσοπίστεις ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον* in Theophrastus (1.1); affection (or pretense) in either case.

9 “Such men are more to be avoided thanadders” 1, *sub fin.*

10 “He pretends not to have heard what he heard, not to have seen what he saw, to have no recollection of the thing to which he agreed” 1–5.

11 “He will praise to their faces those he attacks behind their backs” (1.2). I find it astonishing that Friedländer (1958: 138) should say that Theophrastus portrays, but “does not evaluate,” *εἰρωνεία*. Could there be a more emphatic devaluation than the remark quoted here and in the preceding notes? By leaving Socrates out of it, Theophrastus feels free to vent on the *εἰρων* the scorn he deserves in the common view.

12 Aristotle too observes that your most dangerous enemies are “the quiet, dissembling, and unscrupulous” (*οἱ πρῶτοι καὶ εἰρῶνες καὶ πενυργοί*), hiding their evil intent under a cool exterior (*Rhet.* 1382b21).

excuse for rendering *εἰρωνεία* here by “irony” (Bloom, Grube, Shorey);<sup>13</sup> if that translation were correct, lying would be a standard form of irony.<sup>14</sup>

From the behavior of *εἰρωνεία* in all of the above Attic texts from Aristophanes to Theophrastus one could easily jump to a wrong conclusion: because it is so commonly used to denote sly, intentionally deceptive speech or conduct throughout this period, *must* it be always so used of Socrates by Plato? This is what many noted Hellenists have assumed: Burnet,<sup>15</sup> Wilamowitz,<sup>16</sup> Guthrie,<sup>17</sup> among them. Let me point out how unsafe this kind of inference would be. From the fact that a word is used in a given sense in a multitude of cases it does not follow that it cannot be used in a sharply different sense in others. Such statistical inferences are always risky. This one is certainly wrong. Consider the following:

T2 *G.* 489D–E: [a] Socrates: “Since by ‘better’ you don’t mean ‘stronger,’ tell me again what you mean. And teach me more gently, admirable man, so that I won’t run away from your school.” Callicles: “You are mocking me (*εἰρωνεύῃς*).”

[b] Socrates: “No, by Zethus, whom you used earlier to do a lot of mocking (*πολλὰ εἰρωνεύουσι*) of me.”<sup>18</sup>

13 Bloom (1968) and Grube (1974) take this to be the sense of *εἰρωνεία* and *εἰρωνεύσοιο*. Shorey too (1930) takes “irony” to be the sense of *εἰρωνεία* (referring to *Smp.* 216E, to be discussed below), but he shifts, without explanation, to “dissemble” for the latter. I suspect he is confused about the meaning of the English word “irony,” taking it to mean “dissembling.”

14 For acceptable translations consult Lindsay, 1935 “slyness”; Cornford, 1945 “shamming ignorance”; Robin, 1936 “feint ignorance”; That “shamming,” “feigning” is the sense should be completely clear from the context.

15 In his note on Plato, *Ap.* 38A1: “The words *εἰρων*, *εἰρωνεία*, *εἰρωνεύουσι* (in Plato) are only used of Socrates by his opponents, and have always an unfavourable meaning.” He is not overlooking *εἰρωνεύουσα* at *Ap.* 38A1; the same sense in Allen’s translation (1984): “You will think that I am being sly and dishonest.” But Burnet is ignoring or “mis-understanding”? both of the notable uses of the word in Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium* (to be discussed below).

16 1948: 451, n. 1: “Wo [die Ironie] dem Sokrates beigelegt wird [im Platon] geschieht es immer als Vorwurf, auch von Alcibiades, *Smp.* 216E.” Neither he nor Burnet (preceding note) takes any notice of Ribbeck’s discussion of *R.* 337A, which captures exactly the sense of *εἰωθυῖα εἰρωνεία* here.

17 “In Plato it retains its bad sense, in the mouth of a bitter opponent like Thrasymachus or of one pretending to be angry at the way in which Socrates deceives everyone as to his real character (Alcibiades at *Smp.* 216E, 218D.” Guthrie, 1969: 446). Guthrie could have added *Ap.* 38A1, *οὐ πιστεύει μοι ὡς εἰρωνεύουσα*. Socrates expects the “command” he gets from the oracle story, and the story itself, to be taken as a dishonest fiction. But Guthrie is taking no notice of *G.* 489D–E (to be discussed directly in the text above); and he assumes that in *R.* 337A *εἰρων* has the same sense as at *Smp.* 216E and 218D.

18 My translation follows Croiset & Bodin, 1935. Woodhead’s “you are ironical” is acceptable in [a] where the mockery is ironical (it takes the form of saying something contrary to what the speaker believes to be true), but not at [b], where this is not the case.

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

No less instructive for my purpose is the following from the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (a treatise of uncertain authorship, probably of the fourth century):<sup>19</sup>

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

At [a] we get nothing new: *eirōneuein* is one of the many tricks of the trade this handbook offers the rhetorician.<sup>20</sup> Not so at [b], as becomes even clearer in his example:

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

The way *χρηστοί* is used here reminds us of the line Aristophanes gives Strepsiades in the opening monologue of the *Clouds*: "this good youth" (ὁ χρηστός οὗτος νεανίας), says the old man of his good-for-

Irwin's "sly" will not do: there is nothing particularly "cunning, wily or hypocritical" (*O.E.D.* for "sly") in the tone or content. We must also reject Ribbeck's understanding of the sense in [a]: inexplicably, he reads "chicanery" into *εἰρωνεύειν*. But there is nothing wrong with his gloss on *εἰρωνεύου* at [b] ("a form of mockery through false, insincere, praise"), rightly connecting the use of *εἰρωνεύειν* here with Pollux 2.78, *καὶ τὸν εἰρωνεύειν ὑπεκτῆρα καλοῦσιν*, and the sillographer Timon's reference to Socrates (*fr.* 23D, *sp.* D.L. 2.19), *ὑπεκτῆρ ῥητορῶν καὶ ὑπαιτιῶν εἰρωνεύτης*. Ribbeck remarks apropos of [b]: "hence the current conception of *εἰρωνεύεσθαι* must have been broader than is usually assumed" (*loc. cit.*). He should have specified more definitely this "wider" use. That *εἰρωνεύεσθαι* can be used to express mockery pure and simple without any insinuation of deceit Ribbeck does not seem to have grasped, else why "chicanery" as the sense at [a]?

<sup>19</sup> Long attributed to Aristotle (included in the Berlin edition of Aristotle's works), it then came to be ascribed to Amasiemus of Lampisacus, a contemporary of Theophrastus (see the introduction by H. Rackham in his translation of it in the Loeb Classical Library, 1973: 258ff.). The ascription is far from certain, but its date cannot be much later. Its linguistic and political ambience is that of fourth-century Athens, echoing Isocrates' *Techne Rhetorikē*. Eight fragments of it turn up in a papyrus dated by its editors in the first half of the third century (Grenfell & Hunt, *Hibeh Papyri* pt. 1, no. 26, pp. 113ff.).

<sup>20</sup> Cope, 1967: 401ff., describes the form of persuasion recommended by the treatise as "a system of tricks, shifts and evasions, showing an utter indifference to right and wrong, truth and falsehood."

nothing son.<sup>21</sup> This is irony of the purest water: mockery without the least intention of deceit.

Can we make sense of this state of affairs? In a mass of Attic texts (eight of those to which I have referred; I could have added many more of the same kind) we find *εἰρωνεία* implying willful misrepresentation; yet in the ninth (T2) we see it standing for mockery entirely devoid of any such connotation and so too in part [b] of the tenth (T3), where a rhetorician who is thoroughly at home in fourth-century Attic usage gives a definition of *εἰρωνεία* which anticipates Quintilian so perfectly that the two definitions are precisely equivalent: each is a description of the same speech-act, viewed from the speaker's point of view in T3[b], from the hearer's in Quintilian. Is this linguistic phenomenon understandable? Yes, perfectly, if we remind ourselves of the parallel behavior of our word "pretending." To say that a malingerer is "pretending" to be sick and a con man "pretending" to have high connections is to say that these people are deceivers: "to allege falsely" is the basic use of to pretend. But there are contexts where "to pretend" by-passes false allegation because it by-passes falsehood, as when we say that the children are "pretending" that their coloured chips are money ("pretend-money" they call them) or that their dolls are sick or die or go to school. In just the same way we could say that the crook in the example is "pretending" that the stone on the trinket is a diamond when he offers it to his daughter, which is as far as anything from his pretending it is a diamond when putting it up to the people he is trying to hook. That the latter should be the most common (and, in point of logic, the primary) use of "pretending" does nothing to block a secondary use of the word, tangential to the first – a subsidiary use which is altogether innocent of intentional deceit, predicated on that "willing suspension of disbelief" by which we enter the world of imaginative fiction in art or play. This is the sense of "pretending" we could invoke to elucidate ironical diction, as in Mae West's remark: we could say she is "pretending" that the length of the journey is her reason for declining, which would be patently absurd if "pretending" were being used in its primary sense. There is no false allegation, because there is no allegation: she is pulling our leg.

<sup>21</sup> Should the reader be reminded that the occurrence of ironical speech-acts is independent of the availability of a description of them as such in the speaker's language? The use of irony, as distinct from reflection on it, is as old as the hills. We can imagine a caveman offering a tough piece of steak to his mate with the remark, "Try this tender morsel." No lack of examples in Homer (Eumaeus to the "beggar": "good repute and virtue I would have among men, if I were to kill you." *Od.* 14.402: he means just the opposite).

This, I suggest, gives a good explanation of the fact that though *eirōn*, *eirōneia*, *eirōneuomai* are commonly used to imply disingenuousness, even so, they are capable of an alternative use which is completely free of such evocation and, *pace* Burnet, Wilamowitz, Guthrie,<sup>22</sup> Dover<sup>23</sup> are so used at times by Socrates in Plato. What happened, I suggest, is this: when εἰρωνεία gained currency in Attic use (by the last third of the fifth century at the latest), its semantic field was as wide as is that of “pretending” in present-day English, and *eirōn* had strongly unfavorable connotations – was used as a term of denigration or abuse – because the first of those two uses predominated heavily over the second; to be called an *eirōn* would be uncomplimentary at best, insulting at the worst. But turn the pages of history some three hundred years – go from Greece in the fourth century B.C. to Rome in the first – and you will find a change which would be startling if long familiarity had not inured us to it. The word has now lost its disagreeable overtones. When Cicero, who loves to make transliterated Greek enrich his mother tongue, produces in this fashion the new Latin word, *ironia*, the import has an altogether different tone. Laundered and deodorized, it now betokens the height of urbanity, elegance, and good taste:

T5 Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.67: Urbana etiam dissimulatio est, cum alia dicuntur ac sentias... Socratem opinor in hac ironia dissimulantiaque longe lepore et humanitate omnibus praestitisse. Genus est perelegans et cum gravitate salsum...<sup>24</sup>

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

<sup>22</sup> See nn. 15, 16, 17 above.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. his gloss on *Smp.* 216E4: “εἰρωνεία (unlike ‘irony’) is ‘mock-modesty’, ‘pretended ignorance’; in *Rep.* 337A Thrasymachus speaks (in no friendly tone) of ‘Socrates’ accustomed εἰρωνεία.” Dover is assuming that εἰρωνεία is used in the same sense in both passages.

<sup>24</sup> “Urbane is the dissimulation when what you say is quite other than what you understand... In this irony and dissimulation Socrates, in my opinion, far excelled all others in charm and humanity. Most elegant is this form and seasoned in seriousness.” Translating *dissimulatio* here by “dissembling” (as we may, with good warrant from the dictionaries), we should bear in mind that *deceitful* concealment, normally conveyed by the English word, is absent from the figure of speech Cicero has in view. Deceitful speech would not be what he calls *urbane* dissimulation, “where the whole tenor of your speech shows that you are gravely jesting (*severe ludens*) in speaking differently from what you think” (*loc. cit.*).

Exactly what made this happen we cannot say: we lack the massive linguistic data to track the upward mobility of the word. What, I submit, we can say is *who* made it happen: Socrates. Not that he ever made an assault upon the word. There is no reason to believe he ever did. In none of our sources does he ever make *eirōneia* the *F* in his “What is the *F*?” question or bring it by some other means under his elenctic hammer. He changes the word not by theorizing about it but by creating something new for it to mean: a new form of life realized in himself which was the very incarnation of εἰρωνεία in that second of its contemporary uses, as innocent of intentional deceit as is a child's feigning that the play chips are money, as free from shamming as are honest games, though, unlike games, serious in its mockery (*cum gravitate salsum*), dead earnest in its playfulness (*severe ludens*), a previously unknown, unimagined type of personality, so arresting to his contemporaries and so memorable for ever after, that the time would come, centuries after his death, when educated people would hardly be able to think of *ironia* without its bringing Socrates to mind. And as this happened the meaning of the word altered. The image of Socrates as the paradigmatic *eirōn* effected a change in the previous connotation of the word.<sup>25</sup> Through the eventual influence of the after-image of its Socratic incarnation, the use which had been marginal in the classical period became its central, its normal and normative use: *eirōneia* became *ironia*.

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

Nothing in Aristophanes. The anti-hero of the *Clouds* is many things to many men, but an ironist to none: too solemn by half as natural philosopher, sage or hierophant, too knavish<sup>26</sup> as a preceptor of the young. Nor is he represented as an ironist in the sideswipe at him in the *Frogs* (1491–9). The portrait is now appreciably different. Outside the thinkery – else the question of an ordinary Athenian

<sup>25</sup> A change so drastic as to eclipse the original meaning of the word from Cicero's and Quintilian's view. The occultation seems total: from what they say about *ironia* we would never guess that in texts they knew well its Greek original had been a *Schlingferst*. The authority of the Socratic paradigm becomes so definitive for Cicero that he is content to understand by the word simply “that *ironia*... found in Socrates, which he deploys in the dialogues of Plato, Xenophon, and Aeschines” (*Brutus* 292). And when Quintilian remarks that “ironia may characterize a man's whole life” he refers to Socrates and only to him (*Inst. Or.* 9.2.46).

<sup>26</sup> Though he does not himself inculcate crooked argument, he panders to the demand for it. He keeps both this and its opposite (the δίκαιος and the ἀδίκος λόγος) on the premises and the customer can have his choice. Cf. Nussbaum, 1980: 48: “Throughout the play Socrates makes no attempt to teach justice and to urge the just use of rhetorical skill. His attitude is at best neutral; at worst he condones deceit.”

picking a seat next to him would not arise – he is no longer a sinister figure. But he is still a quibbler, whose hair-splitting solemnities (ἐπισημοῖσιν λόγοισι καὶ σκαριφημοῖσι λήρων, 1496–7), engulf his interlocutors in tasteless triviality. No hint of irony in this pretentious idler's chatter.

We turn to Xenophon. At first it looks as though neither here shall we find what we are looking for. Through most of the *Memorabilia* this tirelessly didactic, monotonously earnest, Socrates appears to have no more jesting, mocking, or riddling in his soul than the atheistic natural philosopher and "highpriest of subtlest poppy-cock"<sup>27</sup> of the Aristophanic caricature. But once in a while we get a flash of something different,<sup>28</sup> and then, in chapter 11 of book III, we get a big break. Here Socrates turns skittish and goes to pay a visit to the beautiful Theodote.<sup>29</sup> He offers her suggestions to enlarge her clientele and she invites him to become her partner in the pursuit of *philoi*. He demurs, pleading much business, both private and public, and adding:

16 Xenophon, *Mem.* 3.11.16: "I have my own girlfriends (*phitai*) who won't leave me day or night, learning from me philters and enchantments." Since she is meant to see, and does see, that these "girlfriends" are philosophers,<sup>30</sup> depressingly male and middle-aged, there is no question of her being misled into thinking that her visitor has a stable of pretty girls to whom he teaches love-potions. So here at last we do get something Cicero and Quintilian would recognize as *ironia*, though hardly a gem of the genre: its humor is too arch and strained.

After the visit to Theodote, Socrates in the *Memorabilia* resumes his platitudinously wholesome moralizing. But he snaps out of it for good in Xenophon's *Symposium*.<sup>31</sup> There we see what he might have been in the *Memorabilia* if the severely apologetic aims of that work had not toned down the hues of its Socratic portrait to shades of gray. The convivial *mise-en-scène* of the drinking-party prompts Xenophon to paint bright, even garish, colours into the picture. Asked what is that art of his in which he takes great pride he says it is the art of the procurer (*mastropos*, 4.56). Challenged to a beauty-contest by the handsome Criobulus (5.1ff.), he pleads the superior

<sup>27</sup> *Clouds*, 359, in Arrowsmith's (1962) translation.

<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, 1965, notes (58–9 and 64) flashes of irony in the dialogue with Charicles (1.2.36ff.) and Hippias (4.4.6).

<sup>29</sup> Here Kierkegaard's taste, usually faultless, deserts him. He finds the episode "disgusting" (1965: 61–2).

<sup>30</sup> He names Apollodorus and Antisthenes, his inseparables, and also his frequent visitors from Thebes, Gebes and Simmas (3.9.17).

<sup>31</sup> For shrewd appreciation of irony in this work see the comments on the goings-on at the drinking party in Higgins, 1977: 15–20. Full discussion of the same material also in Edelstein, 1935: 11–12, though curiously enough she does not perceive it as irony.

beauty of his own ugliest features – his snub nose, his oversized flaring nostrils – on the ground that useful is beautiful (5.6). Here we see a new form of irony, unprecedented in Greek literature to my knowledge, which is peculiarly Socratic. For want of a better name, I shall call it "complex irony"<sup>32</sup> to contrast it with the simple ironies I have been dealing with in this chapter heretofore. In "simple" irony what is said just isn't what is meant: taken in its ordinary, commonly understood, sense the statement is simply false. In "complex" irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another. Thus when Socrates says he is a "procurer" he does not, and yet does, mean what he says. He obviously does not in the common, vulgar, sense of the word. But nonetheless he does in another sense he gives the word *ad hoc*, making it mean someone "who makes the procured attractive to those whose company he is to keep" (4.57). Xenophon's Socrates can claim he does exactly that. Again, when he says that his flat, pushed-in nose, his protruding eyes, and his large, flaring nostrils are beautiful, he does not, and yet does, mean what he says. In the ordinary sense of the word he would be the first to deny that they are. But if by "beautiful" he were allowed to mean "well made for their required function" (5.4), then he would have us know that his particular sort of eyes and nose are superlatively beautiful: unlike the deep-set ones of fashion-models, his can see sideways, not merely straight ahead; his nose is a more efficient vent than that of the currently admired profile (5.5–6).

Undoubtedly then there is an authentic streak of irony in Xenophon's depiction of Socrates.<sup>33</sup> But for the purpose of assuring us that it was really Socrates who played the critical role in the mutation of *eirōneia* into irony, what Xenophon tells us about Socrates would still be defective in important ways.

In the first place, the ironies Xenophon puts into the portrait have little doctrinal significance. They contribute nothing to the elucidation of Socrates' philosophy because Xenophon systematically ignores those very features of it which Socrates wants to be understood as "complex ironies" of the sort he illustrates in making his hero say he is a procurer and has a charming nose. I mean the

<sup>32</sup> I shall be employing this term here and hereafter throughout the book as a quasi-technical term, harking back to my introduction of it in Vlastos, 1985: rff. at 30.

<sup>33</sup> So it is understandable that Cicero (*Brutus* 292: cf. n. 25 above) should speak of Socratic *ironia* in the dialogues of Xenophon (as well as Aeschines) along with those of Plato. But it is only to the latter that he turns to illustrate it and in doing so it is clear that the Socrates he has in view ("ignorant of everything," *omnium rerum inscius*) could not be the Xenophontic figure, though it could be the Aeschinean: see fr. 1: translated in additional note 1.4 below, and quoted again as r21 in chapter 3), "I had no knowledge through which I could benefit him by teaching it to him."

great philosophical paradoxes of which we hear in Plato's earlier dialogues, like Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and of teaching.<sup>34</sup> Each of these is intelligible only as a complex irony. When he professes to have no knowledge he both does and does not mean what he says. He wants it to assure his hearers that in the moral domain there is not a single proposition he claims to know with certainty. But in another sense of "knowledge," where the word refers to justified true belief—justifiable through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument—there are many propositions he does claim to know.<sup>35</sup> So too, I would argue, Socrates' parallel disavowal of teaching should be understood as a complex irony. In the conventional sense, where to "teach" is simply to transfer knowledge from a teacher's to a learner's mind, Socrates means what he says: that sort of teaching he does not do. But in the sense which *he* would give to "teaching"—engaging would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back—in that sense of "teaching" Socrates would want to say that he *is* a teacher, the only true teacher; his dialogue with his fellows is meant to have, and does have, the effect of evoking and assisting their own effort at moral self-improvement.<sup>36</sup>

In the second place, the words *eirōneia*, *eirōn*, *eirōneuomai* are never applied to Socrates in Xenophon's Socratic writings either by Xenophon himself or by anyone else. If we had only Xenophon's picture of Socrates we would have no reason to think that Socrates' contemporaries had thought of *eirōneia* as a distinctively Socratic trait. That noun and its cognate verb, so conspicuous in Thrasymachus' attack on Socrates in T1 above, drop out when the identical reproach is ventilated by Hippias in the *Memorabilia*. This is how the complaint is now made to read:

T7 Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.9:<sup>37</sup> "We've had enough of your ridiculing others, questioning and refuting everyone, while never willing to render an account yourself to anyone or state your own opinion about anything."

The reference in T1 to Socrates' "habitual *eirōneia*" has been washed out.<sup>38</sup>

34 On these complex ironies and a third, closely associated with them, see additional note 1.1. 35 The textual basis for this claim is set forth in considerable detail in Vlastos, 1985 (at pp. 6–11).

36 He says he is "one of the few Athenians, not to say the only one, to undertake (ἐπιχειρεῖν: cf. additional note 1.1, n. 21) the true political art" (*G.* 521D) in a context in which the criterion for the practice of this art is one's effect on the moral character of one's fellow-townsmen (*G.* 513A). Both texts are discussed in additional note 1.1.

37 Quoted more fully as T25 in chapter 3.

38 Nor does any other of Socrates' interlocutors ever say or imply in Xenophon that Socrates is an εἰρων. He is never represented there as producing on friend or foe the impression he

Fortunately, we have Plato's Socratic dialogues where what Xenophon denies us is supplied in such abundance that to go through all of it would be work for a whole book. Forced to be selective,<sup>39</sup> I shall concentrate on one piece of it—the half dozen pages or so that make up the speech of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*. Despite the provenance of this composition from a dialogue of Plato's middle period, its Socrates is unmistakably the philosopher of the earlier one:<sup>40</sup> he is portrayed as voicing that total disavowal of knowledge<sup>41</sup> which is so striking a feature of the Socrates of the earlier period who, as I shall be arguing in chapter 2, is Plato's re-creation of the historical figure. The discourse of Diotima which Socrates professes to report in his own speech in the *Symposium* is as strong an affirmation of Plato's unSocratic doctrine of transcendent Forms<sup>42</sup> as is anything he ever wrote. But Alcibiades has not heard what Socrates says he learned from Diotima. He joins the drinking-party after Socrates has finished. In the speech about Socrates Alcibiades now proceeds to deliver, the last in the *Symposium*. Plato brings back to life the earlier unPlatonic Socrates as surely as he does also in book I of the *Republic*.<sup>43</sup> He ushers us into the *Republic* through a Socratic portico and escorts us out of the *Symposium* through a Socratic back-porch.<sup>44</sup>

The key sentence in Alcibiades' speech is

T8 *Smp.* 216E4: "He spends his entire life *eirōneuomenos* and jesting with people."

How shall we read *eirōneuomenos*? When Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 9.2.46) remarks that *ironia* may characterize not just a text or a speech but "an entire life" (*vita universa*) Socrates is his only example. So we know how *he* would have read *eirōneuomenos* in the text. But time and again it is read differently by scholars. Guthrie<sup>45</sup> takes it to refer to "the way in which Socrates deceives everyone as to his real character." Dover,<sup>46</sup> assimilating it to T1 above, denying that the word means "irony" here, takes it to refer to Socrates' "pretended ignorance." Suzy Groden translates,

makes on Alcibiades in Plato of being *habitually* and *characteristically* ironical (the sense of εἰρωνικός at T9 below, as I shall be arguing in glossing that text). The people to whom he says in Xenophon's *Symposium* that he is a procurer and has lovely facial features do understand, of course, that he is speaking ironically; but they give no indication of recognizing this as a habitual Socratic trait. 39 But see also section II of chapter 5. 40 The multiple differences between these two periods of Plato's literary output in its portrayal of Socrates will be discussed in chapter 2.

41 216D (= T15 below): "he knows nothing and is ignorant of everything."

42 To be discussed in section III of chapter 2. See especially the gloss on T22 here.

43 See additional note 2.1 ("The composition of *Rep.* 1").

44 Similarly in the *Phaedo* authentic Socratic material is used to introduce (57A–64a) and cap (115A to the end) the no less authentically Platonic philosophical argument of the dialogue. 45 Guthrie, 1969: 146. 46 See n. 23 above.

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

and W. Hamilton,

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

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

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

τ9 *Smp.* 218D6-7: "He heard me out. Then, most *ειρωνικός*, in his extremely characteristic and habitual<sup>47</sup> manner, he said..."

Here Groden and Hamilton translate, respectively,

"He answered in that extremely *ironical* way he always uses [my emphasis], very characteristically."

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

Thus of their own accord both of them give me all I want. Do they realize what they are doing? Do they see that they are welshing on their previous translation of *ειρωνευομενος* in τ8? I don't know and I don't need to know. It suffices that here Plato's text allows no other choice.

Let us recall the context. τ9 comes at the climax of the *pièce de résistance* of Alcibiades' speech: his narration of an episode from his distant youth, when he was still in his "bloom" — that final phase in a boy's transition to manhood, which in that culture marked the peak of his physical attractiveness to males older than himself. The story begins as follows:

τ10 *Smp.* 217A: "Believing that he was seriously smitten by my bloom, I thought it a windfall, a wonderful piece of luck, since by allowing him my favors I would be able to learn from him all he knew."

<sup>47</sup> εἰωθότως, with which cf. εἰωθῶτα εἰρωαεία in τ1 above.

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

(1) As we know from Pausanias' speech in the *Symposium* (218D6-219A), this is the norm (*nomos*) in the higher form of pederastic love: the boy gives "favors," the man gives intellectual and moral improvement.

(2) Alcibiades already had (and knew he had):<sup>48</sup> that asset to which he was to owe throughout his life so much of his unprincipled success: stunning beauty and grace.<sup>49</sup>

(3) We know from other Platonic dialogues<sup>50</sup> and from Xenophon too<sup>51</sup> that Socrates has a high susceptibility to male beauty to which a sexy teenager could hardly have failed to resonate.<sup>52</sup>

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

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

τ11 *Smp.* 216B3-5: "I know that I cannot contradict him and I should do as he bids, but when I am away from him I am defeated by the adulation of the crowd."

There is no reason to think that he was different as a teenager.

Put those five things together and it should not seem strange if a boy who longs to become a "good and noble man" (*kalos kagathos*) should get it into his head that the key to what he wanted was hidden away in the vast, undisclosed store of wisdom in Socrates, who might be induced to slip him the key were he to offer as a *quid pro quo* something as irresistibly attractive to all the men of his acquaintance as was his own superlative "bloom." He pursues the project methodically, going through all the ploys in the current repertoire of

<sup>48</sup> 217A3-6, "I had a wonderful opinion of my bloom."

<sup>49</sup> Cf. W. Ferguson in the *Cambridge Ancient History* v (Cambridge, 1935), 263: "Arrestingly handsome, he received from men in Athens the recognition and privileges ordinarily given in other societies to extraordinary beauty in women; and his insolence he draped in such charm of manner that, when he showed respect for neither gods nor men, age nor authority, guardian nor wife, the outrageousness of the act was often forgotten and only the air of the actor remembered."

<sup>50</sup> *Plt.* 309A; *G.* 481D; *Carm.* 155C-E; *Men.* 76C1-2. <sup>51</sup> *Xen. Smp.* 8.2.

<sup>52</sup> Xenophon (*Mem.* 3.11.3) adds the precious information (which we never get from Plato) that Socrates is also susceptible to female beauty. The sight of the scantily clad Theodote makes Socrates (speaking for himself and his companions) "long to touch what we saw; we shall go away excited, ὑποκινηζόμενοι) and with longing ἰπρόθητομεν."

homosexual seduction.<sup>53</sup> But nothing works. Socrates remains friendly but distant. When Alcibiades wants to hear the sweet nothings of love all he gets is elenctic argument, more of the same old thing. Finally he sets Socrates up and blurts out his proposition. Here is the response he gets:

T12 *Smp.* 218D6–219A1: “He heard me out. Then, most *eirōnikōs*, in his extremely characteristic and habitual manner,<sup>54</sup> he said: “Dear Alcibiades, it looks as though you are not stupid (*phaulos*), if what you say about me is true and there really is in me some power which could make you a better man: you must be seeing something inconceivably beautiful in me, enormously superior to your good looks. If that is what you see and you want to exchange beauty for beauty, you mean to take a huge advantage of me: you are trying to get true beauty in exchange for seeming beauty – “gold for brass”.”

Here, I submit, it is incontestably clear that “ironically” *has* to be the sense of *eirōnikōs*, for the context gives no foothold to the notion of pretence or deceit. Socrates is turning down flat the proposed exchange, saying it is a swindle. He starts off with a simple irony, saying to Alcibiades, “you are not stupid,” when he clearly means: “you *are* stupid, very stupid: what could be more stupid than to think I would fall for a barter of gold for brass?” When such a thing happens in those verses of the *Iliad* he echoes here – Glaucus exchanges his golden armour for one of brass – the poet explains: “Zeus had taken away his wits.”<sup>55</sup> Socrates is saying to Alcibiades: “I would have to be out of my head to buy your proposal; what a fool you must think me, a complete ass, to think that I would let you pull it off.”

He winds up with a “complex”<sup>56</sup> irony:

T13 *Smp.* 219A1–3: “But look more closely, blessed boy, lest you have missed that I am nothing. The mind’s vision grows sharp only when the eyesight has passed its peak, and you are still far from that.”

Alcibiades is told that the “gold” he has been looking for isn’t there after all. If moral wisdom is to be understood – as Alcibiades understands it – as the sort of thing which can be handed over in a swap, Socrates will insist that he has absolutely none: *qua* repository of such wisdom he is “nothing.” To say this is not to deny that he does have wisdom of another sort which Alcibiades could have for free if he would seek it himself, looking to Socrates not as a guru but

<sup>53</sup> Though here the roles are reversed: the boy is chasing, not chased.

<sup>54</sup> This first part of T12 was cited as T9 above.

<sup>55</sup> *Il.* 6.234.

<sup>56</sup> Pp. 31–2 above and additional note. 1.1.

as a partner in the search.<sup>57</sup> To find deception anywhere in this speech we would have to plant it there ourselves: there is not a shadow of the will to mislead in what Socrates has said to Alcibiades most *eirōnikōs*.

Does that settle the sense of *eirōneuomenos* at T8? No. But it does create a presumption that there too the sense is the same: it would be unlikely that *eirōnikōs* would be used as we have now seen it used in T9 if just two Stephanus pages earlier “he spends his entire life *eirōneuomenos*” had carried the thought that Socrates went through life “deceiving everyone as to his real character.”<sup>58</sup> So let us look as closely into the context there – the paragraphs in Alcibiades’ speech which precede immediately the seduction story. They are pursuing the famous simile with which the whole speech had begun:

T14 *Smp.* 215A7–B3: “I maintain that he is very like those Sileni that sit in the workshops of the statuaries... who, when opened into two,<sup>59</sup> turn out to have images of gods inside.”

This is the picture of a man who lives behind a mask – a mysterious, enigmatic figure, a man nobody knows: “You should know that none of you know him” (216C–D), says Alcibiades to Socrates’ friends. To say this is not at all to imply that Socrates has been deceiving them: to be reserved and to be deceitful are not the same thing. All we can get from the simile is concealment,<sup>60</sup> not deceit. Even so, we have to ask if Alcibiades does not insinuate deceit in his own explication of the simile:

T15 *Smp.* 216D2–5: “You see that [a] Socrates is erotically disposed towards beautiful youths, always hanging round them, smitten by them; and again [b] that he knows nothing and is ignorant of everything... Isn’t this like Silenus? Enormously so.”

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Socrates’ behavior in the *Laches*. The moral wisdom he is asked to supply on demand he disclaims strenuously: “he has no knowledge of that thing, nor the ability to judge which of you speaks truly [of it]; he has not been discoverer or learner of anything of the kind” (180b–e). But when Laches offers himself to Socrates for instruction (189c) he is welcomed – not to have knowledge poured into him by someone else, but to join with Socrates in “common counsel and search” *συνβουλεύειν καὶ συζητεῖν* the prefix conveys twice over the cooperative nature of the relation. <sup>58</sup> So Guthrie, 1975.

<sup>59</sup> The image of “opening up” to disclose something infinitely precious, which is concealed from the vulgar view, recurs at 216D6, 218E6, 222A. I see no foundation in any of these texts for Martha Nussbaum’s notion that the image, as used by Plato, is “essentially sexual” (1986: 189). There is profound truth in her thought that in sexual intimacy a unique form of knowledge of the beloved person is acquired: in our desire for it, she remarks, “sexual and epistemological [epistemic] need are joined and, apparently, inseparable” (1986: 190). But Plato’s text gives no warrant for reading this thought into it; Alcibiades is not suggesting to his fellow-drinkers at 216D–E that the real Socrates would be revealed (“opened up”) to him or to them through sexual intimacy.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. my gloss in n. 24 above on *disimulatio* in Cicero’s description of Socratic irony.