

More on Socratic Method

1. Dialectic

1. The words λέγω (*lego*) and διαλέγω (*dialogō*) mean saying, speaking or talking, but also gathering, collecting, or picking out (discerning). (The German verb *lesen* is similarly ambiguous between reading and collecting.) So, διαλεκτική (*dialektikē*) simply means discussion, and dialectic can thus be understood as the art or skill (i.e. *technē*) of rational and logical discussion that aims at truth. (Does this cohere with the scepticism produced by the *elenchus*?)

2. The point of dialectic is to think *philosophically* and methodologically. As such, dialectic does not solve problems, or reveals answers for the typical ‘What-is-F?’ questions; rather, through the dialectical process we become aware of the problem, and through which we approach knowledge—becoming knowers.¹ In contrast, a *sophistic* discussion aims just to shine and score points: it is ‘eristic’, and what we see the dubious debating societies, and in *rhetorical* demonstrations.

3. *Goal*. Refute uncritically held beliefs. As destructive activity, dialectic relates to *elenchus*, i.e. refuting and shaming. But dialectic is positive too: seek to establish propositions of high generality, i.e. not what this *x* is, but what *x* is as such, or in itself, or what *x* truly is. In Platonic terms, the ultimate goal of dialectic is the discovery of *Forms* or *Ideas* (universals).

4. Dialectical tools include *hypothesis*, *collection* (*συναγωγή*, *sūnagōgē*) and *division* (*διαίρεσις*, *diairesis*). (a) For the method of hypothesis: suppose that such and such is the case, what follows, and is this consistent with what was assumed or found earlier (e.g., see *Meno* 86e ff.)? (b) In dividing, a concept is split up and increasingly differentiated; in collecting, the features that are shared by different things are drawn together and subsumed under a unifying concept (e.g., *Phaedrus* 265d–266c, *Sophist* 253b–254a).

2. Midwifery or Maieutics

1. Socrates is of course the son of a midwife (D. L. 2.18). In a famous passage in *Theaetetus* (148e–151d), he compares his philosophical work as midwifery (*ἡ μαιευτικὴ τέχνη*, he *maieutikē technē*).

2. Maieutics suggests that Socrates first enables and then criticises other people’s ideas; *aporia* (see Handout 5) or perplexity is hence analogous to the labour of childbirth.²

3. People cannot be forced to be virtuous or happy; the maieutic process starts where they are, so to speak, and goes where they lead—perhaps to *aporia*. A typical example: Socrates’ argumentative limitations stem from the fact that he works with premises and ideas provided by Polus (e.g., 474c–d). In this sense, Socratic midwifery takes people seriously. At the end of *Theaetetus*, an aporetic

¹ See Jaspers, K. (1976). *Plato*. München: Piper (p. 51).

² Matthews, G. B. (1999). *Socratic Perplexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

dialogue, Socrates tells Theaetetus: “If you try, later on, to become pregnant again with something else, your pregnancy will be better because of our present investigation. And if you remain empty, you will be less burdensome and gentler to your associates, because you will have the sense not to think you know things that in fact you do not know. That much my art can do, but no more, and I do not know any of the things which others know [...]” (210b–c).

4. In an intriguing passage in the *Sophist* (231b), the Eleatic Visitor suggests that the ‘noble’ sophist cleanses the soul insofar as he examines pseudo-wisdom and the mere appearance of knowing. If so, Socrates is a ‘noble’ sophist. Note too that in *Gorgias*, Plato has Socrates talk about the ‘real’ or ‘proper’ rhetor (ὀρθῶς ῥητορικός, orthōs rhētorikos) whose main concern is to make people better—just like the doctor (e.g., 508c).

5. According to the midwife analogy people ‘deliver’ what *they* find, or produce, in themselves. This relates to Plato’s theory of recollection or anamnēsis (ἀνάμνησις): learning amounts to uncovering in oneself, or recovering, what is already there (see *Meno* 81d ff.³, and *Phaedo* 72e–77a). The core idea is that the soul is already informed by general truths when it gets embodied, but this information needs to be recovered. Hence, the theory of recollection is connected to the immortality of the soul and the theory of Forms (for details, see *Phaedo*). But this raises a puzzle: insofar as the philosopher has knowledge of these Forms, Socrates is not a philosopher—perhaps just a dabbler in the way Callicles describes him at 484c–486d?

3. Irony

1. Socrates is famous (and notorious) for using irony. Thrasymachus says, “By Heracles, there it is, Socrates’s accustomed *eirōneia*. I knew it all along, and I told these people in advance that you would be unwilling to answer, that you would *ironize* [εἰρωνεύσοιο] and do anything except give an answer if someone were to ask you a question” (*Republic* 337a). With more irritation, the same is expressed by Callicles in *Gorgias* (e.g., 481b ff., 498e). Both suggest that Socrates merely *feigns* ignorance, and thus teases and mocks his interlocutors. But is this *ironical* in our contemporary sense?

2. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that irony is “the expression of meaning through the use of language which normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous effect; esp. (in earlier use) the use of approbatory language to imply condemnation or contempt.”⁴ For instance: saying that a play was ‘brilliant’ when in fact it was quite dreadful. This view of irony goes back to Quintilian (c. 35–100), and its key here is a sort of *incongruence* or tension. Some scholars suggest that Socrates is the source for the semantic change from the ancient *eirōneia* to our *irony*.⁵ This makes sense, given the amount of shame and shaming—albeit indirectly—in the *Gorgias*.

3 *Meno* 85d: “Without anyone having taught him, and only through questions put to him, he will understand, recovering the knowledge out of himself?”

4 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/99565?result=1&rskey=26bEQa&>

5 Vlastos, G. (1987). Socratic Irony. *The Classical Quarterly*, 37, 79–96.



3. Socrates declares in the *Apology* (37e–38a) that if he said he could not give up philosophy because of his duty to god, the Athenians would think he was ‘pulling their leg’. He means the jury thinks he is ironical. But there is no irony there. For *irony* is not the same as *eirōneia*.⁶

4. The Greek verb *eirōneuomai* (εἰρωνεύομαι) means to deceive, to pretend or feign ignorance, or to dissimulate (dissemble). Congruent with this, in classical Greek drama the *eirōn* is the role of the ‘underdog’, who understates his power or shrewdness, or intentionally depreciates herself, yet still beats the ‘top dog’. An *eirōn* thus aims to deceive, or to conceal something by feigning. When Strepsiades lists the abuse he will get for being a student at Socrates’s *Thinkery* in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, ‘*eirōn*’ can be rendered as ‘dissembler’ (l. 449). Thus *eirōneia* has pejorative overtones relating to dishonesty, insincerity, deception, and pretence.⁷ Three speakers call Socrates an *eirōn*: Alcibiades (*Symposium*, 216e), Thrasymachus (*Republic*, 337a), and Callicles (*Gorgias*, 489e).⁸

5. Aristotle discusses the *alazōn* and the *eirōn* in some detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (4.7). Both are *pretenders*: one pretends to be more than he is, the other to be less than he is. Between the two (cf. the mean) is the sincere person. Perhaps inconsistently, Aristotle says, “self-deprecating people, because they play down their qualities, appear to have more attractive characters. For they seem to speak, not for gain, but in order to avoid pomposity. And it is especially qualities held in esteem that they disclaim, as Socrates used to do.” (*NE*, 1127b23–26; transl. R. Crisp).⁹

6. So, *what is Socratic Irony?* It is complicated. If we think of ‘Socratic irony’ in terms of *eirōneia*, Socrates intentionally conceals something. But this seems wrong, for he constantly reminds us about it; and he seems sincere about his lack of knowledge (e.g., *Apology* 20d ff., *Meno* 80c, *Theaetetus* 150c–d, *Gorgias* 488a). Or is Socrates aware of knowing something when he says the does not, wanting the audience to think or suspect he knows when he explicitly says otherwise? That is, is he *ironical in our sense*? There is little textual evidence to suggest that Socrates knows the answers to his ‘What-is-F-ness’ questions, and would thus be inconsistent in his regular proclamations to the contrary. He would be disingenuous too—a proper imposter just like the sophists whom

6 Lane, M. (2011). Reconsidering Socratic Irony. In D. R. Morrison (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates* (pp. 237–59). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 Theophrastus (Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum): “Dissembling [*eirōneia*], generally speaking, is an affectation, whether in word or action, intended to make things seem other than they really are. The dissembler is a man, for instance, who accosts his enemies and engages readily in talk with them, to show that he bears no grudge, and who praises to their faces the very men he slanders behind their backs; and when these lose a suit at court, he professes sympathy for their misfortune” (*Characters*).

8 The other two stock roles in Greek theatre are the *alazōn* (ἀλαζών), the imposter, or conceited braggart; and the *bōmolochos* (βωμολόχος), the buffoon with foul-mouthed and crude wit.

9 For discussion of this passage, see Gooch, P. W. (1987). Socratic Irony and Aristotle’s “Eiron”: Some Puzzles. *Phoenix*, 41, 95–104.

Plato charges with being *eirōnes*, who merely mimic and imitate truth, reality, and being (cf. *Sophist*).

7. So, the point is perhaps that both *eirōneia* and irony serve a didactical purpose, and thus complement midwifery (*maieutics*), *aporia*, dialectic, and the *elenchus*: *eirōneia* emphasises the centrality of making others think for themselves, perhaps by keeping them alert and attentive, perhaps by reminding them to retain a healthy distance to the discussion; while irony (e.g., excessive flattery, see, e.g., *Gorgias* 487a; remember that rhetoric is *defined* as flattery, 463b!) is a rhetorical strategy to engage a smug discussion partner—the *alazōn*—in the dialectical process at all.¹⁰

7. Yet, *irony* in our modern sense is evident too, e.g., when Socrates's hints at Euthyphro's intelligence, or when he praises Anytus, who 'did not become rich by accident or as the result of a gift [...], but through his own wisdom and efforts', and 'did not seem to be arrogant or puffed up or offensive citizen, but he was a well-mannered and well-behaved man' (*Meno*, 89e–90a). Crucial for *irony* in the Socratic dialogues is the *dramatic context* and an informed audience who can spot a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. To Plato's readers a passage often looks ironical; and while Socrates's partners often get the *eirōneia*, they may not get the irony. This makes it even more ironical in *our* sense.

10 Hence, in the *Apology* passage in §3, what Socrates means is this: he cannot and will not give up philosophy (for this is a service to god), but he thinks the jury believes he says this only in order to exculpate himself from the charge of impiety. That is, he thinks they think he pretends. Read in this way, this is not ironical, but '*eirōnical*'. Pointing this out may thus underline his sincerity.

