

Socratic Method III: Irony

Introduction. Socrates is famous (and notorious) for using irony: but what this means is puzzling. For instance, when Socrates declares in the *Apology* that he could not give up philosophy because of his duty to god, the Athenians would not believe him and think he was ‘pulling their leg’ (37e–38a). The Greek text uses the word ‘*εἰρωνευομένῳ*’ (*eirōneuomenô*), which relates to *εἰρωνεία* (*eirōneia*), which in turn is the root of ‘irony’. So the passage might suggest that Socrates means the jury thinks he is ironical. But there is no irony there. For *irony* is not the same as *eirōneia*.¹

The Greek. The Greek verb *εἰρωνεύομαι* (*eirōneuomai*) means to deceive, to pretend or feign ignorance, or to dissimulate (dissemble). Thus *eirōneia* has pejorative overtones that relate to dishonesty, insincerity, deception, and pretence.

The ‘eirōn’. 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* is someone who knows more than she says and thus aims to deceive; she conceals something by feigning. When Strepsiades lists the abuse he will get for being a student at Socrates’s ‘Thinkery’ in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, *eirōn* is rendered as ‘dissembler’ (l. 449). Three speakers call Socrates an *eirōn*: Callicles (*Gorgias*, 489e), Thrasymachus (*Republic*, 337a), and Alcibiades (*Symposium*, 216e). The other two stock roles are the *alazōn* (*ἀλαζών*), the imposter, or conceited braggart; and *bōmolochos* (*βωμολόχος*), the buffoon with foul-mouthed and crude wit.

Understatement. 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).²

Socratic eirōneia. Here is an example from *Republic*, when 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’ (337a). The point: Socrates merely feigns ignorance. The same theme, with more irritation, is expressed by Callicles in *Gorgias* (e.g.,

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

2 For discussion of this passage, see Gooch, P. W. (1987). Socratic Irony and Aristotle’s “Eiron”: Some Puzzles. *Phoenix*, 41, 95–104. Theophrastus (Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum) was less flattering: “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*).

481b ff.). Hence the impression of teasing and mockery.

Modern Meaning. Today, ‘irony’ means not quite the same. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says 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.”³ This understanding of irony goes back to Quintilian (c. 35–100). Some scholars suggest that the semantic change from *eirōneia* to *irony* is due to Socrates.⁴

Socratic Irony. Yet, *irony* in the modern sense is evident in Plato too, e.g., when Socrates’s hints at Euthyphro’s intelligence (e.g., 5a–b; 15e–16a). But crucial for *irony* in the Socratic dialogues is the dramatic context and the informed audience, for only then there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. While Plato’s readers can interpret a passage as ironical; and while Socrates’s partners often get the *eirōneia*, they do not get the irony. Here is an example to bring this out: “And now, Meno, Anytus [i.e. one of Socrates’s accusers] here has opportunely come to sit down by us. Let us share our search with him. It would be reasonable for us to do so, for Anytus, in the first place, is the son of Anthemion, a man of wealth and wisdom, who did not become rich by accident or as the result of a gift [...], but through his own wisdom and efforts. Moreover, he did not seem to be arrogant or puffed up or offensive citizen, but he was a well-mannered and well-behaved man. He also gave our friend here a good upbringing and education, as the majority of Athenians believe, for they are electing him to the highest offices. It is right then to look for the teachers of virtue with the help of men like him [...].” (*Meno*, 89e–90a)

Puzzle: What is Socratic Irony? It is complicated. If we think of ‘Socratic irony’ in terms of *eirōneia*, then Socrates intentionally conceals something. Does he merely pretend his ignorance? No: he constantly reminds us about it; and he seems sincere about his lack of knowledge (cf. *Apology*, 20d ff.). Or does he conceal the fact that he knows after all? No: there is no textual evidence that Socrates knows the answer to his *What-is-F-ness* questions. So it would seem incongruent; and perhaps *ironical*: saying something with the opposite meaning. Read in that way, this suggests that Socrates is aware of knowing something when he says the does not, and he wants the audience to think or suspect he knows when he says otherwise. Again, this is barely consistent with his regular proclamations to the contrary; and he would be disingenuous—a proper imposter just like the sophists whom Plato charges with being *eirōnes*, who merely mimic and imitate truth, reality, and being.⁵ So, what is the point? Perhaps, both *eirōneia* and *irony* serve a didactical purpose, and thus complement midwifery (*maieutics*) and the *elenchus*: *eirōneia* emphasises the centrality of making the other think for themselves, and *irony* (e.g., excessive flattery) is a rhetorical strategy to engage the smug discussion partner—the *alazōn*.⁶

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

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

5 Intriguingly, this passage in the *Sophist* suggests that Socrates is a true or proper sophist (231b).

6 So in the initial *Apology* passage, 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’.

