

Is Socrates' Irony Ironical?

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). The same theme, with more irritation, is expressed by Callicles in *Gorgias* (e.g., 481b ff.). Both suggest that Socrates merely *feigns* ignorance, and thus teases and mocks his interlocutors. But is this *ironical* in our current 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.”¹ For instance: saying that a play was ‘brilliant’ when in fact it was quite dreadful. The key here is a sort of *incongruence* or tension. This view of irony goes back to Quintilian (c. 35–100). Some scholars suggest that Socrates is the source for the semantic change to our *irony* from the ancient *eirōneia* (εἰρωνεία).²

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 not believe him and think he was ‘pulling their leg’. 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*.³

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* is rendered as ‘dissembler’ (l. 449). Thus *eirōneia* has pejorative overtones relating to dishonesty, insincerity, deception, and pretence.⁴ Three speakers call Socrates an *eirōn*: Alcibiades (*Symposion*, 216e), Thrasymachus (*Republic*, 337a), and Callicles (*Gorgias*, 489e). The other two stock roles are the *alazōn* (ἀλαζών), the imposter, or conceited braggart; and the *bōmolochos* (βωμολόχος), the buffoon with foul-mouthed and crude wit.

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

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

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

4 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*).

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).⁵

6. *What is Socratic Irony?* It is complicated. If we think of ‘Socratic irony’ in terms of *eirōneia*, Socrates intentionally conceals something. But does he merely pretend his ignorance? No: he constantly reminds us about it; and he seems sincere about his lack of knowledge (e.g., *Theaetetus* 150c–d). Or does he conceal the fact that he knows after all? 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? The textual evidence does not suggest that Socrates knows the answers to his ‘What-is-F-ness’ questions, and it is inconsistent with his regular proclamations to the contrary. 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 (cf. *Sophist*). So, what is the point? Perhaps, both *eirōneia* and *irony* serve a didactical purpose, and thus complement midwifery (*maieutics*), *aporia*, dialectic, and the *elenchus*:⁶ *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) is a rhetorical strategy to engage the smug discussion partner—the *alazōn*.⁷

7. Yet, *irony* in the modern sense is evident in Plato 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). 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. To Plato’s readers a passage often looks ironical; but while Socrates’s partners often get the *eirōneia*, they do not get the irony. This makes it even more ironical in *our* sense.

8. Two *Theaetetus* passages for further discussion: 161a–b, 201a–b.

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

6 There are many allusions to method in the refutation of Protagoras at *Theaetetus* 161–167.

7 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 hence underline his sincerity.

