Is Socrates’ Irony Ironical?

1. Socrates is famous (and notorious) for using irony. Thrasyllus says, “By
Heracles, there it is, Socrates’s accustomed eirôneia. I knew it all along, and I
told these people in advance that you would be unwilling to answer, that you
would eironize [ἐιρωνεύσω] 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.” 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 eirôneia (ἐιρωνεία).

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 eirôneia.

4. The Greek verb eirôneuomai (ἐιρωνεύομαι) means to deceive, to pretend
or feign ignorance, or to dissimulate (dissemble). Congruent with this, in
classical Greek drama the eirôn is the role of the ‘underdog’, who understates
his power or shrewdness, or intentionally depreciates herself, yet still beats the
‘top dog’. An eirôn thus aims to deceive, or to conceals something by feigning.
When Strepsiades lists the abuse he will get for being a student at Socrates’s
Thinkery in Aristophanes’s Clouds, eirôn is rendered as ‘dissembler’ (l. 449).
Thus eirôneia has pejorative overtones relating to dishonesty, insincerity,
deception, and pretense. Three speakers call Socrates an eirôn: Alcibiades
(Symposion, 216e), Thrasymachus (Republic, 337a), and Callicles (Gorgias,
489c). The other two stock roles are the alazôn (ἀλαζῶν), the impostor, or
conceited braggart; and the bômolochos (βομολόχος), the buffoon with foul-
mouthed and crude wit.

---

1 http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/99565?result=1&rskey=26bEQA&.
4 Theophrastus (Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum): “Dissembling [ειρωνεία], 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).

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*).

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.


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.