

AGAINST VLASTOS ON COMPLEX IRONY*

At a point not long after Anytus has been introduced in Plato's dialogue, *Meno*, we learn two things in particular: (i) that good and virtuous men often have despicable sons, despite their efforts to give them the finest educations (91a–95a), and (ii) that public affairs are not governed by knowledge; Athenian statesmen and those who elect them are ignorant even though they sometimes might get lucky and rule by true opinion (96d–99d).

Now if we glance backwards a bit at the dramatic scene just as Anytus is being introduced, we hear Socrates say this:

Let us share our search with (Anytus); naturally we should share it. For Anytus here is, first of all, the son of a wealthy and wise father, Anthemion, who acquired his wealth, not automatically nor as a gift from someone ... but through his own wisdom and care. And furthermore, in other matters, he seemed not to be an arrogant citizen nor egotistical nor annoying, but rather a well-ordered and well-behaved man. Then he raised and educated quite well Anytus here, as it seems to most Athenians: they choose him to fill the highest offices (89e10–90b3).

This clearly represents an ironic moment within the dramatic context of Plato's dialogue, and yet just such a case as this is not captured by Gregory Vlastos' conception of 'complex irony',¹ even though his work on this issue has come to be the definitive word on Socratic irony for many Plato scholars in recent years.

Vlastos' notion of complex irony is not complex enough; it is fundamentally incomplete because it fails to recognize the dramatic context in which Socratic irony is situated. Using examples from the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* to illustrate the points I wish to make regarding the shortcomings of Vlastos' concept of complex irony, I shall argue and illustrate why and how a broader conception of Socratic irony, which attempts to understand it as an integral part of a drama, is more complete and therefore preferable.

Vlastos begins his work with a conception of irony against which he will position his own view of Socratic irony:

'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*). 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' (*Websters*).²

Vlastos then moves to redefine Socratic irony as complex irony. He says, 'In "simple" irony what is said is simply not what is meant. In "complex" irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant.'³ Vlastos' definition does capture some Socratic irony, and it improves upon the oversimplified definitions he begins with, but even this definition is too simple to tell the entire story.

One of the main weaknesses of Vlastos' definition is that it views irony as limited to language proper, i.e. 'things said', as opposed to, for example, how something is

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¹ First published as, 'Socratic Irony', *CQ* 37 (1987), 79–96. Later published as Chapter 1 in Vlastos' *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cornell, 1991). All references contained here are to Professor Vlastos' book. ² *Op cit.*, p. 21. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

said or by whom or in what context. Most of the time, what we perceive as ironic, on Socrates' part, is so in the context of complex drama. We know the characters involved, we know what actions and discussions have preceded or will follow the remark or incident, we know the topic at hand, we know historical and social background, and so on. I would like to redefine a kind of irony which encompasses all of these things and so incorporates elements of the dramatic context as essential to Socratic irony.

Following Vlastos' example, I too will begin by looking at a dictionary definition.

1: a pretense of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the other's false conceptions conspicuous by adroit questioning—called also Socratic irony. **2a:** the use of words to express something other than and esp. the opposite of the literal meaning. **b:** a usu. humorous or sardonic literary style or form characterized by irony. **c:** an ironic expression or utterance. **3a:** (1): incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result. (2): an event or result marked by such incongruity. **b:** incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play—called also dramatic irony, tragic irony. **4:** an attitude of detached awareness of incongruity.⁴

None of these definitions by itself captures the full range of Socratic irony for various reasons. The first definition evokes Socrates' name, but it is insufficient. It is not at all clear that Socrates' claims of ignorance are pretended, and Vlastos and I would agree in rejecting this definition of Socratic irony for that reason. Vlastos preserves the ambiguity of Socrates' claims to ignorance; these claims are meant and not meant. He recognizes that to resolve the paradox of Socratic ignorance by oversimplifying the case will not do; we can not do justice to Socratic ignorance by saying that it is merely pretence. For example, to Meno's astonishment, Socrates admits that he does not know what virtue is and, moreover, that he has not met anyone else whom he believed to know either (71a–c). As the dialogue progresses Socrates delineates the best position from which to learn—from an awareness and perhaps an understanding of one's ignorance. The dialogue *Meno* helps the reader to get an inkling of the importance of Socrates' professed ignorance as the starting point for the life of inquiry. Better known are perhaps Socrates' claims to ignorance in the *Apology*, and in that context we get enough of an explanation from Socrates to understand the seriousness of his claims (21a–22e). While he is wise in that he recognizes his ignorance, we must take his professed ignorance seriously. Certainly there are beliefs to which Socrates is committed, and he is most often far ahead of his interlocutors in their investigations. But the entire way of life described in the *Apology* and lived by the character in Plato's dialogues would be something quite different if there weren't a genuine aspect to the ignorance Socrates avows. Socratic ignorance is an epistemic, moral, and pedagogical stance which must be taken seriously. This definition of irony, even though it invokes the name of Socrates, is therefore unsatisfactory because Socrates' ignorance, while ironic by Vlastos' definition as well as the definition I will formulate later, is not simply pretended.

While Vlastos and I would agree in rejecting this first definition of irony on account of its lack of ambiguity, I would reject it for yet another reason which Vlastos would not. I reject a conception of Socratic irony which accepts knowledge disavowal as constitutive of that irony, a conception that Socratic irony is paradigmatically about

⁴ Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA, 1980), p. 606. Vlastos gives a less detailed entry from the dictionary, one which highlights the most simple definition here—2(a)—but excludes the relevant introduction of dramatic context into the notion of irony as in 3(a) and 3(b). I shall have more to say about the significance of this omission in what follows.

knowledge (and teaching) disavowals. Vlastos implicitly accepts such a conception of Socratic irony insofar as he has it in mind to explain what he takes to be the core of Socratic philosophy, namely, Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and of teaching.⁵ The first of the dictionary definitions shows that this conception of Socratic irony as knowledge disavowal is common.⁶ I argue that Socratic irony is much more widespread in the dialogues than just occurrences of knowledge disavowals, so the definition would fail on account of its narrow focus as well. While I would certainly include these disavowals and other self-disparaging remarks among Socratic ironies, Socratic irony comprises much more than these instances. While complex irony provides a better framework for understanding of Socrates' knowledge disavowals, it needlessly narrows our focus on what constitutes Socratic irony.

Definition 2(a), saying one thing in order to express the opposite (the concept of simple irony which Vlastos rejects), does describe the occasion, for example, when Socrates calls an obviously ignorant and obstinate interlocutor 'wise'.⁷ But again this is too limited, and Vlastos' definition shows clearly how and why it is too limited a definition of Socratic irony. But even Vlastos' improvement on this definition does not go far enough.

The shortcomings of Vlastos' conception of complex irony become evident when we consider the third dictionary definition.⁸ The third definition gets at an important element in Socratic irony—the dramatic element.⁹ I mean here dramatic in its broadest sense: occurring within the context of drama and understood in that context. I do not mean to accept definition 3a or 3b as fully descriptive of Socratic irony, but these definitions help to get at an essential element in the definition I will formulate below. Often dramatic irony is synonymous with tragic irony, and I do not necessarily mean to limit myself to that understanding of dramatic irony either. It is strange that Vlastos, while citing *Webster's Dictionary* at the beginning of his own work on irony, neglects to mention any entry which refers specifically to dramatic irony, given that his focus is Plato's dialogues. Vlastos does not take fully into consideration the dramatic form of Socratic irony, but its dramatic context is essential to get a full understanding of Socratic irony.

I shall make the same kinds of disclaimers which many make who write about irony: to attempt an exhaustive definition is nearly an impossible task.¹⁰ I want to

⁵ Op cit., pp. 31–2. Vlastos rejects Xenophon as an authentic historical source for the philosophical doctrine of the historical Socrates because his work does not contain the kind of complex ironies embodied in disavowals of knowledge and teaching.

⁶ D. C. Muecke also implies such a conception of Socratic irony when, in referring to several types of irony, he enumerates among them 'the self-disparaging irony of a Socrates' (*The Compass of Irony* [London, 1969], p. 44). The wording here implies that Socratic irony is essentially self-disparaging, and while Socrates does engage in such behaviour often, he does so most famously in his disavowals of knowledge. The examples which Vlastos gives are all of the self-disparaging type of irony as well: op cit., pp. 31–2. See also Paul W. Gooch who works from this conception of Socratic irony in 'Irony and Insight in Plato's *Meno*', *Laval Theologique et Philosophique* 43 (1987), 189–201, esp. p. 193.

⁷ See for example *Euthyphro* 9b, 12a, 14d, 16a; *Meno* 70b; *Gorgias* 461d, 486e–487a.

⁸ Definitions falling under 2(b) and 2(c) depend upon how we end up defining 'irony' since they include 'irony' in the definition, so I shall omit discussion of these.

⁹ For fuller discussions of the history of such forms of irony and the word *εἰρωνεία*, see Muecke, op cit. (n. 6), pp. 47ff.; and Vlastos, op. cit., Chapter One. Muecke holds the representative view of *εἰρωνεία* as 'deception' which Vlastos seeks to modify.

¹⁰ E.g., Muecke opens his book with the words: 'Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could,' op. cit., p. 3. Wayne C. Booth admits that 'the problem of definition is by no means a simple one,' and notes several of the best attempts, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1975), p. 1.

sketch a working definition: irony is an incongruity between phenomena within a dramatic context. The incongruity can be between things said, between actions taken, between words and actions, between what is said and how it is said or to whom or on what occasion, between what one says and what one looks like, between one's actions and the meaning of one's name, and so on. I choose incongruity because it allows the latitude necessary for understanding irony in a more complex and subtle manner than either (a) saying one thing but meaning another or (b) both meaning and not meaning what is said. Actions, behaviour, modes of expression, thoughts, and words can all be incongruous. But only 'things said' are encompassed in the above two descriptions of irony. Moreover, we can only come to understand why things are ironic by examining an entire dialogue. The elements of Socratic irony are always incongruous *within a dramatic context*.¹¹

I should like to examine a few representative examples from *Meno* and *Protagoras* for which Vlastos' definition of complex irony is insufficient, but which fit my broader definition, because they include elements of incongruity understood within a dramatic context. Let us return to the example from the *Meno* which opens the paper. This seemingly complimentary introduction of Anytus becomes ironic only in light of the later discussions of whether good men can pass their virtue on to their own sons and what the difference is between knowledge and true opinion, especially with regard to Athenian public affairs. Only with these discussions as background (or foreground) can we see the irony of praising Anytus' father and saying that Anytus is popular as a statesman. There is an incongruity in such praise which is revealed only by the dramatic context.

Contrary to Vlastos' definition, it would be difficult to make the case that Socrates means and does not mean that Anthemion is a good man or that Anytus is a popular statesman. It seems wrong to claim that Socrates would not mean that Anthemion was a good man. It is essential for the point he later makes—and for the irony to be expressed—that Anthemion be a good man, unequivocally. Likewise with the claim that Anytus is popular among Athenian citizens; Anytus simply is popularly elected by Athenians. The source of the irony lies elsewhere: in incongruity. The passage is ironic because of the dramatic incongruity between praising someone's father and then pursuing a line of argument in the abstract which establishes that even the best fathers have failed to make their sons virtuous men. Similarly the passage is ironic because of the dramatic incongruity between praising someone's popularity and then pursuing a line of argument that those to whom one owes one's popularity are ignorant. Furthermore, the ideas are pursued with a man who is known to Plato's audiences to be at least partially responsible for Socrates' execution at the hands of the Athenian state. In order for these passages to be ironic the initial thoughts must be unequivocally expressed by Socrates, so Vlastos' definition proves unsatisfactory.

Let us take another example from the *Meno*. The dialogue portrays initially a self-confident Meno who makes several attempts to define virtue. After failing in his attempts Meno becomes frustrated and angry with Socrates, balking at further

¹¹ Charles L. Griswold, Jr., defines irony similarly: '... (A) doubling of meaning occurs, which is made visible by a tension, incongruity, or contradiction between aspects of a discourse, between the context and the discourse (e.g. between the deeds and words), or between different views expressed by the same person. Irony is a way of speaking (or writing) which is meant to point to what is not spoken (or written), to what is silent and is kept in reserve, as it were, by its originator', in 'Irony and Aesthetic Language in Plato's Dialogues', in D. Bolling (ed.), *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume Three in the Art and Philosophy Series (New York, 1987), pp. 71–99, at pp. 78–9. Parenthetical qualifications are Griswold's. Cf. Muecke, op. cit. (n. 6): 'Irony is the art of saying something without really saying it', p. 5.

participation in dialectic. He goes so far as to propose the paradox which threatens to end their inquiry—that inquiry is not possible since one can never find what one is looking for; one either already knows it and therefore need not look, or one does not know it and will therefore not know it even if one comes upon it. In order to show Meno that learning is possible, Socrates engages Meno's slave in a small demonstration in which the slave, beginning from a realization of his ignorance, 'learns' geometric fundamentals about the area of a square. Socrates claims, and Meno agrees, that it is a good thing that the slave has realized his ignorance, since if he hadn't, he might have given many speeches before large audiences, lecturing that if we double the length of the side of a square we double its area (84b9–c2). This claim is ironic but, just as in the previous case, it is certainly not sufficient nor even accurate to say that Socrates both does and does not mean that the slave is fortunate to have been saved from giving such speeches. It is clear to us and to Meno that an uneducated Athenian slave would never have given such speeches, nor would he ever have had such an opportunity. What makes this claim ironic is its dramatic context. Using nearly identical language, Meno made a claim earlier in the dialogue that he had given many fine speeches before many people about virtue (80b1–4).¹² The irony of this situation stems from the subtle way in which Socrates brings Meno's very own words back to him in a context which clearly makes Meno look ridiculous. The words Meno originally introduced as a boast are turned into an insult—an incongruity. Meno's giving speeches about virtue is just as ridiculous as the slave's lecturing that one doubles the area of a square by doubling the length of its sides. It is in no way sufficient to explain the irony by saying that Socrates both meant and did not mean that the slave would give many fine speeches.

Throughout the *Protagoras* sophistry and dialectic are juxtaposed; Protagoras practises, instructs in, and even baits with, the former, and Socrates continually attempts to cajole Protagoras into entering into dialectical question and answer, even giving him his choice of which role—questioner or answerer—he would like to take on. Protagoras eventually seems to accede to Socrates' wishes, taking on the role of questioner (338e). But what seems to begin as question and answer between Socrates and Protagoras turns out to be something quite different. In short order Socrates indulges Protagoras' challenge to engage in analysis of poetry, and he gives a grandiose demonstration of the sophists' art himself. Socrates beats Protagoras at his own game, and after all his interpretive gymnastics, he claims that none of what he has said is disputable anyway (347e6–7). All along, and in strong language after his analysis (347b8–348a9), Socrates is pushing to get away from such eristic and to return to dialectic conversation, question and answer.

These passages are heavily laden with irony, but Vlastos' definition will again fail to explain fully why. Protagoras' seeming acquiescence in Socrates' dialectic gives way to the dialogue's longest sophistic speech, given by, of all people, Socrates. Moreover, Socrates uses the method Protagoras championed, to seem to win the challenge of unravelling the poem only to demonstrate that both the method and goal are useless.¹³ Socrates' analysis is ironic because of the manner in which he chooses to speak, because of the incongruity between his consistent position against sophistic throughout the dialogue and his utter command of its use in this passage. The irony

¹² Compare Meno at 80b2–4: *καίτοι μυριάκις γε περί ἀρετῆς παμπόλλους λόγους εἴρηκα καὶ πρὸς πολλούς, καὶ πάνν εὖ, ὡς γε ἑμαυτῷ ἐδόκουν*, with Socrates at 84b11: *... τότε δὲ ῥαδίως ἂν καὶ πρὸς πολλούς καὶ πολλάκις ᾤετ' ἂν εὖ λέγειν...*

¹³ He ends his analysis by telling the gathering of sophists that there is no value in poetry analysis, and that it is an activity beneath any self-respecting men (*καλοὶ κάγαθοί*, 347d3).

is no longer about 'things said', but rather about the mode of expression. We cannot say properly here that Socrates means and does not mean his sophistic mode of expression; it does not make sense.¹⁴ What makes the passage ironic is how Socrates chooses to express himself and in what dramatic context that expression occurs.

Definition 3(b) above speaks of dramatic irony as being something of which the audience is aware, but of which the players are not. I want also to improve upon this understanding of irony when it is Socratic irony. There is an historical component to Vlastos' thesis regarding complex irony. Not only does he wish to redefine Socratic irony as complex irony, he also wants to argue that the historical Socrates is responsible for a shift in the meaning of *εἰρωνεία*. Before Socrates it means little more than 'deception' and has largely a negative connotation. In the person of Socrates, Vlastos argues, *εἰρωνεία* becomes, more positively, something closer to our present understanding of 'irony'.¹⁵ Gottlieb, in her brief response to Vlastos, zeroes in on this issue.¹⁶ Contrary to Vlastos' historical thesis, she suggests that the meaning of *εἰρωνεία* did not, in fact, shift from 'deception' to 'irony' in the person of the historical Socrates. Rather the phenomenon which Vlastos observes in Plato's dialogues can be explained in another manner. While stressing the dramatic nature of the dialogues as I do, Gottlieb argues that there were outsiders and insiders involved as 'audiences' to the dialogues. The insiders enjoy 'the wit and humour of Socrates' remarks' but 'for the outsider, however, irony remains as tricky and deceptive as it ever was'. She concludes, 'Irony has not changed. It is just that one's view of irony depends on whether or not one is its butt. In short, Socratic irony, like irony in general, is even more complex than Professor Vlastos allows.' So what is deception for the outsider is irony for the insider. For the most part I agree with Gottlieb's succinct criticism of Vlastos' position. But this type of definition [3(b) above] which relies on a distinction between insiders and outsiders, or players and audience, might need some further revision. The previous example of Meno and his 'many fine speeches' illustrates that need clearly. In that case one function of Socratic irony is to get the interlocutor to come to some realization about himself. He is supposed to become aware of the irony if Socratic questioning and engagement are to do their work. While dramatic irony is often at someone's expense, it need not exclude those within the dramatic setting from being insiders. There are some cases in which irony functions to change the cognition of its object—or butt, as Gottlieb calls it—from outsider to insider, from not getting the irony to getting it. If Socrates is successful, Meno 'gets it' even though he is its butt. We can take this reasoning one step further. The function of irony need not exclude the reader or audience of the drama. I would argue that one function of Socratic irony is to change the cognition of the reader in this same manner.¹⁷

I have tried to broaden the conception of irony beyond Vlastos' conception of complex irony by drawing attention to irony's dramatic context. Doing so enriches our reading of the dialogues and directs us to realize, further, the significance of audience and reader. If we ignore the dramatic context of the irony situated in Plato's

¹⁴ Although it would be plausible to argue that the content of what Socrates says about the poem is both meant and not meant, and therefore Vlastos' definition of complex irony would include this passage. That is not, however, the particular irony I wish to highlight here.

¹⁵ Vlastos, pp. 27–8.

¹⁶ Paula Gottlieb, 'The Complexity of Socratic Irony: A Note on Professor Vlastos' Account,' *CQ* 42 (1992), 278–9.

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of reader-response theory as it applies to Plato's dialogues see my 'Dialectic, Dialogue, and Transformation of the Self', *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 29:3 (August 1996).

dialogues we not only unnecessarily exclude too much, but we also ignore an essential aspect of the function of irony. Socratic irony is among the most powerful tools at Socrates' disposal for turning the lives of his interlocutors toward philosophy. And so for Plato and his readers.

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