

CONDITIONAL IRONY IN THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUES

1. INTRODUCTION

Socratic irony is potentially fertile ground for exegetical abuse. It can seem to offer an interpreter the chance to dismiss any claim which conflicts with his account of Socratic philosophy merely by crying ‘irony’. If abused in this way, Socratic irony can quickly become a convenient receptacle for everything inimical to an interpretation. Much recent scholarship rightly reacts against this¹ and devotes itself to explaining how Socrates² actually means everything he says, at least everything of philosophical importance. But the fact that a commentator needs to *argue* that Socrates is really serious when he disavows knowledge or claims to be the saviour of Athens is by itself sufficient to establish that there is an abundance of what I will call ‘play’ in the Socratic dialogues.³ The term ‘play’ refers to occasions when Socrates at least *appears* not to be speaking straightforwardly. ‘Play’ covers cases of real or apparent humour, mockery, teasing, irony, and sarcasm, without differentiation or further elaboration. When left undefined, as often, the phrase ‘Socratic irony’ seems to be used to refer to what I am calling ‘play’.

Even if we were to conclude that Socrates means everything he says in the most literal and straightforward of senses, there is still a lot of play in the text, since we must explain *how* Socrates can seriously mean what he says: we must argue that he is not joking. Contrast this with Aristotle; there is no debate about whether or not Aristotle really means what he says in the *De Anima*. In Aristotle’s case, an interpreter needs to explain *what* Aristotle means by saying that the soul is the first actuality of an organic

¹ E.g. R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, 1984); T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Plato’s Socrates* (Oxford, 1994); T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford, 1995).

² I am not making any claims in this paper about the historical Socrates. In the set of dialogues commonly denominated ‘Socratic’ (on which see next note), we find not only a fairly consistent philosophy and methodology expressed by the character ‘Socrates’, but it is also clear that Plato is sketching a portrait of a realistic Socrates, i.e. of a character who could have existed just as Plato portrays him, living his life in the particular ways Plato describes, with the particular ethical and political views and aims we are familiar with from the early dialogues. I am sceptical, however, about the extent to which we can know that this character actually corresponds to the historical Socrates. The realism and depth of Plato’s portrayal of the character ‘Socrates’, together with our knowledge that the historical Socrates really existed and that Plato knew him well, make it tempting to attribute various positions described in the early dialogues to the historical Socrates. But it is quite possible that this assumption may be selling short the literary power and the philosophical originality of Plato. The case for believing that the views expressed in the early dialogues are those of the historical Socrates relies quite heavily on the testimony of Aristotle (see e.g. Irwin [n. 1], ch. 1). The value of this evidence has recently been challenged, however, by C. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1996), esp. pp. 79–88.

This said, however, I will treat the early dialogues *realistically*—as though they are about a real person who questions others about their knowledge of virtue and acts the way the character ‘Socrates’ of the early dialogues acts. Thus, I will talk about the effect that Socrates’ irony seems to have on his interlocutors, and on his society, etc., as though Socrates were a real person. I will also speak about the effect the irony of the character ‘Socrates’ has on the readers of the Platonic dialogue, thereby treating Socrates as the character of a literary work. I think this is a reasonable way to proceed, and that the dialogues themselves, with their vividly realistic portrait of Socrates, ask us to understand ‘Socrates’ in this way.

body, but has no need to argue that he is serious. The interpreter of the Socratic dialogues faces an additional challenge on account of play.

So much is not very controversial. What *is* controversial, however, is whether and how play might have any *philosophical significance*. Part of the difficulty is generated by the assumption of some philosophers that since irony is a literary or rhetorical device, it is not the sort of thing whose presence or absence can be *rationally* debated. Either there is a doctrine straightforwardly defended or else there can be no clear, let alone decisive, argument about the nature of Socratic thought one way or the other. This is because of a 'slippery slope' argument: if one statement (of importance) is ironic, then there is nothing to stop *all* statements (of importance) from being ironic. From this perspective, once the possibility of irony surfaces, adjudicating between what is ironic and what is not becomes merely a matter of one's impressions, and argument devolves into statements of sentiment. I think such concerns stem in part from the thought that unless one could somehow get outside the text, say, by asking the author himself whether something is ironic or not, one could never tell only from textual clues—because what is to stop the textual clues themselves from being ironic?⁴ But we can see that this argument as it stands is too simplistic by again paying attention to the manifest difference between wondering whether Socrates literally means that he is 'god's gift to the city' and wondering whether Aristotle literally means that the soul is the first actuality of natural body having life potentially. In the first case it is difficult to see how a careful reader could *not* wonder about it, while in the second it is difficult to understand how one *could*.

There are at least two ways play might be philosophically important, both contested: (1) the dialogues' use of play might itself be philosophically significant—the way Socrates 'plays' with Euthyphro might have some philosophically significant point; or (2) the dialogues might 'play' with philosophically important claims—when Socrates says he is god's gift to the city or that he disavows knowledge he might be playing in a way that it is important to understand in order to understand his philosophical views. In what follows, I argue that a particular type of play, specifically a type of irony, has an important philosophical role in the Socratic dialogues in both of these ways. I show as well how the presence and absence of irony as I define it can be clearly determined, and that it is not simply something an interpreter can attribute as she pleases to explain away troublesome passages.

Beginning with a critical discussion of Gregory Vlastos's well-known and influential account of Socratic irony,⁵ I proceed to argue that the most prominent form of irony in the Socratic dialogues is neither Vlastos's 'simple' nor his 'complex' irony

³ By 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues I refer to (in alphabetical order): *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Republic* 1. For an account of the reasons for this division see G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cornell, 1992), ch. 2, and Irwin (n. 1), ch. 1. See Kahn (n. 2) for a contrasting view. I treat these dialogues as a group more because of their similarity in style and substance rather than because of any strong belief about when they were actually composed or about their relation to the historical Socrates (see previous note).

⁴ The problem is strikingly similar to the one posed for knowledge by the Argument from Illusion. If one appearance I have that seems correct is in fact false, how can I know whether *any* appearance I have is true, since all I have to go on is yet another appearance? In this case, the philosopher wants to 'get outside' the appearances in the same way as the commentators I have just described want to 'get outside' the text.

⁵ Vlastos (n. 3), ch. 1. J. Gordon, 'Against Vlastos on complex irony', *CQ* 46 (1996), 131–7, calls Vlastos's work on irony 'the definitive word on Socratic irony for many Plato scholars in recent years' (p. 131).

but what I call 'conditional irony'. Further, I dispute Vlastos's claim that we see a shift in the meaning of the word *εἰρωνεία* towards irony; I maintain, instead, that it retains its fifth- and fourth-century meaning of 'shamming' or 'pretending to a false modesty'. I do not claim to provide an account of all of the types of irony in the Socratic dialogues, nor to cite all the occurrences of the types I do discuss.⁶ I focus on conditional irony because I believe that it is a common but unnoticed part of Socrates' speech, which is important to his philosophical method.

2. VLASTOS'S SIMPLE AND COMPLEX IRONIES: AN EXPANDED ACCOUNT

Vlastos's understanding of Socratic irony is intricate and depends upon his interpretation of central aspects of Socratic thought. Vlastos's understanding of Socratic philosophy is, of course, controversial but it often seems that once scholars argue against his *substantive* claims about how irony functions as part of, say, the disavowal of knowledge, they leave irony as a whole behind as well.⁷ Clearly, this does not necessarily follow. Vlastos might be wrong about the specific places where he finds irony and about how it is functioning, without being wrong in his claim that irony is a significant element in Socratic philosophy. I am afraid that in disagreeing with Vlastos's particular accounts of how irony functions, there is a danger that English-speaking scholars are thereby losing his important insight⁸ that irony is somehow philosophically central to Socratic thought.⁹ I will argue that even if all of Vlastos's

⁶ Some recent discussions of various types of irony in Plato, which differ widely in their aims, scope, and accounts of irony, include: Gordon (n. 5); P. Gottleib, 'The complexity of Socratic irony: a note on Professor Vlastos' account', *CQ* 42 (1992), 278–9; C. Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (Yale, 1986), see esp. Introduction; M. Miller, "'The arguments I seem to hear": argument and irony in the *Crito*', *Phronesis* 51 (1996), 121–37; D. Roochnik, 'Socratic ignorance as complex irony: a critique of Gregory Vlastos', *Arethusa* 28 (1995), 39–52; C. J. Rowe, 'Platonic irony', *Nova Tellus* 5 (1987), 83–101; K. Sayre, *Plato's Literary Garden* (Notre Dame, 1995), see esp. ch. 2.

⁷ See e.g. T. Irwin, 'Socratic puzzles', in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1992), 241–66; T. Brickhouse and N. Smith 'Review of Vlastos', in *Ancient Philosophy* 13 (1993), 395–410; both are discussed below.

⁸ This insight may be most evidenced in Vlastos's choice of title. In the book itself irony is really only discussed in two chapters (1 and 5) and in an additional note (1.1).

⁹ Consider the following recent writing on Socrates (all written *after* Vlastos's work on Socratic irony) by scholars who are all either literally or figuratively students of Vlastos: Richard Kraut's 'Introduction' and Terry Penner's 'Socrates and the early dialogues' in R. Kraut (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992), Brickhouse and Smith's *Plato's Socrates*, and Terence Irwin's, *Plato's Ethics*. In Irwin, Kraut, and Penner I do not believe the word 'irony' is mentioned even once. Brickhouse and Smith (p. 32) do refer to irony, but only in order to dismiss it, claiming that it would destroy the possibility of rationally reconstructing Socratic philosophy: 'unless there is some answer to be given [that is sincere and not ironic about Socrates' profession of ignorance], we might as well despair of reconstructing a "Socratic philosophy" from the many arguments and assertions we find him making, for these too, might only be expressed ironically'. Kraut argues strongly for the idea that the Platonic dialogues ought to be understood as straightforwardly presenting the doctrines of Socrates and Plato. Kraut writes: 'Our best chance of understanding Plato is therefore to begin with the assumption that in each dialogue he uses his principal interlocutor to support or oppose certain conclusions by means of certain arguments because he, Plato, supports or opposes these conclusions for those reasons. . . . This methodological principle is not an a priori assumption about how Plato must be read, but is rather a successful working hypothesis suggested by an intelligent reading of the text and confirmed by its fruitfulness' (p. 29). By implied contrast, the *unintelligent* reading is one that sees what Plato believes as (at least sometimes) problematic, not necessarily presented straightforwardly in the arguments of the

particular accounts of Socrates' 'complex philosophical ironies' are seriously flawed,¹⁰ a different sort of irony—what I will call 'conditional irony'—is nevertheless central to Socratic philosophy and far more pervasive than Vlastos himself appreciates. I will begin by examining Vlastos's influential account.

Vlastos offers the following three examples as representative of distinct types of irony:

- (I1) A man, being drenched in a downpour, exclaims, 'What lovely weather!'
- (I2) A tutor, faced with an especially poor performance by his student, says, 'You're positively brilliant today!'
- (I3) Mae West, on being invited by President Ford to a state dinner, declines by saying, 'It's an awful long way to go for just one meal.'

(I1) is the most straightforward and contains the central core of irony as Vlastos defines it, described in a quotation from Quintilian: 'Irony is that figure of speech or trope in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood.'¹¹ In (I1) two explicit features of irony are clear: (1) the opposite meaning from what is literally said is meant—in *no* sense is it lovely weather (as far as the speaker is concerned), and (2) there is absolutely no intention to deceive, that is, there is no intention to suggest in any way that the literal meaning may be the one intended.

We might pause to ask the purpose and occasion of this type of most bald-faced irony. I would suggest it represents humour of a quite particular sort: 'gallows humour'. Irony is used in this sense to buttress yourself (and also your companions) in the face of a bad situation that it is not under your immediate control to change. On an aeroplane, faced with totally unappetizing food, you say 'Delicious!' smiling at your similarly displeased seatmate. Presumably there is no way, then and there, to make the food appetizing and you are thus stuck with unappetizing food. Irony prevents you from either becoming angry ('I can't eat *this*! I must speak with the pilot!') or despairing ('Oh no! I'm *so hungry*.'). Irony fails when things are 'no longer funny', when you can no longer hold reality at bay with a joke and thereby distance yourself from a bad situation. At that point your feelings change to despair, fear, or anger. But irony in this first sense remains an important way of dealing with the inevitable disappointments in life by forestalling more severe and sometimes destructive emotions.¹² I cannot find this sort of irony in anything Socrates says.

primary interlocutor (usually Socrates). Now Kraut is aiming his arguments mainly against an extreme position that maintains that Plato's real views lie in the 'unwritten doctrines', and that the content of the dialogues themselves can be no more than an obscure hint at what those doctrines might be. But Vlastos's claims about the importance of irony (at least with respect to the Socratic dialogues) raise the possibility of differing positions that are not nearly so extreme. Therefore it is striking that Kraut in his essay never considers Vlastos's claims about the philosophical relevance of irony, or mentions it as part of Socratic philosophy. Even Kahn (n. 2), who is concerned to focus on the literary form of Plato's work as well as its philosophical significance, does not discuss irony in any detailed or systematic way.

¹⁰ As I believe at least some are, including the account of the disavowal of knowledge, and therefore also the account of the disavowal of teaching—but I will not argue this here.

¹¹ *Institutio Oratoria* 9.22.44, quoted in Vlastos (n. 3), p. 21.

¹² Of course, these should not be forestalled too much; one who never takes things appropriately seriously (laughing at a funeral, etc.) is a person who cannot face reality, while someone who takes every misfortune as though it is the end of the world is overly serious and has no sense of humour in response to life's inevitable misfortunes. This sort of irony then seems to me to fit the model of an Aristotelian virtue, representing a beneficial quality that is susceptible to both an

I distinguish (I2) from (I1) in that in (I2) cases the speaker and hearer are on, so to speak, different sides of the irony. In (I1) cases the speaker and hearer share the humour aimed at the bad situation. But in the example of the tutor and pupil the speaker mocks the hearer. The tutor intends the student to hear the remark as an insult, albeit a lighter one than if he had said, 'You are performing horribly today. We cannot continue.' At the same time the irony in this particular example may function to some extent as in (I1), in so far as it forestalls the tutor's straightforward anger, giving the pupil, as it were, 'one more chance'.¹³ But this need not be the case. Consider a 'more pure' case of (I2): a coach, furious at his player for a foolish decision that cost a game, yells 'You did a great job out there!' Here the irony is part of the anger and essentially insulting and mocking, functioning differently from the gallows' humour examples (I1). The feature that makes them both species of irony is the expression of what is meant by saying the opposite, without the intent to deceive.¹⁴ What makes them importantly different is that in (I2) cases the hearer is the target of the mockery, and so the remark may, at one extreme, be the expression of anger or hatred, while in (I1) cases the speaker and hearer are on the same side of the joke, even if the comment is made to oneself. In (I2) cases the aim is actually to mock someone, whereas in (I1) cases although someone may be being mocked, the *aim* is not to mock, but to forestall more serious emotions with a joke told to a hearer on the same side of the irony as the speaker. (I1) and (I2), then, although both ironic, are different speech acts: the former humour, and the latter mockery.

Vlastos includes (I3) as a form of irony as well, belonging under the mockery heading; but I do not think he is right, and the example turns out to be fairly complex. The features that make (I1) and (I2) clear types of irony are absent. Mae West has been invited for dinner with the President. The clear intent of the invitation is to ask her to dine *with the President of the United States*, and this, of course, is the reason it is supposed to be attractive under normal circumstances. Mae West's reply, by not even mentioning meeting the President, treats the invitation as though it is only about a dinner and thereby ignores what she is 'supposed' to be responding to. What does this tell us? Her statement is true as it stands: it is a long way to go for a dinner. But she has deliberately misconstrued the intended meaning of the invitation. By doing so, she has revealed at once more and less than she would have otherwise. If she had said simply, 'I cannot. I have a previous engagement', her reply would have purported to supply the reason she will not go, and thus told *more* than her actual answer. Her actual answer tells only what her reason is *not*; we do not know whether she dislikes all state functions, or all Presidents, or just this President, etc.

In (I3) Mae West is not playing with the literal meanings of words (or sentences), but deliberately misunderstanding the social import of something in order to hide her real reasons, and also to convey a mild but clear insult. She is being insolent. The mere fact that she communicates that she is not revealing her real reason is not sufficient to call this a case of irony, at least not in the sense captured by the Quintilian definition.

excess—over-seriousness—and a defect—one who can never be serious. But note that this is *not* how Aristotle uses *εἰρωνεία*, which means for him a sort of false modesty; see esp. *N.E.* 4.7.

¹³ Vlastos does not notice this aspect of this example, treating it as a case of pure mockery.

¹⁴ There is some similarity between the effect of irony and the rhetorical figure of *litotes* in that both are tropes which hold something back: 'I really *love* you' said ironically is still different and more distanced than 'I *hate* you', and similarly, 'not bad!' is different from 'great!'. It is not the case that the ironic form stings less—in fact, it might sting more in that, in this example, the speaker may be showing distance and detachment from a situation by not giving in to the straightforward expression of his or her feelings.

Crucial to irony in the Quintilian sense—the sense central to (I1) and (I2) cases—is that, at least on some level, it involves saying the opposite of what is meant.¹⁵ The only clear thing about the remark is that it is intended as mockery, but not all mockery is irony. Vlastos is wrong, then, to consider the Mae West example as a type of irony.

(I3) *is*, however, perhaps an example of *εἰρωνεία*, in its standard fifth- and fourth-century sense of ‘shamming’, or ‘false humility’. Although Mae West is certainly not trying to deceive anyone into thinking she is speaking straightforwardly, the humour of her response stems in part from the apparent simple-mindedness of her response—as though she were too stupid to understand the import of the invitation. This is the pretending, or putting someone on, typical of *εἰρωνεία*. As we shall see, this is what Socrates’ interlocutors accuse him of when he claims not to be able to answer certain questions.

Vlastos also distinguishes what he calls ‘simple’ irony from ‘complex’ irony. (I1) and (I2) are paradigms of simple irony. But in a case of complex irony the speaker in one sense of the crucial terms *does* mean just what he says, yet in another sense does not. For Vlastos, the central case of Socrates’ complex irony arises in the disavowal of knowledge. According to Vlastos, Socrates operates with two different senses of knowledge: certain knowledge, and elenctic knowledge.¹⁶ When Socrates disavows knowledge he is engaging in complex irony because with respect to certain knowledge he means just what he says, but he nevertheless avows elenctic knowledge. To the extent that commentators have not been persuaded that Socrates maintains Vlastos’s elenctic/certain knowledge distinction, they have correspondingly not found complex irony in Socrates’ disavowal. In all of Vlastos’s examples of Socrates’ complex ironies,¹⁷ the appreciation of the irony depends on agreeing with Vlastos’ substantive account of Socratic philosophy. If one does not believe that there is a distinction in the Socratic dialogues between certain and elenctic knowledge, then one will not believe Socrates is engaging in any complex irony.

Finally, I want to call attention to two important conditions never discussed by Vlastos, which underlie all of these examples of irony, simple and complex, and which will hold as well for the conditional irony I shall introduce shortly. An interpretation of a statement as ironic must involve a comparison of some sort. We must compare the meaning of the statement with something else: some other statement or statements, an action, an event, or perhaps a gesture, intonation, or facial expression.¹⁸ This is to say that irony is essentially context dependent, and dependent in particular on some sort of comparison. Further, the comparison must involve some conflict. While the content of my sentence says that it is a beautiful day, the manifest fact is that it is pouring. I look at my student and say ‘Brilliant!’, but the expression on my face

¹⁵ The importance of opposites is also apparent in a slightly different use of ‘irony’ where we speak of an event, rather than a statement, as ironic. A person, after spending twenty years protesting and lobbying against the military, ends up becoming a general. We call this ironic because he has ended up as precisely what he worked against his whole life. But in (I3) Mae West does not say the opposite of what she really means.

¹⁶ See esp. ‘Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge’ in G. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 39–66.

¹⁷ Vlastos (first in ‘Socratic irony’ in *CQ* 37 [1987], 79–96, then in [n. 3], ch. 1 and additional n. 1.1) connects irony to four areas of Socratic thought—the disavowal of knowledge, the disavowal of teaching, the disavowal of politics, and Socratic eroticism—calling them collectively ‘Socrates’ complex philosophical ironies’.

¹⁸ Gordon (n. 5), p. 134, emphasizes the idea of ‘incongruity’ between these different categories.

is one of disapproval. There is conflict in these cases between the meaning of my statements and the facts about the weather and my facial expression, respectively.

The presence of conflict alone, however, is not enough to determine a case of irony. For one of the two sides of the conflict to be understood as ironic, a judgement must also be made about the *truth* of the matter, in light of which the statement can then be understood as ironic. In a simple case like the weather example the fact that it is raining is manifest, and the statement that the weather is beautiful is understood in contrast to be ironic. Irony as I am interested in it, then, always arises in some comparative context, where the sense of a statement conflicts with something else, and that something else is taken to express the real truth of the matter.¹⁹

3. THE FORM AND NATURE OF CONDITIONAL IRONY

How does irony ordinarily appear in the Socratic dialogues? I shall argue that the most pervasive and least philosophically contentious type of irony is neither simple nor complex irony as Vlastos has defined them, but what I shall call 'conditional irony'.²⁰ This irony is expressed in a conditional, with the antecedent frequently explicit, but sometimes implicit although clear from the context. The irony lies in the fact that *if* the antecedent were true, then Socrates *would* really believe the consequent; however, it is clear to the reader, though not always to the interlocutor, that Socrates believes that the antecedent is false, which therefore suggests that he believes the negation of the consequent.²¹ Further, the antecedent most commonly involves an attribution of knowledge of virtue. To cite just one example for now: 'if you [Euthyphro] can give me proof [that your prosecution of your father is correct], I shall never stop praising your wisdom' (9b2–3).²² *If* Euthyphro can give such a proof, and so, *if* he has knowledge of piety, Socrates *will* never cease extolling his wisdom. But this is also ironic because a reader acquainted with the Socratic dialogues knows that since Socrates does not believe that Euthyphro can provide

¹⁹ Here there is some conceptual connection with metaphor. A statement can be called metaphorical in one ordinary sense only by contrast to the literal truth—the metaphor must, as it were, be translatable. Can we call an expression metaphorical while lacking its literal rendition? I suppose something of the sort is intended in a remark like 'all language is metaphorical', which suggests that language has no non-metaphorical level. Whatever this might mean, using the concept of metaphor in this way would be quite different from the 'ordinary' way—where a metaphorical expression stands in for an idea that can be rendered literally. Something similar is at issue with irony. Someone of a more Deconstructionist stripe might want to claim that all Plato's writing is ironical. Whatever is meant by 'ironical' in such a statement, and whatever truth it might contain, it should be clear that this is *not* the sort of irony I am discussing. For a statement to be ironic in the sense I am interested in, something must be held as the truth against which a statement is then understood as ironic. On this account, then, it makes no sense to say something like 'all of Plato's writing is ironical'.

²⁰ Complex irony is controversial because it depends, as I discussed as an example above, on agreeing with Vlastos's account of certain *versus* elenctic knowledge. Recognizing conditional irony (at least in many clear cases) will not be dependent on adopting any particular understanding of Socratic philosophy.

²¹ Of course, from the denial of the antecedent the denial of the consequent does not follow logically. But here we are not dealing simply with the contents of the antecedent and consequent but with the fact that Socrates appears to assert both the entire conditional as well as to hold that the antecedent is false. This suggests at least strong doubts about whether Socrates believes that the consequent is true, especially in the absence of some other antecedent which implies the consequent.

²² See also: *Ap.* 19e1–4, 20b9–c1; *Eu.* 5a3–4, 6a9–b2; *Hi.Mi.* 376b4–6; *Pr.* 319a8–9; *Symp.* 218d6.

such a proof, Socrates will do the opposite of extol Euthyphro's wisdom. Whereas Euthyphro's wisdom *would* be something to extol, his thinking he knows what he does not know, especially in the face of Socrates' critique, is something worthy of censure, 'the most blameworthy ignorance' (*Ap* 29b1–2).

We should keep in mind that all statements of conditional irony are strictly speaking true as they stand for Socrates. The irony arises in so far as we have reason to believe that Socrates does not believe that the (implied or explicit) antecedent is true, and so he does not really believe or endorse the consequent. The conditional itself, however, remains true. In the claim that Socrates does not believe that the antecedent is true, and so in the claim that there is an element of irony at work, I am comparing the literal content of the antecedent against some other statement, action, or event which I judge actually to be the case and which I believe that Socrates believes is actually the case. In the absence of such a conflict there is no reason to take a statement of Socrates as ironic. The upshot of this is that the claim that a statement is an example of conditional irony must be argued for on the basis of the truth against which it conflicts. The idea that Socrates really wishes to become Euthyphro's pupil because he believes that Euthyphro really has knowledge of piety conflicts with the manifest results of the dialogue. At least once we have read the dialogue, we have been shown what Euthyphro knows and does not know about piety and so we are therefore in a position to judge such a statement of Socrates as ironic. In the absence of such a conflict, however, we are not in a position to call a statement ironic.

Conditional irony has something in common with Vlastos's complex irony in so far as in one sense Socrates does indeed literally mean what he says, while at the same time in so far as we have evidence that he does not believe the antecedent, we have evidence that suggests he does not really believe the consequent. Conditional irony is different from either complex or simple irony, however, in that with the latter two ironies what is being played with are the meanings or senses of words or phrases. So, with simple irony one says the opposite of what one actually means, while with complex irony there are two senses of the word or phrase at work, one of which makes the statement true, and one of which does not. In complex irony the central role of opposites is gone. To take one of Vlastos's central examples: when Socrates disavows knowledge, he is really disavowing *certain* knowledge (and so if by 'knowledge' one understands 'certain knowledge', then the disavowal is sincere and straightforward). But there is another sense of 'knowledge', 'elenctic knowledge' which renders the disavowal ironic, since, according to Vlastos, Socrates claims to have elenctic knowledge. It is hard to see elenctic knowledge and certain knowledge as opposites or even contraries, as is the case in simple irony, when one says the weather is 'lovely' while meaning the opposite. Conditional irony has a connection with opposites or at least contraries in common with simple irony. Faced with evidence that Socrates does not believe the antecedent of the conditional, I will argue that the reader is asked to draw the conclusion that Socrates in fact really believes the contrary of the consequent.

4. IRONY AND DECEPTION

When Socrates uses conditional irony, his 'real' meaning is implicit. Socrates' irony can be—and often is—missed by a careless interlocutor who is anxious to hear himself complimented. Vlastos is concerned to emphasize that Socratic irony is sharply divorced from the standard fifth-century meaning of the word *εἰρωνεία*, which typically carries with it the idea of intentional deceit. It goes to the heart of

Vlastos's Socrates that he never 'cheats', and therefore Vlastos is constrained to argue that the irony he finds in Socrates is never of the deceptive type.²³ It is important to emphasize, however, that the presence and use of irony of any sort is a careful part of the *writing of Plato*.²⁴ The discussion around the presence or absence of irony and how it functions has focused too much on the relation between Socrates and his interlocutors without paying adequate attention to the 'outer frame' of the dialogues—the relation between the text and the reader.²⁵ On all accounts, the dialogues are fictional works written by Plato to be read, regardless of the extent to which some of them may or may not accurately portray the historical Socrates. Therefore if irony is employed, it ought to be discernible from the perspective of the 'outer frame', between the text and the reader, even if it may be more elusive in the 'inner frame'—between Socrates and his interlocutors. We need to keep this in mind as well in discussions about whether and how Socrates is being 'deceptive'. To which audience does irony have to be clear in order for it not to be a case of deceit? To the audience of the inner frame, Socrates' interlocutors? Or to the audience of the outer frame, Plato's readers?²⁶ It is one thing to claim that the pompous Euthyphro fails to understand an irony, and so in some sense may be being deceived, but quite another to claim that a reader of the dialogue would fail to catch it.

In the discussion of Socrates' deceptiveness between Vlastos and his critics the inner and outer frames are not distinguished clearly enough. According to Vlastos, irony is only irony if it is not meant to deceive—otherwise it is shamming or outright lying. But sometimes Socrates' interlocutors do not understand his irony, and so they are in fact deceived. This happens in two sorts of cases: (1) Socrates is not aiming to deceive, but his interlocutors are simply too careless, and (2) Socrates aims to deceive. Vlastos is concerned to emphasize that (2) only occurs in 'extra-elenctic Socratic capers', and never in examples of serious philosophical argument. Consider his comments on Socrates' remarks on Simonides' poem in the *Protagoras* (Socrates, 136):

It can hardly be disputed that through this performance Socrates is pulling the wool over his hearers' eyes. What is his game? Irony, certainly, but irony put to a very special use: mockery elaborately played out in sly concealment of its mocking intent.

²³ See Vlastos (n. 3), ch. 1 and esp. ch. 5. As we shall see, Vlastos must explain how interlocutors can partially or totally fail, as they often do, to grasp Socrates' irony without it being considered deceptive. Both Irwin (n. 7) and Brickhouse and Smith (n. 7) argue that there is a conflict between Vlastos's attribution of irony to Socrates and his contention that Socrates never cheats—both suggest that the attribution of irony is incorrect.

²⁴ Vlastos, focused as he is on the claim that he is reconstructing the philosophy of the historical Socrates, has lost the idea that irony must at least also be a literary device employed by Plato. I make no claims about the historical Socrates.

²⁵ The distinction between the audiences of the inner and outer frame cuts across Gottlieb's 'in-crowd/out-crowd' distinction (n. 6, p. 278); see also Gordon (n. 6), esp. p. 136. I agree with Gordon that Vlastos's account needs expanding, but I expand it in a different direction than she does.

²⁶ I speak of *Socratic* and not *Platonic* irony because all of the examples I am considering come from the character 'Socrates', not because it belongs to the historical Socrates. Of course in one sense the irony is Platonic, in so far as Plato is the author of the entire text, including the irony of the character Socrates. But what would more interestingly be called 'Platonic' irony would involve the claim that Plato is being somehow ironic with respect to a dialogue or dialogues as a whole, so the irony is no longer between Plato's character 'Socrates' and the reader, but between Plato and the reader. This would be a more elusive form of irony, which I have nothing to say about here. But see Griswold (n. 6) and Rowe (n. 6) for discussions of types of Platonic ironies.

But concealed from whom? Clearly not from Vlastos, which implies that he counts irony as deceptive if it succeeds in deceiving Socrates' interlocutors.

Irwin's discussion of Vlastos on irony also claims that for an example of irony to be free of deceit it must be understood by a careful interlocutor. Illegitimate equivocation would be examples of either Socratic confusion or deceptiveness. In order for complex irony to avoid these possibilities,

we must suppose that Socrates is aware of the different senses and intends his hearer to be aware of them . . . if we are to suppose that Socrates intends a complex irony (and so is neither confused nor deceptive), it must be reasonable for him to expect his hearers to understand that he is using a key term in two senses.²⁷

But Irwin's and Vlastos's stricture that the irony must be understandable to the interlocutor is perhaps unreasonably strong. What might more plausibly be thought most important is whether *we*, the readers, can understand the irony—providing textual evidence for it and explaining its different senses. Vlastos and Irwin both agree with the hypothesis that the early dialogues represent the views of the historical Socrates. Therefore, if they find the 'Socrates' of the early dialogues acting deceptively, they infer that the historical Socrates acted this way as well; and so they both try to avoid attributing any deception to the character Socrates. But even Vlastos and Irwin do not maintain (nor does anyone else as far as I know) that the dialogues are accurate accounts of actual conversations (except perhaps to some extent the *Apology*). All of the dialogues were written to be *read*, and so are constructed with the audience of the outer frame in mind. 'Socrates' as a character always speaks to the audience of both the inner and the outer frames. The dialogues ask their readers to imagine themselves in the place of Socrates' interlocutors, thinking about how they might answer Socrates' questions differently, etc. Because of these considerations, and because of my suspension of belief about the extent to which the dialogues represent the views of the historical Socrates, the fact that interlocutors are deceived by Socrates' ironies is not particularly important. Keeping in mind that the dialogues are works of fiction written always with the 'outer audience' in view (something which Irwin and Vlastos can both agree with) ought to cause us to worry primarily about the deception of the outer audience. Even more importantly, as we shall see in section 6, if the interlocutors themselves were fully aware of the conditional irony, it would undermine the point and sense of the irony itself and the dialogues would not be able to take place as they do.

5. SIMPLE IRONY AND *εἰρωνεία* IN THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUES

Simple irony occurs far less frequently in the Socratic dialogues, if at all. I will argue that the examples of simple irony which Vlastos cites turn out not to be irony at all or else to be examples of conditional irony.

There are two distinct issues to consider: first, a correct description of the rhetorical devices employed by Socrates in a particular passage, whether simple irony, complex, or some other form of 'play'; and second, the evolution, if any, of the meaning of the word *εἰρωνεία*. The Greek word *εἰρωνεία* has a different meaning from the English word 'irony'. The traditional fifth-century meaning of *εἰρωνεία* typically carries the connotation of saying something so as to deceive. If one accuses someone of

²⁷ Irwin (n. 7), pp. 246–7. Irwin goes on to argue that it is implausible to claim that a careful interlocutor could discern one of Vlastos's paradigm examples of complex irony: the disavowal of knowledge.

εἰρωνεία, he accuses him of shamming or of being intentionally deceitful, in particular as part of false modesty. Vlastos claims that with Socrates we see the meaning of *εἰρωνεία* shift to one closer to the contemporary meaning of 'irony': conveying what you mean by saying the opposite of what you want to say, without intending to deceive. Vlastos wants to argue that despite *εἰρωνεία*'s usual implication of shamming or deceit, particularly with respect to playing down one's particular qualities or assests to a false extent, *εἰρωνεία* is sometimes in Plato correctly translated by 'irony'. Vlastos claims that with the character of Socrates, *εἰρωνεία* begins to evolve into the Quintilian '*ironia*' and the contemporary 'irony'. But I shall argue that nowhere in Plato is the word *εἰρωνεία*, or its cognates, used for any of the rhetorical devices we have been calling irony, whether simple, complex, or conditional. I submit that throughout Plato and Aristotle *εἰρωνεία* and its cognates continue to imply some sort of shamming or false modesty.²⁸ It should be clear that the argument about the meaning of the word *εἰρωνεία* is entirely distinct from the question of whether Socrates engages in the rhetorical device of conditional irony, and what its philosophical significance might be.²⁹ It will turn out that although *εἰρωνεία* is not well translated as 'irony', Socrates engages in *εἰρωνεία* as well as conditional irony.

One passage comes from the *Symposium*:

[Socrates] heard me out. Then, most *εἰρωνικῶς*, in his extremely characteristic and habitual manner, he said: 'Dear Alcibiades, it looks as though you are not stupid (*φαῦλος*), if what you say about me is true and there really is in me some power which could make you a better man: you must be seeing something inconceivably beautiful in me, enormously superior to your good looks. If that is what you see and want to exchange beauty for beauty, you mean to take a huge advantage of me: you are trying to get true beauty in exchange for seeming beauty—"gold for brass".'

(218d6–219a1, Vlastos trans.)

Vlastos comments (36):

Here, I submit, it is incontestably clear that 'ironically' *has* to be the sense of *εἰρωνικῶς*, for the context gives no foothold to the notion of pretense or deceit. Socrates is turning down flat the proposed exchange, saying it is a swindle. He starts off with a simple irony, saying to Alcibiades, 'you are not stupid,' when he clearly means: 'you *are* stupid, very stupid: what could be more stupid than to think I would fall for a barter of gold for brass?' [. . .] Socrates is saying to Alcibiades: 'I would have to be out of my head to buy your proposal; what a fool you must think me, a complete ass, to think that I would let you pull it off.'

First, is this really only simple irony, a case of saying the opposite of what is meant, with no intention of deceit? The language is more carefully constructed. What Socrates says is: 'you are not stupid, *if what you say about me is true*'. This is not simple irony, but conditional, expressed as usual in a conditional, the antecedent of which attributes to the interlocutor some knowledge. Thus, the conditional, as it stands, is actually something Socrates believes: *if* Alcibiades is right about his assessment of

²⁸ According to Brandwood, *εἰρωνεία*, *εἰρωνεύομαι*, *εἰρωνικός*, and *εἰρωνικῶς*, and all their variations in form, appear only fourteen times in Plato, only six of those in the Socratic dialogues. None of those instances is identical to the concept of irony as it has been defined above; they all involve the idea of pretending or shamming, common to the meaning of *εἰρωνεία* at the time. The same is the case for its uses in Aristotle: see esp. *Eudemian Ethics* 2.3, 1221a6, a25 and *N.E.* 2.7 1108a20ff., and 4.7, *passim*.

²⁹ For a clear example of *εἰρωνεία* see *Pr.* 334c8–d1 where Socrates tells Protagoras to make his speeches short because he is so forgetful. Soon (342a–348b) Socrates himself will give the longest speech of the dialogue. We have an example here of a false humility or feigned incapacity, typical of *εἰρωνεία*. We will see that Socrates often engages in *εἰρωνεία* as well as conditional irony.

Socrates, then he is *not* stupid, although, as the rest of the passage explains, he would be trying to swindle Socrates. The irony is that if Alcibiades is wrong about Socrates, then he *is* being stupid. The text continues:

But look more closely, blessed boy, lest you have missed that I am nothing. The mind's vision grows sharp only when the eyesight has passed its peak, and you are still far from that.

(219a1–3, Vlastos trans.)

Socrates offers Alcibiades unpalatable options: either he is right about Socrates, in which case he is trying to 'take a huge advantage' and swindle the man he claims to love, or else he is stupid in being willing to trade himself and his possessions in exchange for something which is not true beauty and wisdom. Making the second option explicit heightens the irony involved in the first, suggesting that the falsity of Alcibiades' antecedent implies the opposite of Socrates' stated conclusion. But we have seen that this is not simple irony, since there is a clear sense in which Socrates means everything he says.³⁰

What about the second question: is 'ironically' the sense of *εἰρωνικῶς*, as Vlastos claims it must be? I think Vlastos's claim that it 'must' be taken in this way is too strong. When Alcibiades says that Socrates spoke 'most *εἰρωνικῶς* in his extremely characteristic and habitual manner' it is unclear to what aspect of his speech Alcibiades refers. As I have argued, there is irony in the passage (though not simple irony, as Vlastos thinks, but conditional), but there is also *εἰρωνεία*. When Socrates says that Alcibiades should beware lest he has missed that he is nothing, Alcibiades is sure to understand this as an example of the purest *εἰρωνεία* in the usual sense of false modesty: Socrates claims he is nothing, when he is beyond doubt an extraordinary and wise man. Now, Socrates' response may (as Vlastos thinks) contain complex irony. Vlastos himself does not spell out what he thinks the complex irony is, but Vlastos would probably employ his distinction between elenctic knowledge and certain knowledge. With respect to certain knowledge of virtue, possessed by the gods alone, Socrates is nothing; but in a different sense, with respect to mortal elenctic knowledge, Socrates is not nothing, but quite rare among men. But regardless of whether this is correct or not, Alcibiades, in calling Socrates' speech an example of *εἰρωνεία*, *need* only be referring to the false modesty typical of the usual meaning of the word. Thus *εἰρωνικῶς* here may be translated as *εἰρωνεία* is in *Republic* 1, where Thrasymachus objects to Socrates' claim that he himself cannot answer the questions he poses:

'Heracles!' he said. 'This is Socrates' habitual shamming (*εἰωθία εἰρωνεία*). I had predicted to these people that you would refuse to answer and would sham (*εἰρωνεύοιο*) and would do anything but answer if the question were put to you.'

(337a, Vlastos trans.)

Here Thrasymachus is accusing Socrates of what I am arguing is the meaning of *εἰρωνεία*, projecting a false modesty by claiming that he has no answer to his question, when he really does (or so Thrasymachus believes). Vlastos agrees that *εἰρωνεία* must here mean 'shamming', while later arguing that in the *Symposium* passage it must mean 'irony'. But we can understand both passages univocally.

³⁰ Since I am concerned here to critique Vlastos's account of this passage, I have used his translation of *φᾶλος* as 'stupid'. But it might also be translated as 'base', and perhaps this translation might make the conditional irony even clearer than Vlastos's 'stupid'. If Socrates really has the power to make Alcibiades a better man, Alcibiades would be trying to secure something truly valuable (by Socrates' lights) and must therefore appreciate this value. Alcibiades, then, would in fact *not* be base in so far as he is pursuing excellence. Thus the sense in which Socrates literally means the conditional is even more apparent. I owe this point to Jennifer Whiting.

Vlastos's other example of simple irony in the Platonic dialogues is from the *Gorgias*:

[a] Socrates: 'Since by "better" you don't mean "stronger", tell me again what you mean. And teach more gently, admirable man, so that I won't run away from your school.'

Callicles: 'You are mocking me [*εἰρωνεύη*].'

[b] Socrates: 'No, by Zethus, whom you used earlier to do a lot of mocking [*πολλὰ εἰρωνεύου*] of me.' (489d–e, Vlastos trans.)

Vlastos claims that there is no deceit involved in either [a] or [b], but in [a] the mockery is a form of irony (simple irony), while in [b] *εἰρωνεία* refers to simply mocking without any irony. The mockery is clear; but I cannot see that [a] is an example of irony.³¹ Vlastos comments (26):

In part [a] Callicles is protesting Socrates' casting himself as a pupil of his—a transparent irony, since Callicles no doubt feels that, on the contrary, it is Socrates who has been playing the schoolmaster right along.

Why suppose that *Callicles* would feel Socrates is the schoolmaster? Rather, a more natural understanding seems to be that Socrates is mockingly warning Callicles to remain calm if he wants to keep his 'students'. In the 'false modesty' implicit in Socrates' claim to be the pupil, we have precisely the kind of 'pretending' or 'shamming' characteristic of *εἰρωνεία*. If Vlastos's interpretation is correct, we would have Plato using *εἰρωνεύομαι* twice in close succession in two crucially distinct senses. But if we understand its use simply as mocking, its use in both cases is consistent. I conclude then that this example from the *Gorgias* fails to be irony at all, although, as the passage says, there is *εἰρωνεία*. This completes consideration of Vlastos's examples of simple irony in the dialogues. I turn now to present my own account of the far more prevalent and important conditional irony.

6. CONDITIONAL IRONY IN THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUES

In the opening of the *Euthyphro*, Socrates explains that his presence at court is due to the charges of Meletus. Then he makes a short speech that includes four distinct examples of conditional irony:

(1) Meletus charges him with a charge that is 'not ignoble, for it is no base thing for a young man to have knowledge of such a subject' (2c2–3).

(2) 'For he [Meletus] knows, as *he* says, how the youth are corrupted and who corrupts them and he is likely to be wise . . .' (2c3–6).

(3) 'It seems to me that he [Meletus] alone of our citizens has started out correctly, for it is correct to care first for the young, that they be as good as possible . . .' (2c8–d1).

(4) After getting rid of us corrupters, 'it is clear that he [Meletus] will take care of the older ones and will be responsible for the greatest goods for the city, as is likely to happen to one who started out from such a beginning' (3a2–5).

All four of these statements are claims that Socrates, in one sense, means; yet we know from his treatment of Meletus in the *Apology* (esp. 24b–28b), as well as from the other dialogues, that Socrates does not believe that Meletus truly fits any of these claims. The conditional irony in all four cases depends on assuming that Meletus possesses knowledge of virtue. For example, in (1) the implied conditional is: *if* Meletus has knowledge of virtue, it is surely no base thing and the charge he has raised

³¹ This example is similar to the Mae West example discussed above.

against Socrates is not ignoble. Socrates literally means this, but we know that Socrates does not believe the antecedent. Given *this*, however, Meletus' false pretence to knowledge and his charge against Socrates based on that pretence *are* base and ignoble. One can easily do the same analysis for the other three examples.³²

The rest of the dialogue has many examples of conditional irony, which aim themselves at Euthyphro and depend on his claim to have knowledge of piety.³³ Such conditional irony is typical of the Socratic dialogues, though it is often less bald-faced than it is in the *Euthyphro*. It ranges from subtle to extreme in accordance with the interlocutor's conceit of knowledge. When it is more extreme it can seem to be simple irony. For example, at the end of the dialogue Euthyphro says he has to leave and then Socrates ironically laments:

What are you doing, my friend? You are leaving and casting me down from my high hope that by learning from you what acts are pious and what are not, I will escape the charge of Meletus . . .
(15e5-7)

This can sound like simple irony: Socrates had no high hope, so there is no sense in which Socrates means what he literally says. But this would be to overlook the context. Socrates' immediately preceding speech draws out the implications of their discussion:

For if you did not clearly know what the pious is and what it is not, it is not possible that you would have ever attempted to prosecute your elderly father for murder on behalf of a servant. You would have been afraid before the gods to run the risk in case you might not be acting rightly, and you would have been ashamed in front of people. But as things are I know well [*εὖ οἶδα*] that you think that you clearly know what is pious and what is not. Tell me then, best Euthyphro, and do not hide what you think it is.
(15d4-e2)

Here we see conditional irony *par excellence*. An important goal of the elenchus is to try to show the interlocutor that he does not know what he thinks he knows. Euthyphro is famously obtuse on this point. Socrates never tells the interlocutor that he does not know something. Instead Socrates always honours the person's claim to know, and then proceeds to draw out the implications of his purported knowledge. There are two ways in which an interlocutor can claim knowledge. One is to declare outright that he has it, another is to act in a way that presumes it. Euthyphro does both in the course of the dialogue,³⁴ but here Socrates relies on the latter method. Euthyphro has not hesitated in the prosecution of his father on charges of impiety. Since he is doing such a thing, he must know what he is doing, must know what is pious and what impious—Euthyphro will not admit that he is acting without knowledge. All of Socrates' speeches operate under the standing assumption, 'since you know what piety is . . .', until such a time as Euthyphro might finally withdraw it—a day so remote that it prompts Socrates to make a rare knowledge-claim in the passage above: 'I know well [*εὖ οἶδα*] that you think . . .'. We can now see that the final passage is not an example of simple irony after all. Socrates continues to operate under the (at this point ridiculous) assumption that Euthyphro knows what piety is: *if* Euthyphro knows, he really has cast Socrates down from a high hope. As always, then, in one sense—the sense dictated by his interlocutor's implicit (and

³² The remaining antecedents are: in (2), knowing how the youth are corrupted and who corrupts them; in (3), knowing how to care correctly for the young so that they may be as good as possible; and in (4), since he has the knowledge in (2) and (3), starting out from the correct beginning of properly caring for the youth.

³³ Some of the clearest examples include: 5a3-4, 6a9-b2, 9b2-3, 15e5-6.

³⁴ See 5a for the avowal of knowledge.

earlier, explicit) claim to knowledge—Socrates does literally mean what he says, while given that Socrates does not believe the antecedent, he does not mean the consequent. Socrates is thus engaging in conditional irony. Further, as is typical of conditional irony, Socrates' 'real' meaning is the one left implicit in the statement: since Euthyphro does not have knowledge, Socrates does not really have any great hope.

But Socrates' irony is not always so heavy-handed, because his interlocutors are not always so thick-headed. Nevertheless, conceit of knowledge is invariably the trigger for this rhetorical device. Consider a dialogue like the *Crito*, in which irony seems wholly absent. After Crito's heartfelt, if somewhat rambling, speech trying to persuade Socrates to escape prison (45a–46a), Socrates says:

Dear Crito, your eagerness [*προθυμία*] is worth much if it is aimed correctly; but if not, the greater it is, the more difficult [*χαλεπωτέρα*] it makes matters. (46b1–3)

Here Socrates gently points out the alternatives, and the attending risks. If this were Euthyphro we could have expected the omission of the 'if not . . .' clause and something like 'your eagerness is truly worthy of the highest praise, if it has a correct aim'—clear conditional irony. But Crito, willing to examine and test his views even under these dire circumstances, as well as to confess his lack of knowledge (50a), does not need to be mocked out of some conceit.

Consider as well Socrates' treatment of Lysimachus in the *Laches*. Lysimachus has confessed to being at a loss and not knowing what the best education for his sons is, and is engaged in actively seeking someone who does know. Laches and Nicias each offers a speech about what would be best for Lysimachus' and Melesias' sons. They turn out, however, to offer conflicting advice, and so Lysimachus asks Socrates to cast the deciding vote (184c–d).³⁵ From 184d–185a Socrates criticizes this idea and argues³⁶ that one should not ask the majority, but 'the one who knows'. Socrates leads Lysimachus to this conclusion, via the *τέχνη*-analogy, without any irony at all. There is no need to resort to it, because there is no conceit of knowledge on Lysimachus' part.

Contrast Socrates' references to Laches and Nicias in the short speech that follows (186a–187b). In looking for 'someone who knows' what is best for the boys' education, as Socrates has just said they must, he claims that they need to search for someone who has been taught excellence or who has discovered it himself. Socrates denies being such a person (186c). Although he longed for a teacher, he did not have money for sophists who 'alone claimed to be able to make me fine and good' (186c4). How are we to take this statement? If ironic, it must be conditional irony, since what Socrates is saying is in one literal sense true: he really did not have the money to pay the sophists who really are the ones who *claim* to make a person fine and good. If we were able to read just this passage, it would be impossible to discern what Socrates' views are. Someone who had only read this far in the *Laches* (and no other dialogues) would not

³⁵ Although, as I am about to discuss, Lysimachus' suggestion of a vote is roundly criticized, it should not be understood as an obviously stupid idea. Lysimachus is looking for someone who knows what he does not, and the idea of finding a majority of knowledgeable people who claim the same thing is a reasonable approach. If two doctors offer conflicting opinions about the necessity of surgery, it is reasonable to go to a third to seek a 'majority opinion'. Socrates will criticize this because the aim of the dialogue will be to show that none of them knows what courage is, so that simply amassing a majority opinion of non-knowers will be of no help. But Lysimachus is considering them all as at least more knowledgeable than he himself is.

³⁶ Here as elsewhere, see e.g. *Cr* 47a–d.

pause at this line.³⁷ But anyone who has already read the other Socratic dialogues will smile at Socrates' implication that if only he had had the money, he could have learned what virtue is from the sophists. Such a smile will be caused by the conflict between the belief that Socrates does not think that the sophists have the knowledge they profess to have and his claim that money is what keeps him from their wisdom. This person will have reason to read this as conditional irony, based as always on an avowed claim to knowledge, in this case on the part of the sophists.

Socrates continues by saying that he would not be surprised if Laches and Nicias have learned or discovered what excellence is, since either (a) they are richer and could have paid some sophist to teach them, or else (b) they are older and may have discovered it themselves (186c7–8). Again, how are we to take this? If this were all we had read, we might not pause. But having read the other dialogues we think that in fact Socrates *would* be very surprised if Laches and Nicias have learned or discovered what excellence is, since no one else has ever successfully done so.³⁸ Isn't this, then, simple irony? Socrates says he would not be surprised, when in fact he means the opposite. What Socrates is careful to say, however, is that he would not be surprised if either of them had 'learned or discovered [*ἡύρηκεν ἢ μεμάθηκεν*]' (186c6) the *τέχνη* of making a person fine and good; and Socrates really would not be surprised at this, *since they must know what it is*, as far as Socrates is concerned:

They seem indeed to me to be capable of educating a person; for [otherwise] they would never have fearlessly [*ἀδελως*] spoken out on pursuits both good and bad for a young person unless they believed that they knew [these things] sufficiently [*ἱκανως εἰδέναι*] for themselves.

(186c8–d3)

Here we see the same attribution of knowledge based upon action that we saw in the *Euthyphro*. The fact that Laches and Nicias 'fearlessly/shamelessly spoke out' on how to make a person fine and good shows that they must then have knowledge. Since, by their actions, they have displayed the 'conceit of knowledge' they are susceptible, unlike Lysimachus and Melesias, to some conditional irony. Socrates' claim that 'he would not be surprised . . .' can now be seen to be conditional, not simple, irony, because in one sense he means it: he would not be surprised that Laches and Nicias have learned and discovered the art of making a person good, under the standing assumption that they know what virtue is (knowledge that has been clearly implied by their willingness to speak). Socrates awaits Laches' and Nicias' disavowal of knowledge, after which conditional irony will no longer be important. To the extent that Laches and Nicias are far less conceited about what they know, to that extent the conditional irony is more subtle in this dialogue, and, I have suggested, not easily discernible if the *Laches* were the sole dialogue one had read. By contrast, even if one had read only the *Euthyphro*, it would be clear, at least by the end, that Euthyphro was a conceited and pompous person whom Socrates was clearly mocking.

Further, the conditional irony at this point in the *Laches* is clearly for the reader of the dialogue to grasp. Laches, from the perspective of the inner frame, does not comprehend it and proceeds to avow knowledge at 190c and then is led into *ἀπορία* by

³⁷ Contrast D. Roochnik (*Art and Wisdom* [Penn State, 1996], p. 96) who calls Socrates' irony here 'manifest'. To us, this is true; but in the context of the *Laches* alone it is not.

³⁸ As Socrates himself says at *Meno* 71c. Again, we are faced with a conflict between the manifest fact that no one has successfully withstood an elenchus about virtue, and Socrates says as much in the *Meno*, and that nevertheless he is here attributing knowledge of virtue to Laches and Nicias. Here is an example of how one can argue that a passage contains irony. We have no reason to think, by contrast, that the claim in the *Meno* is ironic since it is consistent with all the actual results in the other dialogues.

194a–b. Even though the irony is wholly missed by the inner frame audience, I do not think there is any reason to call this a case of deceit. The conditional irony is clearly intended for the outer frame audience, the reader, to discern, based upon her experience with the Socratic dialogues. More importantly, from the perspective of the inner frame we can now see that it would not make sense for Laches to grasp the conditional irony, at least not initially; if he did, he would not have the conceit of knowledge in the first place, and the dialogue would not occur—at least not in its present form. Conditional irony is put into Socrates' mouth by Plato for the benefit of a careful reader; there is no reason to demand that it necessarily be intelligible to Socrates' interlocutors. In fact, we can now see that there are strong dramatic and philosophical reasons for thinking it will often not be grasped by the inner frame audience: if it were, the very discussion they engage in would no longer be necessary; they would have already understood Socrates' point.

In addition, whatever further positive results the elenchus may or may not have towards obtaining truth,³⁹ the elenchus at least succeeds in eliciting a contradiction in the views of the interlocutor. The resulting *ἀπορία* ought to give a thoughtful interlocutor pause; perhaps he knows what he says he does, but he is in some sort of state of confusion. An interlocutor like Euthyphro will not grasp the irony in Socrates' claim that he must become Euthyphro's pupil (5a–b). Since he thinks he has knowledge of piety, Euthyphro will take Socrates' remark entirely straightforwardly. On the other hand, the audience of the outer frame is liable to take Socrates' remark as simple irony aimed exclusively at mocking Euthyphro. Both miss the complete picture. A thoughtful outer audience and a thoughtful inner audience ought to see that the irony is conditional. Socrates' use of conditional irony is a way of mocking his interlocutor into conceding his own lack of knowledge and appreciating the necessity of further examination. It is also a way of simultaneously revealing the character and philosophical sophistication of his audiences—both inner and outer.

Conditional irony, then, may reasonably be understood as a companion to the elenchus, which aims at getting the interlocutor to appreciate the difficulty the elenchus has caused, and thus to help incite *ἀπορία*—a state that is a necessary preliminary to the positive search for knowledge (*Meno* 84a–c). This holds for the outer audience as well when it wonders whether there might be some point to Socrates' irony, a sense in which he really means what he says. As long as an interlocutor does not concede *ἀπορία*, Socrates will continue to argue with him on the *ad hominem* assumption that he does really know but that he is reluctant, or bashful, and so on. Socrates never says something that he does not in one sense mean; rather he continues to draw out the ramifications of the alleged knowledge with 'since you know . . .', or 'if you know . . .', etc.⁴⁰ Conditional irony is an important part of Socrates' method for prodding the audiences of both the inner and outer frames into a clearer awareness of their own ignorance.⁴¹

Georgia State University

IAKOVOS VASILIOU
ivasiliou@gsu.edu

³⁹ See e.g. G. Vlastos, 'The Socratic elenchus: method is all', in Vlastos (n. 16), pp. 1–37.

⁴⁰ Also, as I have mentioned, Socrates takes certain actions as implying a claim to knowledge—such as Euthyphro's prosecution of his father or Laches' and Nicias' speeches on the education of the youth.

⁴¹ I have benefited from the comments of Steve Strange, the Editor, and an anonymous referee. I am especially grateful to James Barrett, Bill Vasiliou, Jennifer Whiting, and Nancy Worman for their criticisms and suggestions.