

## SOCRATES' REVERSE IRONY

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a previous paper I argued that Socrates<sup>1</sup> frequently employs a quite particular type of irony, which I call 'conditional irony'.<sup>2</sup> Conditional irony is expressed in a conditional with an antecedent, often explicit, but sometimes also implicit, that typically attributes knowledge of some sort to the interlocutor. Conditional irony then functions as follows: *if* the antecedent were true, then Socrates *would* believe the consequent. The reader, however, if not the interlocutor, has good reason to believe that in fact Socrates does not believe that the antecedent obtains, and that he also does not maintain the consequent. At the same time Socrates does truly believe the conditional proposition as a whole, so he never strictly speaking says something contrary to what he really believes.<sup>3</sup> Consider a clear example: at *Euthyphro* 4e9–5a2, Euthyphro avows precise knowledge of what piety is, and Socrates immediately replies that he must become Euthyphro's pupil. If someone has already read other Socratic dialogues, or read further into the *Euthyphro*, he or she will smile at Socrates' claim to need to be Euthyphro's pupil. But Socrates' playfulness is a quite particular kind of irony. While he is not saying he should be Euthyphro's pupil sarcastically, neither does he simply mean it. Socrates is making a hypothetical claim: *if* Euthyphro truly has precise knowledge of what piety is, then he should become his pupil. Socrates believes this conditional as it stands. But readers of the dialogues (who also recall the first lines of the dialogue, which show that Euthyphro and Socrates are reasonably well acquainted) will be confident that Socrates does not believe that Euthyphro does in fact have the knowledge he claims.

Conditional irony is a particularly common form of Socratic irony, and functions as an ally to the elenchus by indulging the interlocutor's conceit of knowledge. Socrates never directly tells an interlocutor that the interlocutor does not know something. Rather, he operates on the standing assumption that the interlocutor's avowal is correct, and he proceeds to draw out its ramifications. Conditional irony is an *ad hominem* trope insofar as it proceeds on the basis of the interlocutor's own belief that he possesses knowledge. Moreover, as in the example from the *Euthyphro* above, if

<sup>1</sup> By 'Socrates' I am referring to the character in Plato's 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues, consisting of (in alphabetical order): *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Republic* 1. For some reasons for this division, see G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, 1992), ch. 2, and T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), ch. 1. See C. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1996) for a contrasting view. I treat these dialogues as a group because of their similarity in style and substance, rather than because of any firm belief about the order in which they were composed, or indeed even about whether they were all composed earlier than so-called 'middle' or 'late' dialogues. On questions of chronology, see also: J. Cooper, 'Introduction' in J. Cooper (ed.) *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), esp. 12–18, and A. Nehamas, *Art of Living* (Berkeley, 1998), chs. 1–3, in particular 219, n. 64, in response to Cooper. I am making no claims about the historical Socrates. I shall, however, treat the character Socrates 'realistically'—that is, as though there were such a person who had such conversations, and had such and such effects on his society.

<sup>2</sup> See I. Vasilou, 'Conditional irony in the Socratic dialogues', *CQ* 49 (1999), 456–72.

<sup>3</sup> Contrast Vlastos's 'complex irony' ([n. 1], ch. 1, originally 'Socratic irony', *CQ* 37 [1987], 79–96), where in one sense Socrates means what he says, but in another sense does not. See Nehamas (n. 1), ch. 2, and Vasilou (n. 2), §§2, 4, 5, for detailed discussions of Vlastos's position and additional references.

someone understands the conditional irony, it is typically the *reader* of the dialogue, not the *interlocutor*; that is, it is understood by the audience of what I call the 'outer frame'—between the reader and the text—as opposed to the audience of the 'inner frame'—between Socrates and his interlocutor.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the frequency of conditional irony throughout the Socratic dialogues, in the *Apology* the form of irony that is most prevalent is what I shall call 'reverse irony': when Socrates says what he actually believes to be true, but what his audience is bound to *understand* as ironic, in the sense of speaking with *eirōneia*—dissembling or putting them on.<sup>5</sup> As I shall show, there is a 'reversal' here insofar as Socrates knows that he will be understood as speaking *eirōnikōs*, while in fact he is speaking straightforwardly. Reverse irony is typified in Socrates' claims that his defence speech is really on behalf of the jurors, and that he deserves free meals at the Prytaneum. I shall argue that such remarks surely puzzled and shocked most of the audience, and that they must have thought he was (rather ludicrously, under the circumstances) putting them on and somehow not being serious about what he was saying. But we the readers understand that he was, strictly speaking, saying just what he believes. We shall see further that there is reverse irony in the *Gorgias* as well, where it serves the function of provoking difficult interlocutors into argument by inducing immediate *aporia*, without requiring an *elenchus*.

Reverse irony is an importantly different trope from conditional irony. The effect of reverse irony on the listener in the inner frame is quite different from the effect of conditional irony. While conditional irony is often missed by the interlocutor, who may be (as Euthyphro is) lulled into believing that Socrates believes he has the knowledge he avows, reverse irony may anger and provoke the hearer by instantly generating perplexity. Of course the usual way that Socrates generates *aporia* in an interlocutor is by showing the inconsistencies between his proposed answer to a 'What is F?' question and his other beliefs, until he no longer knows what to say (e.g. *Eu.* 11b, *La.* 194a–b, *Me.* 80a). With reverse irony *aporia* is immediately generated: the hearer does not know what to make of Socrates' shocking remarks. In the *Gorgias* we shall see that this then provokes a desire to find out what Socrates means and whether he is serious. Reverse irony will turn out to be an alternative technique for achieving that most Socratic of all results: *aporia*.

## II. IRONY IN THE *APOLOGY*

I shall begin by first considering some of the infrequent examples of conditional irony in the *Apology*. After denying that he undertakes to teach anyone and that he charges a fee for this (19e), Socrates adds:

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between the inner and outer frame complicates any discussion of the extent to which Socratic irony is deceptive. We must ask, 'deceptive to whom?'—Socrates' interlocutors or Plato's readers? See Vasiliou (n. 2), esp. §4.

<sup>5</sup> I have also argued that, contrary to Vlastos, *eirōneia* does not begin to shift meaning in Plato from 'dissembling' or 'putting someone on' to something more akin to what Vlastos believes is the modern meaning of 'irony': to say the opposite of what one believes without intending to deceive. Socrates engages in conditional irony but is also accused by his interlocutors of engaging in *eirōneia*; on such occasions he is, according to them, saying something other than what he really means. See Vasiliou (n. 2), §5, 465–8. Nehamas (n. 1), 54ff. believes that Vlastos's view that opposites or contraries are necessarily part of irony is too simplistic, and covers only the crudest cases. Vlastos appeals to Cicero's and Quintilian's accounts of irony as part of the justification for his emphasis on opposites, but Nehamas argues that this is not actually warranted by the Latin texts.

Although it [teaching people] also seems to me to be a noble thing indeed, if someone were able to teach people just as Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Keos and Hippias of Elis. (19e1–4)<sup>6</sup>

In one sense, Socrates means exactly what he says: *if* someone could truly teach people in the way the Sophists claim, that would indeed be something Socrates thinks noble. We grasp the implicit, underlying point, however, when we recognize—having read the *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Hippias Major*, *Protagoras*, and *Euthydemus*—that Socrates does not really believe these people capable of teaching virtue. The implication<sup>7</sup> is that it would in fact be disgraceful to claim to teach virtue, if one is not truly able to (that is, if one does not possess the requisite knowledge of virtue). Socrates' 'real' belief, then—that Gorgias and company are wrong about their claims to teach virtue and are therefore acting not nobly but shamefully—is the one that remains implicit. Without a change of intonation or a wry smile, the sentence itself would not be understood as ironic, unless one knows a bit about Socrates and his ethical outlook.<sup>8</sup>

Socrates continues by recalling a conversation with Callias in which he asked him whether or not he knew someone who had knowledge of human and political virtue. Callias replied that Evenus is such a person and that he teaches virtue for five *mnas*. Socrates responds with another paradigmatic example of conditional irony:

I thought Evenus a happy man, if he truly should have this art (*technē*) and teaches it at so reasonable a price. (20b9–c1)

Again, in *one* sense this is straightforwardly true: *if* Evenus had this knowledge, Socrates would consider him truly happy. But a reader familiar with the dialogues (or perhaps a careful listener who is familiar with Socrates) realizes that Socrates believes that the antecedent is in fact false: Evenus does not possess this knowledge and therefore, since he probably also succumbs to what Socrates later calls 'ignorance worthy of reproach (*amathia eponeidistos*)' (29b1–2)—thinking one knows what one does not—Socrates does not in fact believe that he is happy. While a careful listener might catch this irony, someone else, like Callias in this example, who is so enamoured and impressed by Evenus, surely does not. The important point at present is to see that the unexpressed, suppressed part of the conditional irony corresponds to what Socrates really thinks about Evenus. What makes the irony *conditional*, however, and not simply a crass version of what Vlastos calls 'simple irony', is that what Socrates literally says is in fact something he believes. It fails to be misleading for us because we are confident that Socrates is confident that the antecedent does not hold in the case at hand.<sup>9</sup>

Conditional irony, however, is not a rhetorical device that dominates the *Apology*. Instead, Socrates turns to reverse irony, in which the meaning that is suppressed or

<sup>6</sup> In the popular G. M. A. Grube translation, included in Cooper (n. 1), the conditional, and therefore the *conditional irony*, is lost: 'Yet I think it a fine thing to be able to teach people as Gorgias . . .'; not so in D. Gallop's *Plato: Defence of Socrates, Euthyphro, Crito* (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Not, of course, the logical implication, which would be a simple fallacy. See Vasiliou (n. 2), 462, n. 21.

<sup>8</sup> See Vasiliou (n. 2), 461–3 for the importance of contrast in determining whether a claim is ironic.

<sup>9</sup> Given our knowledge of all the dialogues together—and so the 'experience' of many Socratic conversations—we judge the Sophists' lack of knowledge (by Socrates' lights, at least) to be the truth, against which this remark in the *Apology* can be understood as ironic. T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton, 1989), 229, provide internal evidence for the claim that Socrates must not believe that Evenus has this knowledge: if Evenus had such knowledge, he would be wiser than Socrates and so the Oracle would be lying.

implicitly intended in conditional irony becomes expressed and explicit. The 'irony' of this reversal, however, is that while in cases of conditional irony the interlocutor usually misses the irony, and thinks that Socrates is speaking simply straightforwardly, in 'reverse irony' Socrates speaks candidly, with his intended meaning explicit, and yet his interlocutors understand him as speaking *eirōnikōs* in the Greek sense. In 'reverse irony', Socrates directly states what he truly believes—the meaning that remains unexpressed in conditional irony—but he is confident and we are confident that he will be understood by his listeners as putting them on, that is as speaking *eirōnikōs*.<sup>10</sup>

Conditional irony and reverse irony operate somewhat differently with respect to the inner and outer frames. That Socrates employs conditional irony in some instance is a judgement made from the perspective of the outer frame by the reader who compares, for example, Socrates' apparent praise of Euthyphro with what she knows about Socrates from the other dialogues or even from other parts of the *Euthyphro* itself. That a remark is an example of reverse irony is also a judgement made from the outer frame, but it is based on the actual or reasonably expected reaction of the audience of the inner frame.<sup>11</sup> Conditional irony can be determined independently of the (actual or hypothesized) reaction of any character in the inner frame; reverse irony cannot. For a remark to be an example of reverse irony, Socrates' interlocutors or hearers in the inner frame must think he is speaking *eirōnikōs*. Although I shall continue to call this trope 'reverse irony', since I am concerned to delimit specific types of Socratic irony, it might in fact be more accurately called 'reverse *eirōneia*'.

### III. REVERSE IRONY IN THE *APOLOGY*

Reverse irony begins in earnest at 30b ff.<sup>12</sup> To appreciate it we must consider Socrates' own ethical position in the *Apology*, since identifying reverse irony depends upon making a substantive judgement about what Socrates actually believes.

Recall this familiar passage:

You are not right, sir, if you think that a man who is worth any little bit at all ought to give countervailing weight to the risk of living or dying and not to this alone when he acts: whether he is doing just or unjust things, the deeds of a good or a bad man. (28b5–9)

I shall call this principle the 'Supremacy of Virtue' (SV). That a person should always aim to do the virtuous action is the centrepiece of Socratic ethical thought, and it is in light of this that reverse irony will become clear.<sup>13</sup> Acting virtuously is the most important thing, and aiming to act that way is the highest principle of action for human beings. The conceptual connection between SV and philosophy, as Socrates conceives of it, should be clear: if one is to aim at the virtuous action, one must

<sup>10</sup> J. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, 1998), 166–79, esp. 175–6, argues persuasively that Socrates' speech itself involves an 'inversion' of traditional rhetorical tropes. I hope to show that reverse irony involves an inversion of a particularly Socratic trope as well: conditional irony.

<sup>11</sup> Thus attributions of conditional or reverse irony importantly contrast with accusations of *eirōneia* insofar as the latter are sometimes made by speakers within the 'inner frame': e.g. Thrasymachus at *R.* 1.337a4 and, significantly as we shall see, Socrates about himself at *Ap.* 38a1.

<sup>12</sup> See 19a2 for some foreshadowing.

<sup>13</sup> In I. Vasilou, 'Socratic principles, Socratic knowledge', *Philosophical Inquiry* 21.3–4 (1999), 43–60, I contend that understanding the nature of SV (which is there called 'the Supremacy of the Ethical [SE]') is critical for a proper understanding of the argument in the *Apology* and *Crito*, and that it also allows us to resolve the apparent conflict between Socrates' frequent disavowals of moral knowledge and his occasional avowals.

examine and seek knowledge of virtue. To the extent that one does not have that knowledge, one is at risk of doing wrong, and that is the greatest evil.

After declaring his unyielding commitment to practising philosophy, even in the face of a legal injunction not to do so, Socrates says, 'I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god' (30a5–7). This remark will surely be understood by most of the jurors as presenting a wildly inflated sense of self.<sup>14</sup> But we understand that Socrates truly means it, given his acceptance of SV. He believes in SV and spends his life trying to persuade others of it as well.

It also follows from SV that his remarks from 30c onwards are ones he means in the most straightforward sense:

Listen, for I think it will be to your advantage to listen. . . . For know well that if you kill me, being the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus would harm me in any way—for neither would be able to harm me—for I do not think it is permitted (*themiton*) for a better man to be harmed by a worse; certainly he might perhaps kill me, or banish or disfranchise me, which he and others maybe think are great evils, but I do not think so. I think he is doing [himself] much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. Indeed, men of Athens, I am thus far from making a defence now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, lest you go wrong by mistreating god's gift to you in condemning me. (30c4–e1)

Given SV, this must be what Socrates truly believes. The worst thing a person can do is to commit an injustice (or some other violation of virtue) which is a risk that the *jury* but not Socrates (given his truthful testimony) is running. Socrates cannot be harmed by Meletus and Anytus because they cannot harm his character. For Socrates, harm to his body or to his possessions is not harm to him.<sup>15</sup> We readers understand that this is precisely what Socrates thinks is true. We are justified in believing this because all of Socrates' words and deeds cohere with SV. There is no statement or action which generates the conflict necessary for the possibility of attributing irony. As with conditional irony, we may claim that a statement is 'ironic' only on the basis of a conflict between two claims (or a claim and an action, etc.), one of which must be judged to be the truth.<sup>16</sup> There is no such conflict surrounding SV and its ramifications.

If we consider, however, how such remarks would strike the *jury*, *eirōneia* would be the most plausible supposition. When Socrates claims that he is making a defence not for his own but for *their* sakes, the jury is bound to think he is joking or putting them on. There is a more general irony here in that the man who has employed conditional irony throughout his life, now at his trial at last ceases to be ironic and yet knows full well that he will be understood as speaking extremely *eirōnikōs*.

<sup>14</sup> Nehamas (n. 1), 49ff. argues convincingly for a connection between irony and boastfulness, specifically in Socrates' case. Ober (n. 11), 166–79 claims that in such remarks Socrates inverts the typical rhetorical trope of a defendant: instead of claiming to be one of the people, Socrates sets himself apart from the *hoi polloi*.

<sup>15</sup> For elaboration on this and an argument that it is the critical difference between him and Polus in the *Gorgias*, see I. Vasilou, 'Disputing Socratic principles: character and argument in the "Polus episode" of the *Gorgias*', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> I am not saying this criterion should necessarily hold for anything one might want to count as irony. Rather it is a restriction I have put on the types of irony I am concerned with in this paper and in Vasilou (n. 2), the point of which is, in part, to make identification of instances of these types of irony more easily susceptible to rational argumentation on the basis of the text. For similar concerns about irony, and the historical root of those concerns, see H. Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters* (Ithaca, 2000), 108–11. For more complicated notions of irony, including Platonic irony, see Nehamas (n. 1), chs. 1–3.

Asked to assess a penalty for himself, he again engages in reverse irony:

What counter-penalty should I propose to you, gentlemen of the jury? It is clear that it should be [a penalty] I am worthy of. . . . Some good, gentlemen of the jury, if I must truly make an assessment according to what I deserve (*axia*). . . . What is suitable for a poor benefactor who needs leisure to exhort you? Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed at the Prytaneum. . . . if, then, I must make a just assessment of what I deserve, I assess it at this: free meals at the Prytaneum. (36b–37a)

This should not be understood, given SV, as in any sense less than serious and truthful. Yet to the jury it must appear as an extreme example of *eirōneia*. Socrates must seem to the jurors to be joking—to be saying something other than what he really means. But this is not the case. Since Socrates believes he is engaged in the highest good—exhorting men to believe in SV—he, as far as justice is concerned, is deserving of state support. Brickhouse and Smith also argue that Socrates is serious.<sup>17</sup> But there is clearly some ‘play’ going on in addition. Everyone smiles when Socrates says his penalty should be free meals because of how ludicrous it seems to the reader, and how doubly so it must have seemed to at least most of the jury. Brickhouse and Smith acknowledge that ‘though there may well be irony in Socrates’ suggestion, this irony is neither gratuitous nor is it likely to have been seen by the jury, or intended by Socrates, as a mere outrage’ (220). My aim is to specify the particular nature of the irony here. Insofar as it is correct to say it is reverse irony, the jury (or at least most of them) does in fact take Socrates’ statement as *eirōneia*, and the result is, in fact, most probably outrage. I shall argue below, however, that it is not *mere* outrage. Socrates seems to be joking when his life hangs in the balance. It is only given some understanding of Socrates’ ethical views, surely lacking in many (but not all) of the jurors, that we can understand that Socrates is in fact serious.<sup>18</sup>

Socrates himself understands how his remarks will be received.

Perhaps someone might say: Are you not able, going away from us, to live by leading a quiet life in silence? Now this is the most difficult point of all on which to persuade some of you. For, if I say that it is impossible to lead a quiet life because that means disobeying the god, you will not be persuaded and think I am putting you on [*eirōneuomenos*]. But if I say that it is the greatest good for a person to have discussions every day about virtue and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others—for the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being—in saying these things you will believe me even less. (37e–38a)

Because of the failure of the jury to believe in, or even perhaps to understand SV, Socrates claims that they will not be able to understand the entirely candid statements he is making; they will only understand these claims as examples of *eirōneia*. It is important to keep in mind the close connection between SV and Socrates’ activity of continuous testing and examining. No reflective interlocutor should walk away (even if some do) from a Socratic discussion believing that he has the sort of expert knowledge of a virtue that would reliably enable him to pick out instances of that virtue. If SV is the core of Socratic ethics, then the sort of testing that Socrates spends his life engaged in—and that he claims makes life worth living for human beings—makes perfect sense. Socrates exhorts people to spend their time reflecting on the ethical, and conditional irony is a device which prods Socrates’ interlocutors toward that

<sup>17</sup> Brickhouse and Smith (n. 9), 214–21.

<sup>18</sup> The very fact that we must *argue* that Socrates is serious (as, for example, Brickhouse and Smith do) shows that there is something additional going on here; no one ever needs to argue that Aristotle is serious. See Vasilioni (n. 2), §1.

reflection by indulging their beliefs about what virtue consists in. When we contrast the effects of conditional irony with those of reverse irony, we see further the important role of conditional irony in Socrates' more typical conversations. The effect of presenting his audience bluntly with SV and its ramifications is to bewilder and provoke them; his hearers think he is engaging in *eirôneia*. Many of Socrates' interlocutors would be shocked by what Socrates thinks is the truth, and so the *ad hominem* approach of conditional irony provides a way of potentially moving them more successfully, or at least of engaging them in an elenchus.<sup>19</sup>

So why does Socrates use reverse irony here, and what purpose does it serve? Why would Socrates say things that he recognizes most of his audience will understand simply as examples of *eirôneia*? From the perspective of the inner frame, Socrates employs reverse irony in the *Apology* at least in part because he is required to by SV. One unique aspect of the *Apology* as compared with the other early dialogues is that Socrates has been called upon to speak in a positive way about himself and his life. As we have seen, he is required, for example, to say what he believes would be a just punishment for him, not merely to question others about their views.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Socrates is speaking to a large audience. While conditional irony indulges an interlocutor's belief that he has knowledge, in this context he cannot be sure that his audience holds any given opinion; he must address them *en masse*.<sup>21</sup> From the unique facts about the context and audience of the *Apology* one might conclude that Socrates has abandoned any hope of educating his listeners. Forced by the city and by his own ethical beliefs to give the particular speech he has given, he is left with the undesired result of shocking and alienating much of his audience. One might think that Socrates unfortunately had no option in this context, and that in fact this partly explains his remarks, even within the *Apology* itself, about his preference for a private life and for examining individuals one on one (e.g. 36c3 ff.).

But I believe that such a conclusion would be mistaken. By looking at the *Gorgias* we shall see that reverse irony may have a positive effect on the hearer, and that Socrates does not resort to it only in the unique context of the *Apology*. Reverse irony is able to induce immediate *aporia* in a listener, without the necessity of engaging in Socrates' more usual method of conducting an elenchus that shows his interlocutor that his beliefs are inconsistent. Reverse irony is shocking. From 30c2–6, in the midst of the remarks I have quoted as exemplifying reverse irony, Socrates warns the jurors at some length not to shout or cry out at what he is saying (*thorubein*).<sup>22</sup> He knows that his remarks, which we have seen are the consequences of SV, will shock and anger most of the audience. But it will not simply shock them in the way that details of a horrible crime, or excessive greed, or incredible feats of strength might shock or surprise. What

<sup>19</sup> Of course, not necessarily successfully. Socrates' conversations often apparently fail to move their interlocutors. Nevertheless, had Socrates not resorted to conditional irony, we may plausibly suppose that the conversations themselves would have been impossible in many instances.

<sup>20</sup> Without looking at irony closely, if at all, many scholars have discussed the reasons why Socrates says what he does in the *Apology* and *Crito*. Most now agree that his ethical beliefs substantially commit him to speaking and acting in the ways he does. See, for example, R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, 1984); Brickhouse and Smith (n. 9); C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis, 1989). J. Ober, 'Living freely as a slave of the law. Notes on why Sokrates lives in Athens', in *Polis and Politics* (Copenhagen, 2000), argues that Socrates' ethical views make Athens the best place for him to lead a free, consistent, and yet law-abiding life.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this point to Josh Ober.

<sup>22</sup> Shouting or crying out at public speakers was a frequent practice, see J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, 1989), ch. 3.

Socrates says shocks by being puzzling, that is by generating *aporia*. Many in the audience will not understand how it could possibly be true that Socrates is defending them more than himself. They will not understand his claim that Meletus and Anytus can kill him or disfranchise him, and yet not harm him. Therefore I believe that even in the extreme context of the *Apology*, Socrates is attempting to generate perplexity *en masse*, and therefore attempting to do something positive and educative. A thinking, reflective hearer will be puzzled, and will wonder what Socrates means, and whether he can be serious. Indeed contemporary scholarship on the *Apology* (and so this paper as well) is itself part of the continued effect of Socrates' reverse irony. We shall see that this potentially educative effect of reverse irony is explicitly present in the *Gorgias*.

#### IV. REVERSE IRONY IN THE *GORGIAS*

The *Apology* is not, of course, a true dialogue, and so we are deprived of any person's response—other than Meletus' brief answers under cross-examination and the jury's guilty verdict and subsequent condemnation of Socrates to death. I have argued that we can plausibly suppose, however, in part from the jury's decisions and in part from Socrates' warnings and admonitions to the jury not to cry out, that the effect of Socrates' remarks was largely that of reverse irony.

We can gain additional support for this account of the importance of reverse irony when we notice that it occurs in the *Gorgias* as well. SV is the primary ethical truth Socrates claims to know (*Ap.* 29b).<sup>23</sup> It is striking that in two out of the three situations where this is challenged—in the trial and in the discussion in the *Gorgias*, particularly with Polus and Callicles—Socrates resorts to reverse irony.<sup>24</sup> When dealing with the jury, and with Polus, Socrates confronts audiences who may indeed hold that care of the body and of one's possessions is more significant than care of the soul.<sup>25</sup> In both cases Socrates states his own beliefs starkly. In the *Gorgias* we are privy to the interlocutors' reactions and they are stunned, believing that Socrates must be joking, must be speaking only *eirōnikōs*. But Socrates insists that he is sincere, and understanding SV we understand that he *is* sincere. The result of SV in the *Gorgias* is to spur the interlocutors into discussion in order to see how he could seriously maintain what he says.

Let us consider some examples. In the 'Polus episode' of the *Gorgias* Socrates engages in two primary arguments with Polus: one which concludes that someone can do what he sees fit without thereby doing what he wants (466a–468e), and the second which concludes that doing injustice is not only more shameful, but also worse for the doer than for the victim (474d–475e). Prior to the first argument Socrates has explained his view that rhetoric is an *empeiria* and not a *technê*, and that rhetors are mere flatterers and so worthless (466b). Polus is confused and asks how someone who has the greatest power in cities could not count for anything. Socrates then denies that rhetors or tyrants have great power since they do not do what they want.

Scholars have vigorously debated the structure, purpose, and validity of the argument that follows.<sup>26</sup> But on the assumption that this is indeed what Socrates

<sup>23</sup> See Vasiliou (n. 13), §5.

<sup>24</sup> The third case is Thrasymachus in *Republic* 1, which would require a separate treatment, and to which the rest of the *Republic* constitutes the response.

<sup>25</sup> See Vasiliou (n. 15), §2.0.

<sup>26</sup> See esp. K. McTighe, 'Socrates on desire for the good and the involuntariness of wrongdoing: *Gorgias* 466a–468e', *Phronesis* 29 (1984), 193–236, reprinted in H. Benson (ed.), *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates* (Oxford, 1992), 263–97. Detailing the logical errors in the argument,



believes, on some interpretation of 'want' at any rate, such a comment has the effect on Polus of reverse irony. Not interested in following any sustained argument until now, he cannot believe that Socrates is serious and it provokes him to focus on what Socrates is saying.

- SOCRATES: I deny that they [orators and tyrants] do what they want. So, come on, refute me.  
 POLUS: Didn't you just agree that they do what seems to them best?<sup>27</sup>  
 SOCRATES: Yes, and I agree now as well.  
 POLUS: Then don't they do what they want?  
 SOCRATES: I deny it.  
 POLUS: Although they are doing what they think fit?  
 SOCRATES: That's what I say.  
 POLUS: You are saying shocking and monstrous stuff (*schetlia ge legeis kai hyperphuê*), Socrates!  
 SOCRATES: Don't attack me, peerless Polus—to address you in your own style. But if you are able, question me. Show that I am wrong, or else you yourself answer.  
 POLUS: All right, I wish to answer, in order to know too what you mean (*hina kai eidô hoti legeis*). (467b2–c4)

Socrates incites Polus to argument by bluntly and baldly stating what he believes. He flusters and provokes Polus, spurring him to call Socrates' remarks outrageous and monstrous. This is precisely the effect of reverse irony: Socrates says what he believes, but it provokes a reaction in his audience of incredulity. Polus believes that Socrates must be joking. We can see here how reverse irony is a positive force insofar as it pushes Polus to engage in argument by making him perplexed. Pricked by the preposterousness (by his lights) of Socrates' claims, he cannot resist entering an argument to see whether Socrates can really defend it: 'I wish to answer, *in order to know too what you mean*.' Polus is perplexed even before he has been shown any inconsistencies in his beliefs. Indeed in his case it is the perplexity that leads him into argument in the first place, rather than, as with Euthyphro, any avowal of knowledge.

When this argument ends (468e), Polus moves on to other examples and Socrates again has trouble getting Polus to engage in sustained argument. After a number of brief interchanges and traded barbs, Socrates at last settles on another claim: that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it (474b).<sup>28</sup> Socrates provokes Polus with his bald statement that both he himself and everyone else believes this. Polus responds that no one does. After repeating this exchange, Socrates asks, 'Won't you answer then?' and Polus responds, 'Yes, indeed; for I desire to know what on earth you will say (*epithumô eidenai hoti pot' ereis*)' (474c1–3). Once again, in language strikingly similar to that of the previous passage, Socrates has lured the stubborn and thick-headed Polus into an

McTighe maintains a minority view that Socrates does not truly endorse the conclusion, but argues with Polus simply 'destructively', treating him as a hostile witness. Against McTighe (and others), Vlastos (n. 1), ch. 8 and additional note 8.4, argues that Socrates never 'cheats'—that is, he never knowingly uses false premises or draws fallacious inferences when he is engaged in serious argument. Therefore, Socrates (and Plato, presumably) endorse the argument and are ignorant of any fallacies that may be present. In 'Disputing Socratic principles' (n. 15) I argue that Socrates' engagement with Polus is indeed 'constructive', but not in the way Vlastos thinks.

<sup>27</sup> Following Burnet in bracketing *toutou prosthen* at 467b4.

<sup>28</sup> This argument has an advantage over the previous one in that no one doubts that Socrates believes this. If one thinks with McTighe (n. 26) that Socrates does not believe that one can do what one sees fit without doing what one wants, then his earlier enticement of Polus cannot be reverse irony.

argument by using reverse irony and thereby pricking Polus' curiosity to find out just what Socrates is talking about.

The last clear instance of reverse irony that I have found comes at the end of the argument just mentioned.<sup>29</sup> In the last part of this argument (480a–481b) Socrates returns to the question of what the use and power of rhetoric is, and he describes in vivid detail what he sees as the consequences of his belief that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. In this Socratic world you benefit your friends and loved ones by making sure they receive their just punishments for any wrongdoing, even if it requires their death, while you harm your enemies (if, as Socrates is careful to add, you should ever harm anyone) by helping them always to escape punishment in all of their wrongdoings. Preposterous though this sounds, we understand that Socrates, committed to SV and its connected claim that it is never right to do wrong, strictly speaking means just what he says. In the midst of this Socratic diatribe, Polus remarks that what Socrates is saying is indeed strange (*atopa*; 480e1), but then agrees that it seems to follow from what preceded it. At that point, however, Socrates' speech has the effect of reverse irony not so much on Polus as on Callicles, who, after hearing Socrates explain how harming one's enemies would consist in helping them to get away with murder, can no longer contain himself.

- CALLICLES: Tell me, Chairephon, is Socrates serious about these things, or is he joking (*spoudazei tauta Sôkratês ê paizei*)?
- CHAIREPHON: He seems to me, Callicles, to be exceedingly serious (*hyperphuôs spoudazein*); but there's nothing like asking him.
- CALLICLES: Indeed I desire to do just that, by the gods (*nê tous theous all' epithumô*).  
Tell me, Socrates, should we take you to be serious just now or to be joking (*spoudazonta ê paizonta*)? (481b6–c1)

Callicles goes on to say that if Socrates is serious and is right, the way people live their lives would in fact be 'upside down'. Callicles, like Polus before him, has been drawn into the argument as the result of Socrates speaking his mind. Callicles reacts precisely the way we would expect from reverse irony: he thinks Socrates cannot be serious but must be joking or somehow putting them on. It is notable that Plato includes Chairephon in this interchange,<sup>30</sup> Socrates' close friend who, according to the *Apology*, famously asked the Oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. Chairephon has no doubt that Socrates is being 'exceedingly' serious, presumably knowing more than anyone else present about Socrates' own views. Callicles, by contrast, thinks it more plausible to think Socrates is joking, and desires, by the gods, to find out whether he is. Callicles is experiencing *aporia* but not—or not yet anyway—by being shown that his beliefs are inconsistent. Knowing how these remarks will sound to his listener, Socrates has once again provoked a new interlocutor into conversation with him and generated perplexity by means of reverse irony.

<sup>29</sup> On the nature and validity of this argument, see Vasiliou (n. 15), esp. §§3.0–3.1. For different interpretations, see T. Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford, 1979), 154ff.; C. Kahn, 'Drama and dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983), 75–121; M. Mackenzie, *Plato on Punishment* (Berkeley, 1981), 242; G. Santas, *Socrates* (London, 1979), 233–46; G. Vlastos, 'Was Polus refuted?', *American Journal of Philology* 88 (1967), 454–60; Vlastos (n. 1), ch. 8, esp. 139–48.

<sup>30</sup> These are Chairephon's only lines in the *Gorgias* other than the first two Stephanus pages.

## V. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REVERSE IRONY

Recognizing reverse irony is important for understanding Socrates' method. First, it gives us insight into Socrates' more normal mode of ironic discourse. If he had altogether abandoned the irony that kept his real views for the most part implicit during his elenctic conversations, he would have spent his time speaking in the manner of the passages I have quoted as exemplifying reverse irony. Socrates at his most straightforward antagonizes and bewilders his audience to the point where they condemn him to death. But Socrates is not suicidal and apparently desires to have a real effect on his society (*Ap.* 30b ff., 32a ff.; *G.* 521d), albeit from outside mainstream Athenian politics.<sup>31</sup> If Socrates had employed nothing but reverse irony it would most probably have had a deleterious effect both on the length of his career and his ability to achieve his stated goal: to persuade people to care for virtue more than anything else and thereby to appreciate the truth of SV. By employing conditional irony, he is able to conduct his conversations with most people more easily and more effectively.

More importantly, however, I have argued that even within the context of the *Apology* Socrates might have reasonably expected his reverse irony to have a positive effect insofar as it would provoke perplexity—a necessary first step towards seeking and possibly acquiring knowledge—without requiring the listener to be subject to an *elenchus*. The use of reverse irony in the *Gorgias* shows us its value in more private contexts as well. Like conditional irony, reverse irony can be an ally to the elenchus. Confronting both Polus and Callicles bluntly with what he believes, Socrates is able to provoke these interlocutors into argument by inducing *aporia* in them prior to elenctic argument. When conditional irony is employed, the interlocutor is led into perplexity on account of inconsistencies in his beliefs, usually about an answer to Socrates' 'What is F?' question. In this context conditional irony is effective because it indulges the interlocutor's conceit of knowledge until he is forced to admit, at the least, that he cannot say what it is he thinks he knows. At this point, the interlocutor is sometimes willing to accept help from Socrates (e.g. *Eu.* 11b) or someone else (e.g. *La.* 194a ff.) in an effort to find out how to proceed. But we have seen that Socrates employs reverse irony to provoke recalcitrant interlocutors into engaging with him in argument in the first place. We can also plausibly suppose that in the context of the *Apology*, when his opportunity to address young and old, rich and poor, citizen and stranger had come to an end, reverse irony may well have provoked some of his audience to puzzle through his claims in order to understand how he could be serious in what he says. In the *Gorgias* we witness Socrates successfully provoking his interlocutors into argument by baldly declaring the surprising ramifications of his position. Reverse irony, then, is an expedient and efficient means of generating perplexity.<sup>32</sup>

Brooklyn College, City University of New York

I AKOVOS VASILIOU  
vasiliou@brooklyn.cuny.edu

<sup>31</sup> See Ober (n. 10), ch. 4; for a contrasting view, see Nehamas (n. 1), esp. ch. 6.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Alexander Nehamas for discussion about irony and Josh Ober for comments on an earlier version of this paper. In addition, I am especially grateful to the anonymous referee for helpful criticisms and suggestions.