

THE PRACTICAL IRONY OF THE HISTORICAL SOCRATES

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PROBABLY FROM SOCRATES' OWN TIME, certainly from Aristotle's time, irony has been a central feature in the description of the philosopher from Alopeke. The importance of Socrates' irony is reflected in the title of an influential book, stemming from influential teaching and articles, by Gregory Vlastos: *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*.¹ In Vlastos's discussion, and generally, irony is assumed to be an exclusively verbal phenomenon. The Greeks, however, down through the fourth century B.C.E., knew of a practical irony. It was an irony of manner or more broadly of style. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses Spartan dress, i.e., the imitation of Spartan dress by Athenians, as an example of irony (1127b27–28). Socrates, it will be seen, was associated by contemporaries with this particular style and thus with practical irony as defined by Aristotle.

Aristotle's discussion of irony appears in a chapter on truthfulness, the mean between the extremes of boastfulness and irony. He begins: "let us discuss truthful persons and untruthful persons in words and in practices (πράξεις) and in their claims about themselves" (1127a19–20). An irony of practices, a practical irony, is presupposed. Consistently with this starting point, Aristotle's whole discussion of the mean and the extremes looks to public and social context. Theophrastus follows Aristotle.² He begins his character sketch of the ironist: "Irony would seem to be . . . a pretense of the worse in practices and in words" (προσποίησις ἐπὶ χεῖρον πράξεων καὶ λόγων, *Char.* 5.1 Jebb-Sandys). For a narrower, exclusively verbal sense of irony, one can compare the definition in the roughly contemporary *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*: "Irony is to say something while pretending not to say it or to call things by the opposite names" (1434a17–18). The author of this rhetorical treatise has formulated a definition in which the notion of practice is absent. Irony now has the purely verbal status that it will have in Cicero and in Quintilian (except for a single intriguing statement to be discussed below, 202).³

Vlastos, thinking of verbal irony, resolutely denied irony in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. "The anti-hero of the *Clouds* is many things to many men, but an ironist to none."⁴ But with this comedy one can begin to describe the practical irony of the historical Socrates.

¹ Vlastos 1991.

² Steinmetz 1962: 8, 36–37. On Theophrastus' ironist, see Büchner 1941: 348–349.

³ Cic. *Brut.* 292; *De orat.* 2.67 (Socrates an example); Quint. 6.2.15, 8.6.54–59, 9.2.44–46 (Socrates an example).

⁴ Vlastos 1991: 29.

1. CLOUDS

To talk about Socrates in *Clouds* is apparently to step into a yes-no cycle that, starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, has not run down.⁵ Yes, it is the historical Socrates. No, it is not the historical Socrates. A forceful twentieth century no, that of K. J. Dover in his commentary on *Clouds* (1968), only initiated a new yes phase of the cycle.⁶ But everyone, including Dover, agrees that the description of Socrates in lines 362–363 can be taken as historical, and one of the elements of the description can be shown, with reference to Aristotle, to be a matter of practical irony.

Their context is as follows. The old farmer, Strepsiades, deeply in debt because of his son's obsession with horses, is forced to enter Socrates' school in order to learn how to defraud his creditors. He asks Socrates to teach him "the unjust speech." In order to matriculate, Strepsiades must be initiated into the religion of the Clouds, the divinities of Socrates and his followers. As part of the ceremony, Socrates must invoke the Clouds, who appear and speak to him as one of their favorites. They say that, when called, they would answer, among present-day "meteorosophists," only Prodicus and Socrates—Prodicus because of his skill and intelligence (361), i.e., because of genuine abilities. Why Socrates? Because, say the Clouds,

ὅτι βρενθύει τ' ἐν ταῖσιν ὁδοῖς καὶ τῷφθαλμῷ παραβάλλεις
κάνυπόδητος κακὰ πόλλ' ἀνέχει κάφ' ἡμῖν σεμνοπροσωπεῖς.

You swagger in the streets and cast your eyes sideways,
and, going barefoot, endure many ills, and put on a grave face
on our account. (362–363)

They answer Socrates, then, not because of his abilities or inner qualities but because of externals—his mannerisms and his lifestyle. The description of Socrates' in these two lines consists of four elements.

1. βρενθύει. It is coupled with παραβάλλεις by τε . . . καί, and the two verbs thus seem to form a unit. In Plato's *Symposium* (221b3–4), Alcibiades couples the two verbs, citing the passage in Aristophanes just quoted, in a description of Socrates' bravery during the retreat from Delium. "I thought that there as also here [i.e., in Athens] . . . he went along swaggering and casting his eyes sideways." Alcibiades then goes on to provide a gloss on casting the eyes sideways, but nothing on the verb βρενθύεσθαι.

This verb is the most difficult of the four elements in the description of Socrates. The main reason for the translation "swagger" is context: the phrase ἐν ταῖσιν ὁδοῖς "in the streets" in Aristophanes and the verb διαπορεύεσθαι "to

⁵ Part 1 of this article is a revised and updated version of part of Edmunds 1987.

⁶ Dover 1968; the new yes-cycle (for example): Rossetti 1974; Nussbaum 1980; Kleve 1983a.

go along” in Alcibiades’ description (221b1).⁷ If, as seems likely, βρενθύεσθαι comes from βρένθος, an unknown kind of waterbird, this verb would mean specifically “to walk like a *brenthos*,” and the gait of this bird would be implicit in the etymology proposed by Emile Boisacq.⁸ He reconstructed an Indo-European root **g^wrendh-* from which Latin *grandis* and Old Slavic *grodi* “breast” would also descend. The Greek waterbird would thus get its name from its chest, and the name would correspond to the English bird name “puffin,” which refers to the bird’s characteristic puffing out of its chest.

2. Casting the eyes sideways. Alcibiades’ gloss on τῷφθαλμῷ παραβάλλεις is ἡρέμα παρασκοπῶν καὶ τοὺς φίλους καὶ τοὺς πολεμίους, (221b4). ἡρέμα here can hardly mean “gently.” It must refer to a calm, slow glance (LSJ⁹ s.v. 3): thus “slowly glancing around at both friends and enemies.”⁹ But what would such a glance convey? Both Photius, citing Archippus (fr. 52 K = 59 K-A), a fifth-century comic poet, and Eustathius (204 *ad Il.* 2.212), bring this sort of glance into their definition of σιλλοῦν, “to ridicule or mock.”¹⁰ Eustathius explains that this verb means “to turn the eyes aside slowly (ἡρέμα) in depreciation or ridicule.”¹¹ With this explanation, it is easier to understand how Socrates, as Alcibiades said, used the same mannerism both on the battlefield and in the streets of Athens, toward both enemies and friends.

The phrase from *Clouds* quoted by Alcibiades in praise of Socrates is quoted once again in Greek literature, this time by someone hostile to Socrates, the Epicurean Philodemus.¹² In the tenth book of *On Vices*, Philodemus writes about various types of the ὑπερήφανος, “the arrogant man.” One of these types is the σεμνοκόπος, “the one who affects grandeur.” Philodemus reports:

[They used to say that he] swaggered (verb βρενθύεσθαι) and they used to name him and still now name him a swaggerer . . . , the one who . . . looks down and looks askance at (παρεμβλέποντα) everyone and nods downward with his head and belittles those he meets or those whom anyone mentions, even if they are among those considered important, with ridicule and a brief, if any, answer that reveals his own superiority and assigns no worth to

⁷ The scholiast on *Clouds* 363 connects the verb with Socrates’ gait.

⁸ Boisacq 1950 s.v. βρενθύομαι. He was followed by Pokorny (1994 s.v. **g^wrendh-*). This etymology was abandoned in the etymological dictionaries of Frisk (1960) and Chantraine (1968–1980).

⁹ Cf. Pl. *Phd.* 103a: καὶ ὁ Σωκράτης παραβαλὼν τὴν κεφαλὴν . . .

¹⁰ They cite a certain Aelius Dionysius. See, in *Der Kleine Pauly*, no. 23 s.v. Dionysios: “angeblich ein Nachfahre des Rhetors . . . in hadrianischer Zeit.”

¹¹ I have these references from Lowry 1991: 130–137, where he discusses *silloi*, the Homeric Litai and their relation to Thersites, and Socrates’ sidelong glances, which he interprets as squinting. Cf. Pl. *Phd.* 86d (he opened his eyes wide as he often used to do); 117b (ὥσπερ εἰώθει ταυρηδὸν ὑποβλέψας). Cf. Patzer 1993: 85–86. Borthwick (2001) explains that the adjective *blepedaimon* is applied to Socrates (at Eust. 206.27) because “it was by their being in thrall to . . . Socrates’ insistently glaring eyes that their appearance and behaviour could, at least in the case of Chaerephon, be accounted for” (301).

¹² Also quoted by Diogenes Laertius (2.28).

anyone else. As Aristophanes said in his comedy, "He swaggers in the streets and casts his eyes sideways." (Col. XXI.13–37 Jensen).¹³

In this context, the quotation from *Clouds* implicitly puts Socrates, whom Philodemus also mentions by name in this treatise,¹⁴ in the category of the *semnokoros*, the man who puts on airs, who is governed by a sense of his own superiority, which he does nothing to conceal.

A preliminary conclusion from the first and second elements in the description of Socrates in line 362 of *Clouds*: Socrates, the public figure (note ἐν ταῖσιν ὁδοῖς, "in the streets"), the Socrates who could be seen in the marketplace and the gymnasium, drew attention to himself by his manner, by the attitude of haughtiness he conveyed, which was taken as depreciation and derision.¹⁵ Socrates maintained this attitude even when he was on trial for his life.¹⁶

3. "Barefoot, you endure many ills" (363). If there is one indisputable historical fact about Socrates, it is barefootedness. Amipsias in his *Connus* (fr. 9 K = 9 K-A), produced on the same occasion as *Clouds*, jokes about it.¹⁷ In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Antiphon the Sophist holds it against Socrates (1.6.2–3). From the description of Aristodemus at the beginning of the *Symposium*, one could conclude that an enthusiastic follower of Socrates would always go barefoot (173b2), as Socrates did (Pl. *Phdr.* 229a3–4). When Strepsiades emerges from Socrates' school in *Clouds*, his son, Pheidippides, asks him: "What have you done with your shoes?" (858).¹⁸

In the same context with Socrates' shoelessness, his single threadbare cloak (*himation*), always the same one winter and summer, will be mentioned (Amipsias *ibid.*; Xen. *ibid.*). In *Clouds*, one of Socrates' scientific demonstrations culminates in the theft of a cloak from a wrestling school (177–179), and in Socrates' school Strepsiades is relieved of this garment as well as of his shoes (856).

So much, then, for the shoelessness of Socrates and the single cloak. As for "enduring many ills," the reference is, of course, to his capacity for enduring the deprivations that were the result of his chosen poverty (Pl. *Apol.* 31c2–3). As someone in Amipsias' *Connus* says, καρτερικός γ' εἶ ("you are capable of endurance," *ibid.*). Socrates practiced round-the-clock asceticism, sleeping not on a bed but a pallet (*skimpous*, Ar. *Nub.* 254; Pl. *Prt.* 310c1).¹⁹ Antiphon the Sophist, again in Xenophon, says to Socrates that, if his regimen were imposed

¹³ The ellipsis is in my translation; it is not a lacuna in the text.

¹⁴ In the next section (XXI.37–XXIII.37), in which Philodemus discusses the *eirones*.

¹⁵ I cannot agree with the conclusion of Bergson (1971: 418) that Socrates wished to avoid being blamed for being *semnos*.

¹⁶ Cf. Danzig 2003.

¹⁷ See Patzer 1994: 60–67 for discussion of the fragment.

¹⁸ It is possible that he gave the shoes as payment: see Dover 1968 on 859. But the point of the joke would be the same: Socrates and his followers need shoes and will therefore take payment in the form of shoes.

¹⁹ Cf. Patzer 1993: 87–88.

on a slave, the slave would desert his master (*Mem. ibid.*). This καρτερία or “endurance” of Socrates is the theme of much of Alcibiades’ description of Socrates in the *Symposium* (219d7, 220a1, a6, c2). Alcibiades gives a sense of its effect on ordinary people. He tells how, in the winter weather at Potidaea, Socrates went about barefoot and in his usual cloak while the others were freezing. “The soldiers looked at him suspiciously as if he were showing contempt for them” (ὥς καταφρονούντα σφῶν, 220c1). The shoelessness of Socrates thus belongs to a style of self-deprivation and this style, like the mannerisms already discussed (elements one and two), could convey to others an attitude of superiority.

4. “You put on a grave face.” What is a grave face, and how did Socrates put on such a face? Xenophon’s *Symposium* provides a clue. Each of the guests in turn is asked what he prides himself on. Socrates’ response is preceded by a change in his facial expression: μάλα σεμνῶς ἀνασπάσας τὸ πρόσωπον, “very haughtily drawing up his face” (3.10). Then he says that he prides himself on the trade of being a procurer, and everyone laughs.²⁰ But how did he draw up his face? Of the two sets of facial muscles that can “draw up the face,” one is around the nose, and the other is in the brow. When Xenophon describes Socrates as “very haughtily drawing up his face,” he probably refers to raising the eyebrows (and not to tilting his face backwards so as to look down his nose). Someone in a three-word fragment of Cratinus is described as ἀνελκταῖς ὀφρύσι σεμνόν, “haughty with raised eyebrows” (fr. 355 K = 348 K-A). A fourth-century comic poet, Amphis, described Plato as σεμνῶς ἐπηρκῶς τὰς ὀφρύς, “with haughtily raised eyebrows” (fr. 13 K = fr. 13 K-A).²¹ In σεμνοπροσωπεῖς, then, in *Clouds* 363, there are two notions, raised eyebrows and haughtiness, or perhaps better superciliousness (from *supercilium*, “eyebrow”), a trait he shared with Anaxagoras, whose notion of mind as the cause of all things attracted him when he was young (*Pl. Phd.* 96a6–99d2).²²

The superciliousness of Socrates became proverbial from an early time. In the *Pedetai* of Callias, which can be dated to the early years of the Peloponnesian War (on the basis of frs. 20–21 K-A), someone (Euripides in drag? Euripides’ Muse? a personified tragedy of Euripides?) is asked why she is haughty (*semne*) and presumptuous (φρονεῖς . . . μέγα).²³ The answer: “Because it’s allowed me. Socrates is responsible” (fr. 15 K-A). (The speaker’s reasoning is apparently: Socrates is the cause of this trait in me and that’s my authority—that’s why

²⁰ At 4.56–60, Socrates’ interlocutors ask for and get an explanation of his bizarre assertion. Vlastos (1991: 30–31) cites this passage as an example of “complex irony.”

²¹ Bato (third century) uses this phrase of philosophers (fr. 5.13 K-A), as Jeffrey Henderson pointed out to me. Cf. Menander frs. 34, 395 Koerte and *Sic.* 160; Imperio 1998a: 127. Socrates was the originator of this identifying characteristic of the philosopher.

²² On this trait in Anaxagoras, see Turato 1995: 20. Empedocles was said to have imitated Anaxagoras’ haughty style (D.L. 8.56 = Pythagoras A 5 D-K).

²³ For the very problematic identification of the character, see Imperio 1998b: 223; Patzer 1994: 56. For φρονεῖς . . . μέγα, see LSJ⁹ s.v. φρονέω II.2.b.

it's allowed me.)²⁴ At the end of Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 B.C.E.), the chorus, explaining Dionysus' choice of Aeschylus over Euripides, sings a song in praise of the man of true intelligence, who would shun association with Socrates; only a crazy man, says the chorus, would waste time on hair-splitting, pretentious (adj. *semnos*) words in the company of Socrates (1491–99). Lysias, in a speech written for a client prosecuted by a follower of Socrates, Aeschines of Sphettus, refers to the latter's "many pretentious (adj. *semnos*) discourses about justice and virtue" (fr. 1.2 Thalheim), with the obvious implication that Aeschines' words were hollow.²⁵

To conclude, the four elements of Socrates' style described in *Clouds* 362–363 have a common denominator in his projection, through various mannerisms, of an attitude of superiority. One of these elements, however, the third one, was considered a kind of irony, the kind which I am calling practical irony. It is the example of Spartan dress, mentioned above, in Aristotle's discussion of irony which opens this particular perspective on Socrates' *karteria*.

II. ARISTOTLE *EN* 4.1127A13–B32

Truthfulness in the sense of sincerity or matter-of-factness, i.e., to claim neither more nor less than one has, is the mean between irony or self-deprecation and its opposite, boasting (*alazoneia*). Aristotle gives one named example of irony: Socrates. As P. W. Gooch has shown, Socrates is not for Aristotle just an isolated example but the model that controls his entire analysis.²⁶ And it is this analysis that, for the first time, allows irony both a degree of truthfulness and a degree of gracefulness, freeing it from its earlier consistently pejorative sense.²⁷ Elsewhere, Aristotle's view of irony is mainly negative, in keeping with what might be called the common-sense understanding of the matter.²⁸ This understanding persisted long after Aristotle. It reappears in Epicurus' negative evaluation of Socratic irony (Cic. *Brutus* 292),²⁹ which is continued by his followers Philodemus and Colotes, for whom irony is still indistinguishable from *alazoneia*, as it was for Strepsiades in the fifth century.³⁰

Irony is not, however, the virtue which Aristotle is discussing, but one of the extremes between which the virtue in question lies, and it is necessary to be

²⁴ Cf. D.L. 2.24: αὐτάρκης τε ἦν καὶ σέμνος; 2.27: ἐσεμνόνετο ἐπὶ τῇ εὐτελείᾳ.

²⁵ Cf. de Vries 1944–45, who finds that *semnos* and cognate words are ironical or unfavorable in Plato (twenty-eight of thirty times).

²⁶ Gooch 1987.

²⁷ Cf. Ribbeck 1876: 388; Bergson 1971: 413–414.

²⁸ Gooch 1987: 98. Contrary to what Gooch suggests in n. 7 on this page, irony, as associated with the *megalopsuchos* (1124b29–31), would not have a simply positive sense but would refer to haughtiness.

²⁹ Irony was the Epicureans' main objection to Socrates: cf. Riley 1980 and Kleve 1983b. Long (1988: 152) cautions: "irony cannot be said to constitute a dominant feature of Socrates when we are considering his positive role in the mainstream of Hellenistic philosophy."

³⁰ In the section of *De vitiis* on irony, Philodemus speaks of the ironist as a type of *alazon* (21.37–38). Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1117d: Socrates used ἀλαζόνας λόγους. Cf. Strepsiades at Ar. *Nu.* 449.

precise about where, according to Aristotle, Socrates stands in relation to the virtue. While it looks as if Socrates is the paragon of proper irony, Aristotle gives an example of improper irony (Spartan dress) which applies perfectly to Socrates, although Aristotle seems not be aware of this fact. This contradiction in Aristotle's account, to be explained below, is one more puzzling trait in a chapter already puzzling in crucial ways.³¹

οἱ δ' εἰρωνες ἐπὶ τὸ ἔλαττον λέγοντες χαριέστεροι μὲν τὰ ἥθη φαίνονται· οὐ γὰρ κέρδους ἔνεκα δοκοῦσι λέγειν, ἀλλὰ φεύγοντες τὸ ὀγκηρόν· μάλιστα δὲ καὶ οὗτοι τὰ ἔνδοξα ἀπαρνοῦνται, οἷον καὶ Σωκράτης ἐποίει. οἱ δὲ τὰ μικρὰ καὶ φανερά [προσποιούμενοι] βαυκοπανοῦργοι λέγονται καὶ εὐκαταφρονητότεροί εἰσιν· καὶ ἐνίοτε ἀλαζονεία φαίνεται, οἷον ἡ τῶν Λακόνων ἐσθῆς· καὶ γὰρ ἡ ὑπερβολὴ καὶ ἡ λίαν ἔλλειψις ἀλαζονικόν. οἱ δὲ μετρίως χρώμενοι τῇ εἰρωνείᾳ καὶ περὶ τὰ μὴ λίαν ἐμποδὼν καὶ φανερά εἰρωνευόμενοι χαρίεντες φαίνονται. ἀντικείμεθα δ' ὁ ἀλαζών φαίνεται τῷ ἀληθευτικῷ· χείρων γάρ. (1127b22–32)

I offer a paraphrase, with brief comments: Ironists, speaking in understatement, are, as such, already closer to the virtuous mean than boasters (cf. 1127b7–8). They present a more graceful character. Ironists do not speak for the sake of gain, as, Aristotle has just shown, boasters sometimes do. They seek to avoid pompousness. Especially do ironists also deny things generally approved or in good repute (τὰ ἔνδοξα), as Socrates also used to do.³² (I shall return to the question of what these *endoxa* are.) Those, on the other hand, who deny things that are trivial and obvious are affected devils (the word βαυκοπανοῦργοι is a hapax and sounds like slang or something from a comedy) and rather contemptible. And sometimes it (their behavior) is imposture (as I shall here translate *alazoneia*), for example, Spartan dress. For excess and excessive deficiency are impostures. Those who use irony moderately and who are ironic with respect to that which is not too commonplace and obvious appear as graceful, while the impostor (*alazon*) appears to be the opposite of the truthful person, for he is worse (than the ironist). (The ironist, then, is not completely the opposite of the truthful person.)

The word *endoxa* occurs six times in *EN*, twice in the masculine plural, of persons, and twice in a well-known programmatic passage, where it means “things generally admitted” (1145b2–7). The other two occurrences are in the passage under discussion. Because Aristotle begins his description of the ironist with two references to irony as speech (1127b22–23, 24) it seems that Socrates' denial (verb ἀπαρνέσθαι) must also be a matter of speech and not a practical refusal. Then Socrates is, on Aristotle's account, denying or disclaiming (that he has) things generally approved (as good or desirable). The main such thing that Socrates

³¹ Gooch 1987: 98: “We were not prepared . . . to have Aristotle's scheme end up with a putative vice vicious only in the measure that it harbours its opposing vice. That is puzzling.”

³² The verb ποίεω is “used in the second clause, to avoid repeating the Verb of the first” (LSJ⁹ s.v.).

denied or disclaimed, to judge by Plato and Xenophon, was wisdom.³³ The inferior ironists, again on Aristotle's account, deny or disclaim that they have qualities which are unimportant. At this point, however, just where Aristotle says that their irony can turn into its opposite, i.e., *alazoneia*, he uses an example that takes the discussion out of the realm of verbal irony. Spartan dress is a matter of what someone does, not what someone says.

Although Aristotle uses Socrates, in the passage under discussion, as an example of proper, verbal irony, which is attractive and is closer to the virtue under discussion than is irony's opposite (*alazoneia*), it happens that, in his own time, Socrates appeared to demonstrate Aristotle's excessive irony, which becomes its opposite, i.e., *alazoneia*, jumping over the virtuous mean with which Aristotle wants to associate Socrates. It was precisely in the matter of dress that Socrates went to this opposite extreme. His single cloak has already been mentioned. Its connotation would have been obvious to his fellow-Athenians, who were well aware of philo-Laconian, anti-democratic circles in their midst who went in for boxing and hard exercise (Pl. *Gorg.* 515e8–9; *Protag.* 342b6–c2). The single cloak was unambiguously Spartan. From the age of twelve, the Spartans wore a single cloak throughout the year (Xen. *Lac.* 2.4, on the Lycurgan educational system). The Spartan king Agesilaus was highly esteemed for his moderation, of which a simple cloak (*tribon*) was an aspect (Plut. *Ages.* 14.4). Socrates' shoelessness, already mentioned, also connoted Sparta. In the same passage in which he refers to the young Spartans' single cloak, Xenophon says that they were required to go without sandals (14.3).

Aristophanes explicitly links Socrates with the Spartan style as practiced in Athens. In *Birds*, the verb σωκρατεῖν, "to be a Socrates," is synonymous with λακωνομανεῖν, "to be possessed by Laconomania," "to be philo-Spartan," which is also specified as to go without a haircut, to be hungry, and to be dirty (*Av.* 1281–82; cf. *Nub.* 440–442 [Strepsiades' expectations concerning life in Socrates' school], 833–837 with schol.).³⁴ A freshly bathed and well-shod Socrates was a rare sight (Pl. *Symp.* 174a3–5; cf. *Ar. Nub.* 837); his food was generally of the poorest kind (Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2; this passage was cited above in connection with Socrates' capacity for endurance).

Clouds provides a good example of how Socrates' particular style could be perceived as *alazoneia* or imposture. When, at the beginning of the play, Strepsiades tries to persuade Pheidippides to enter Socrates' school, it turns out that Strepsiades does not even know Socrates' name (just as in Plato's *Laches* old Lysimachus, Socrates' fellow demesman, knows nothing about Socrates and his activities [180b7–e1]). Pheidippides, however, who is more au courant than his father, says: "I know them. You mean the *alazones*, the palefaces, the

³³ Gooch 1987: 101–102: one could add a good memory, rhetorical skill, and argumentative skill, all of which the Platonic Socrates sometimes denies that he possesses.

³⁴ Citing *Av.* 1281–82, Lipka (2002: 122) suggests that it was because of the single, never-changed cloak that the Spartans (and their Athenian imitators) looked dirty.

ones who go without shoes, like the godforsaken Socrates and Chaerephon" (102–104). (Similarly, Laches' sons know who Socrates is [180e4–181a3].) In Pheidippides' mind, *alazoneia* and going barefoot are closely connected and belong to the essential description of Socrates. Pheidippides' spontaneous remark gives the common-sense version of Aristotle's proposition that irony of the kind exemplified by Spartan dress could seem to be an imposture.

Aristotle's example of Spartan dress, then, happens to fit the case of Socrates perfectly, though not the case of Aristotle's own Socrates. Further, this example shows that Socrates' style of self-deprivation could be perceived as practical irony. A case of this irony and its effect has already been cited above in Part I: Socrates at Potidaea barefoot and wearing only his usual cloak, which his fellow-soldiers took as a sign of contempt (Pl. *Symp.* 220c1).

III. SOCRATIC IRONY IN PLATO

Joseph Cotter has argued that εἴρων derives from the Spartan ἰρήν (= Attic εἴρην, "young Spartan soldier"), whose training notoriously included the systematic use of paramilitary deception. To the base of this word was added the suffix –ων, a common way of creating epithets and nicknames. If Cotter is right, then in its origin εἴρων has to do at least partly and perhaps wholly with practical irony.³⁵ As Vlastos observes, in the earliest uses of *eironeia* in Aristophanes and down through Theophrastus in the fourth century B.C.E., the word often denotes "sly, intentionally deceptive speech or conduct."³⁶ Deception is indeed the common denominator of the earliest uses of εἴρων and words formed on this base, which have such connotations as pretext and trickery (Ar. *Vesp.* 174–176; note τεχνωμένους) and feigned ignorance and mockery (Ar. *Av.* 1208–11; note Iris' mocking repetition of Pisetaerus' words).³⁷ But already the word refers to verbal behavior (as most clearly in Strepsiades' list of various pejorative terms for clever, deceptive speakers at Ar. *Nub.* 449), and one can see why Vlastos, having mentioned ironic "conduct," never returned to this matter.³⁸

As for irony in Plato, it seems to be a foregone conclusion that it is a verbal phenomenon, even if, as the discussion of *Clouds* 362–363 showed, both Plato and Xenophon preserve traits of Socrates that amount to a practical irony. The persistent verbal irony of the Platonic Socrates, of which all readers are aware, is what matters. It can be shown, however, that, in at least one attestation of the verb εἰρωνεύομαι in Plato—and an important one—, practical irony is part and perhaps all of the meaning.

³⁵ Cotter 1992. Cf. the possible origin of ἀλαζών in the name of the Thracian tribe Ἀλαζήνες (Hdt. 4.17.52): Bonfante 1936.

³⁶ Vlastos 1991: 25.

³⁷ Ar. *Pax* 623 (διειρωνόξενοι) probably has the same common denominator. The generalization about Aristophanes by Nehamas (1998: 58) overlooks the patent sense of mockery at Ar. *Av.* 1208–11.

³⁸ Vlastos 1991: 25.

For Socrates' irony, Vlastos finds a "key sentence" in the speech of Alcibiades in *Symposium*: "He spends his entire life *eironeuomenos* and jesting with people" (216e4).³⁹ Vlastos's procedure is to use another, later sentence to explain this one (218d6–7: Socrates spoke *ironikos*). These places are crucial to Vlastos's interpretation of Socrates' irony as free from any untruthfulness or deceit, so that Socrates will play a "critical role in the mutation of *eirōneia* into irony."⁴⁰ Socrates is not deceitful because he both means and does not mean what he says, so that his irony is a teaching device. His interlocutors have to figure out what he really means. Vlastos's name for this device is "complex irony."⁴¹

A year after the publication of Vlastos's book on Socrates, Alexander Nehamas in his Sather Lectures (1992–93) offered a critique of Vlastos's interpretation of Socrates' irony.⁴² He argued that "[t]he simple contrast between truthfulness and lying cannot capture either Socrates' character or his way of doing philosophy."⁴³ In his earlier review of Vlastos, Nehamas had said more strongly: "Taking his [Socrates'] disavowals as complex ironies robs him of his strangeness and in fact eliminates his irony."⁴⁴ Nehamas stressed the element of concealment in Socrates' irony, which "introduces complexity even in the simplest cases of irony."⁴⁵ He also emphasized the sense of superiority that is "irony's constant companion,"⁴⁶ the sense that, I have suggested, lies behind the practical irony of Socrates.

Nehamas discussed the second of the two passages in the *Symposium* just mentioned at length (218d6–219a4). As for the first passage, Nehamas was well aware that practical irony is presupposed, and he cited this passage apropos of Quintilian's observation on Socrates' "whole life" as ironic (9.2.46), on which he acutely observed that, on this account, it "does not even depend on words."⁴⁷ But the first passage Nehamas did not discuss at length, and its implications for practical irony remain to be drawn out.

The context of 216e4 (*eironeuomenos*) is Alcibiades' account of his attempted seduction of Socrates, a distinct section of his speech which begins at 216c4.⁴⁸ Like

³⁹ Vlastos 1991: 33. The translation is Vlastos's.

⁴⁰ Vlastos 1991: 31.

⁴¹ Vlastos 1991: 31: "In 'simple' irony what is said just isn't what is meant: taken in its ordinary, commonly understood, sense the statement is simply false. In 'complex' irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another. Thus when Socrates says that he is a 'procurer' he does not and yet does, mean what he says."

⁴² Nehamas 1998: 46–69. Vlastos's book also provoked a spate of articles on Socrates' irony. For a bibliography, see Vasiliou 1999: 458, n. 6, to which add Vasiliou 2002.

⁴³ Nehamas 1998: 59.

⁴⁴ Nehamas [1992]1999: 102.

⁴⁵ Nehamas 1998: 62.

⁴⁶ Nehamas 1998: 62.

⁴⁷ Nehamas 1998: 56.

⁴⁸ A paragraph indentation in the OCT correctly indicates the beginning of this section of Alcibiades' speech. Cf. the outline of the speech in Dover 1980: 164–165. Dover also sees the beginning of a new section at 216c4.

all the rest of the speech, this section is guided by the image of Socrates as satyr, more precisely a carved figure of Marsyas that opens up to reveal images of the gods inside (215a6–216a2). The outside and the inside have opposite qualities. With the outer erotic Socrates, Alcibiades contrasts the inner *sophrosyne* of Socrates. Vlastos's "key sentence" appears in Alcibiades' characterization of this *sophrosyne*:

ἴστε ὅτι οὔτε εἴ τις καλός ἐστι μέλει αὐτῷ οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ καταφρονεῖ τοσοῦτον ὅσον οὐδ' ἂν εἴς οἰηθείη, οὔτ' εἴ τις πλούσιος, οὔτ' εἰ ἄλλην τινὰ τιμὴν ἔχων τῶν ὑπὸ πλήθους μακαριζομένων· ἡγείται δὲ πάντα ταῦτα τὰ κτήματα οὐδενὸς ἄξια καὶ ἡμᾶς οὐδέν εἶναι—λέγω ὑμῖν—εἰρωνευόμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων πάντα τὸν βίον πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διατελεῖ.

I can tell you that he doesn't care at all if someone is good-looking, but he disdains [it] more than anyone might think, nor does he care if someone is rich or has any other honor of those esteemed by the multitude. He considers all these possessions as worthless and that we are nothing—I'm telling you—and *eironeuomenos* and in playfulness toward mankind he spends all his life. (216d7–e5)

First of all, the inner Socrates is anything but obsessed with beautiful young men. He scorns this beauty. Second, this scorn extends to everything else that most people value highly. The two participles, *eironeuomenos* and *paizon* (translated "in playfulness"), can be taken as summing up the attitude Alcibiades has described, and *eironeuomenos* will have the connotation of scornful superiority (note "we are nothing"). This attitude could of course be expressed verbally, as I shall show in a moment, but it also took the visible form of Socrates' practical irony. In particular, his chosen poverty showed his contempt for possessions, and his Spartan dress in particular showed his contempt for some of the *endoxa*, the things esteemed by others.

The participle which I at first translated "in playfulness" functions exegetically (the two participles can be construed as sharing the preposition πρὸς, "toward") and thus means "making fun of," or, more strongly, "in mockery of" mankind.⁴⁹ Socrates' interlocutors in Plato and Xenophon sometimes feel that it is mockery that they are suffering. "Mockery" is the word used by the young Glaucon, who wilts under Socrates' questioning (*Mem.* 3.6.12: σκώπομαι); by Alcibiades in *First Alcibiades* (109d6); by Phaedrus in the eponymous dialogue (264e3).⁵⁰ Hippias in the *Memorabilia* accuses Socrates of "laughing at" others (4.4.9).⁵¹ Socrates comments on the extreme distress of Protagoras and says that he changed the tone of his questioning of the great sophist (*Pl. Prt.* 333e2–5).

⁴⁹ Contrast Vlastos's milder "jesting with people." For the collocation of mockery and "playfulness," cf. ps.-Pl. *Theag.* 125e4, where Theages says to Socrates: σκώπτεις καὶ παίζεις πρὸς με ("you are mocking me and making fun of me").

⁵⁰ Cf. ps.-Pl. *Eryx.* 399c7.

⁵¹ Cited by Vlastos (1991: 32–33) as evidence that the Xenophonic Socrates is *not* ironic.

Socrates' mockery was connected, in the biographical tradition, with one of the charges on which he was condemned. The scholiast on Plato *Apologia* 18b reports that Anytus, one of Socrates' accusers, was "a lover of Alcibiades and a rich man from his leather business; mocked (σκαωπτόμενον) for this by Socrates, he therefore bribed Meletus to bring a charge of impiety against Socrates."⁵² To return to Alcibiades' speech, in order to illustrate Socrates' *sophrosyne*, Alcibiades proceeds to tell an anecdote from his youth, when he attempted and failed to seduce him. Here what I would add to Nehamas's discussion is the force of this speech as a speech act *as Alcibiades later understood it*. Alcibiades prefaces Socrates' speech with three adverbs: Socrates spoke (1) "very ironically" (*mala eironikos*), (2) "sharply" (*sphodra*), and (3) "characteristically of himself" (*eiōthotos*, 218d6–7).⁵³ All three modify the verb of speaking. The first two can be taken to refer not to the propositions contained in Socrates' speech but to qualities of the speech as an act, i.e., to the performative aspect of what he says.

But the speech act did not succeed. Alcibiades did not hear a refusal in Socrates' words, and he proceeded to lie down next to him. It is only now, at the time Alcibiades is telling the story, that he understands what Socrates really meant: no exchange of knowledge for sex. With this present understanding, he can describe Socrates' words as *mala eironikos*, a phrase which, it turns out, has a meaning close to that of *eironeuomenos* in 216d7–e5, which, taken with the participle with which it is paired, meant "in haughtiness" or "in mockery." As Alcibiades says a little later, "He was so superior, he scorned [verb *kataphronein*; cf. 216d7–e5 and 220c1 quoted above] and derided [verb *katagelan*; cf. Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.9 cited above] my bloom, and was arrogant [verb *hubrizo*]" (219c3–5).

IV. CONCLUSION

Though Vlastos recognizes the element of mockery in *eironeia* in the earliest, Aristophanic usages and in Plato,⁵⁴ this element is marginal in his definition. Losing the clue of mockery, he fails to see irony as a dimension of Socrates' *hybris*, to borrow Alcibiades' description (Pl. *Symp.* 215b7, 219c5, 221e3, 222a8),

⁵²The scholiast cites the *Apologies* of Lysias and of Xenophon and also Aristoxenus' life of Socrates (fr. 60 Wehrli). In Xen. *Apol.* 29–31 Socrates predicts that the son of Anytus will not continue long in "the servile occupation" to which his father has consigned him. In this passage, Socrates is denigrating the occupation of Anytus (though his main point is the education that would be appropriate for the son), whereas in the scholiast on Pl. *Apol.* 18b it may be that Socrates was also mocking Anytus as a lover of Alcibiades, as the upstart leather-dealer in love with an inaccessible young aristocrat.

⁵³For the use of τε in this tripartite phrase, see Denniston 1966: 500 b.α. Vlastos (1991: 34 and 36) translates the phrase as if it were bipartite: "most *eirōnikōs* in his extremely characteristic and habitual manner," taking the second adverb as modifying the third, whereas all three modify the verb of speaking.

⁵⁴Vlastos 1991: 21, 25, 28, 29.

which was manifested to his contemporaries in his mannerisms as well as in his words. This hybris is the common denominator of the verbal and the practical irony of Socrates. Vlastos's "complex irony" may be a philosophically interesting kind of irony, and indeed it provoked a large discussion, but (Nehamas is right) it is not a kind that was known to Socrates or his interlocutors. It is the manner of Socrates *as interpreted by Aristotle* (on the basis of the Platonic dialogues and/or hearsay from Plato and others) that causes the change in the meaning of irony. Socrates is thus appropriated for a new sense of irony that will ever after be read back into the Platonic dialogues, where it is absent. Indeed the relevant chapter of *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to be the origin of the notion of "Socratic irony."⁵⁵

What remains of Vlastos's work on Socrates' irony is the insight, which was hardly original with him but needed to be recuperated, that irony is central to the personality of Socrates, that Socrates is, in short, an ironist. This insight rewrites the history of irony: there was a philosophic irony, in Socrates, *before* there was irony as a rhetorical figure and before the Romantic (re)discovery of philosophic irony. The central contribution of Nehamas has been the aspect of concealment in Socrates' irony, a constant surd element. *Obiter dicta* of Nehamas, cited above, show that he is aware that, as in the cardinal statement by Alcibiades, this irony was a way of life and not only verbal.⁵⁶ I have tried in this paper to specify the non-verbal irony practiced by Socrates.

Irony is ultimately the vanishing point at which the social-historical line of research conducted here converges with the philosophic line. Maddening though it may be, one cannot penetrate the mask created by Socrates' irony.⁵⁷ But the mask—or could one say the life of Socrates?—is worth studying for its own sake. A corroborating reason for studying the life is suggested by Aristotle, again, as in Part II above, in spite of himself. In *Metaphysics* 1078b34–1080a8, he discusses Socrates as a predecessor of Plato. Socrates, it turns out, did not "separate" the Forms but only sought general definitions through inductive reasoning. On Aristotle's somewhat belittling view of Socrates as philosopher,⁵⁸ it seems at first glance to be impossible to explain Socrates' impact on Plato, on the other writers of *Sokratikoi logoi*, and on those who went off to other cities in Greece and elsewhere to found philosophic schools. What Aristotle leaves out, of course, is Socrates the person, and it is this Socrates who must have caused the enormous

⁵⁵ Gooch 1987: 95, n. 1.

⁵⁶ Cf. Nehamas 1998: 68: "not as a rhetorical figure but truly as a way of living."

⁵⁷ On irony as a mask, see Nehamas 1998: 67–68.

⁵⁸ As Field ([1930]1967: 203) comments, Aristotle's "historical sketches are never undertaken for their own sake, but as a preliminary to the development of some positive view of his own He is always . . . anxious to show that his own philosophy is the final consummation of previous lines of thought"

effect on others which his philosophic activity, at least on Aristotle's account, could hardly explain. To the person, then, or to its mask, one is compelled to return.⁵⁹

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⁵⁹The method followed in this article could ideally be called "triangulation" (Nehamas [1992]1999: 89). Whenever I could find agreement among three (though sometimes it was two) of our four main sources for Socrates—Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle—I assumed that it was the historical Socrates about whom they were speaking. The objections to this method of combination have long since been made clear: the dubious independence of Aristotle from Plato and the shakiness of "Fitzgerald's canon"; the dubious independence of Xenophon from Plato; the fictionalizing premises of the forms in which Plato and Xenophon wrote; the ineluctable distortion of the portrait of Socrates in the comedy *Clouds*. These objections have arisen, however, in discussion of the philosophy of Socrates and have been made against those who intended to establish what Socrates thought and how he argued. I, for my part, have focused on the non-verbal behavior of Socrates and on others' reactions to him. The kinds of details for which I have looked in the sources are not ones which these sources would have had any reason to invent. Further, in the passages which I have cited, I can see no point at which one is echoing or borrowing from another. (Alcibiades' quotation of Aristophanes is presented as a quotation, and its description of Socrates is corroborated.)

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