From the poem “Socrates and Alcibiades” by Friedrich Hölderlin:

He who has thought most deeply  
Loves that which is the most alive.¹

Friedrich Nietzsche borrows from Hölderlin’s poem and seems to have Socrates in mind in one of his passages in *Untimely Meditations*:

Nothing better or happier can befall a man than to be in the proximity of one of those victorious ones, who, precisely because they have thought most deeply, must love what is most living and, as sages, incline in the end to the beautiful… They are active and truly alive… which is why, in their proximity, we feel human and natural for once, and feel like exclaiming with Goethe: “How glorious and precious is a living thing! How well adapted to the conditions it lives in, how true, how existent!”²

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**Socratic Irony**

What is it?

1. Introduction

Originally the ancient Greek term of *eirôneia*, and its derivative forms, had a purely negative meaning; *eirôneia* was a term of abuse connoting a deception, a sham, dishonest dissembling or concealing by feigning.³ It was in this derogatory sense that

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the term was used by the comic playwright Aristophanes, whose works are the first preserved historical data where the term appears.⁴

However, the meaning of the term changes at a certain point and it becomes a more complex and sophisticated concept with partly a positive connotation. There is a consensus among scholars on what triggered the change: Plato’s account of Socrates in his dialogues. The figure of Socrates, particularly as he is described by Plato, altered how eirôneia was viewed; the term acquired a broader meaning, which was attached to it when it was first introduced in its Latin form, ironia, which again was the basis for its current meaning. Thus, the modern concept of irony is rooted in Socratic irony.

In this essay I will account for the term Socratic irony and explain what it is. My focus will be on the philosophical relevance of the concept, which can be found in the more complex versions of it, although discussion of irony as a rhetorical or literary device cannot be excluded from such enquiry.

2. Socrates and the Conceptual Change

The first systematic account of irony was given by Aristotle and the break between the old and the new meaning of the term is evident in the contradictory verdict he gives in The Art of Rhetoric, on the one hand, and in Nicomachean Ethics, on the other hand. In the former work he calls irony “contemptuous”⁵ and he talks negatively about those who are “mild and ironic and mischievous.”⁶ However, such traditionally negative description of irony is absent in the latter work; a new more positive meaning emerges there which is directly linked to Socrates, as commentators such as Alexander Nehamas are keen to point out:

In the Nicomachean Ethics ... Aristotle contrasts eirôneia with boastfulness, writes positively of it, and establishes once and for all


⁵ Aristotle (AR), The Arts of Rhetoric (London: Penguin, 1991), ch. 2.2 (1379b30-35) & ch. 2.5 (1382b18-21). Remotely more neutral description can be found in other parts of the book (3.18, 1419b8-10; 3.19b34-1320a2) but the overall account is clearly uncharitable.

⁶ Ibid.
its connection with Socrates: in contrast to the boastful, ironists, “who understate things, seem more attractive in character; for they are thought to speak not for gain but to avoid parade; and here too it is qualities which bring reputation that they disclaim, as Socrates used to do.”

So, although Socratic irony is not Aristotle’s ideal truthfulness, he considers it an artful and sophisticated form of self-deprecation, which according to him is much better than boastfulness. Aristotle’s new conception of irony is most likely caused by the writings of Plato.

The ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian offered a simple general definition of irony, which became well known and widely cited until modern times: “Irron is that figure of speech or trope in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood.”

Although both the account of Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the definition of Quintilian reflect a post-Socratic meaning, neither of them are particularly interesting from a philosophical point of view. Aristotle does not go further than describing a character trait. The character trait was arguably beneficial for Socrates in dealing with people and in engaging his interlocutors in conversations – while at the same time looking like a humorous mockery for the readers of the dialogues – but it does not go beyond such usefulness. Socrates’ most famous and puzzling putative act of irony, his disavowal of knowledge, would for example be made totally banal if Aristotle’s account was sufficient: Socrates would just be pretending to be ignorant; and the pretence would be an expression of being radically humble or modest about his knowledge. The definition of Quintilian only describes

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7 Nehamas (1998), p. 50. Nehamas cites the translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* by Jonathan Barnes in *The Revised Oxford Translation of the Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). – In the translation by Roger Crisp, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle (NE)) in the series of Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), the passage is as follows: “Self-deprecating people, because the play down their qualities, appear to have more attractive characters. For they seem to speak, not for gain, but in order to avoid pomposity. And it is especially qualities held in esteem that they disclaim, as Socrates used to do.” (Aristotle (NE), 4.7, 1127a13-b32).


9 L. “*Contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est* (Institutio Oratoria (9.22.44)), cf. Vlastos (1991), p. 21; cf. . – A similar definition is to be found in the anonymous treatise *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* which has been dated from the fourth century: *eirôneia* is (a) saying something while pretending not to say it or (b) calling things by contrary names.” (Ibid., p. 26).
the most plain and uninteresting mode of irony, where the meaning conveyed is clear-cut: A person says one thing but by context, situation, tone of voice or other hint, unambiguously means the opposite of what was said, i.e. the negation of what is said is meant to be the obvious meaning of what is said. Such understanding of irony is a mode of irony as a simple rhetorical or literary device, which I consider irrelevant for my task.

On the other hand, the relevance of Socratic irony for philosophy can be identified in this passage by the Roman jurist and philosopher Cicero: “Urbane is the dissimulation when what you say is quite other than what you understand ... In this irony and dissimulation Socrates, in my opinion, far excelled all others in charm and humanity.”10 Here, importantly, irony in relation to Socrates is not described as having the contrary meaning to what is said, which would render the meaning usually totally transparent, but as having other meaning than what is said, which renders the meaning opaque or vague. Cicero’s also links irony with dissimulation, which is an important aspect of more complex and philosophically interesting forms of irony.

The ancient philosophy scholar Gregory Vlastos values truthfulness in the spirit of Aristotle and he is notably hostile in linking his hero – the historical figure of Socrates who he considers best represented in Plato’s early dialogues – to any forms deceit or dissembling.11 Alexander Nehamas rightfully criticises Vlastos in this regard and he correctly considers the vagueness of the dissembling feature of Socratic irony to be essential to its philosophical relevance.12 Another reputable scholar, the French philosopher Pierre Hadot, has a similar take on it as Nehamas and he frequently refers to Socrates as wearing a mask.13 In the same vein, one can find the following description in a book on irony from 2004: “The word eironeia was first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the word is used both as pejorative – in the sense of lying – and affirmatively, to refer to Socrates’

10 L. “Urbana etiam dissimulatio est, cum alia dicuntur ac sentias ... Socratem opinor in hac ironia dissimulantiisque long lepore et humanitate omnibus praestitisse. Genus est perelegans et cum gravitate salsum.” (De Oratore 2.67); cf. Vlastos (1991), p. 28.


13 Hadot (1995), ch. 5.
capacity to conceal what he really means.”\textsuperscript{14} Artful double meaning is a good
description; in some instances it could even be artful multiple meaning. Socrates’
concealment is not equivalent to lying as the passage suggest, but it is still a
dissemblance and closer to lying than Vlastos would like. But opaqueness and
dissemblance are not necessarily immoral; on the contrary the lack of such behaviour
can be immoral and inhumane. A revealing example is the situation when an adult
receives a question from a child where a straight-forward and truthful answer would
be cruel to an immature mind. If the adult manages the situation \textit{morally} she does
neither tell the child naked lie nor naked truth; and if she manages the situation
\textit{skillfully} she uses vague language which invites interpretation on different levels.

Before I further account for such Socratic irony with examples along with
explaining it relevance for philosophy, I will turn to Melissa Lane’s criticism of the
view that irony should, after all, be attributed to Socrates.

\textbf{3. Melissa Lane’s Criticism}

The chapter “Reconsidering Socratic Irony” by Melissa Lane in \textit{The Cambridge
Companion to Socrates} is a bold contribution to Socratic scholarship. She questions
that the concept of irony should be as closely linked to Socrates as it has been.

A feature of Socrates which is probably the clearest instance of irony in the eyes
of a casual reader of the Platonic dialogues, is his tendency to excessively praise
interlocutors who seem hardly worthy of such a flatter. One of the most extreme
eamples is from \textit{Euthyphro} where Socrates expresses the desire of becoming his
interlocutor’s pupil:

\begin{quote}
It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro!, that I should become
your pupil, and as regards this indictment, challenge Meletus\textsuperscript{15} about these
very things and say to him. that in the past too I considered knowledge
about the divine to be most important, and that now that he says that I am
guilty of improvising and innovating about the gods I have become your
pupil.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{15} Meletus was one of three Athenian citizens who were in the role of prosecuting Socrates.

\textsuperscript{16} Plato (Euphr.), \textit{Euthyphro}, 5a-b (Plato (1997), \textit{Plato: Completed Works}, Ed. John M. Cooper
Another comic example can be found in the beginning of *Greater Hippias* where Socrates greets Hippias by saying: “Here comes Hippias, fine and wise!” And shortly after Socrates gives his interlocutor the following elevated compliment:

That is what it is like to be truly wise, Hippias, a man of complete accomplishments: in private you are able to make a lot of money from young people (and to give still greater benefits to those from whom you take it); while in public you are able to provide your own city with good service (as is proper for one who expects not to be despised, but admired by ordinary people).  

The *Gorgias* dialogue is also full of examples of such praise, as Lane points out, for example where Socrates says that he has “sufficient proof” that Calliclas does “have good will towards” him.  

Lane discusses what she calls “friendship terms of address” and she claims, with support from Eleanor Dickey’s book *Greek Forms of Address*, that almost everything we consider ironic way of addressing people in the dialogues is a normal non-ironic way of speaking for Socrates, Plato and their contemporaries. In other word, modern readers, according to Lane, are ignorant of the ancient Greek cultural pattern which determines the meaning of the seemingly ironic terms:

Dickey’s analysis establishes that such epithets, including in particular the friendship terms, are (with only one exception) never in Plato to be read ironically. Dickey’s contention is that “[friendship terms] in Plato, rather than being complimentary to the addressee, show the dominance of the speaker.” She argues that they are genuinely used as polite terms rather than insults or ironic put-downs. However, their politeness serves to demonstrate the speaker’s control of the situation in a somewhat patronising way.

Lane also downplays other forms of putative irony in relation to Socrates. She grants that there are ironic instances outside of terms of address, for example in *Euthyphro* and *Greater Hippias*, but she maintains they serve purely rhetorical purpose, that they play first and foremost the role of a pedagogical device. Regarding Socrates’ ironic self-deprecation Lane is sceptical and she suggests they might not be self-
deprecation, after all, but “reactions” which “flow naturally from the conversation’s emotional currents.” The only instance of self-deprecation she is willing to consider is Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge, but in that regard she also has serious doubts:

[T]he question of how to understand the disavowal of knowledge, no less than the question of irony, requires settling of global interpretative framework for the dialogues. To take the disavowal of knowledge literally engenders one sort of reading of the dialogues, in which Socrates appears as the sceptical inquirer, genuinely seeking knowledge through elenchtic examination and collaborative inquiry. To take it ironically engenders a very different sort of reading, in which Socrates appears as the sphinx who does not share his knowledge, presenting an ironic face for reasons of his (or rather, Plato’s) own; or in which his concealment of his knowledge serves some specific purpose, whether benign or sinister. What is certain is that the concept of Socratic irony offers no firm foundation for deciding between these different interpretations.20

In short, Lane’s view on Socratic irony in the dialogues is that it is much overstated and where it occurs it should be understood merely rhetorically, but that any deeper meaning of Socratic irony should be rejected.

Dickey and Lane argue for their case artfully and it is not implausible that the modern observer reads too much irony into Plato’s dialogues. But if Lane is right in downplaying Socratic irony as much as she does, the result would be rather comic: It would basically mean that the overwhelming majority of Socrates’ fellow citizens and readers of the dialogues – scholars and amateurs alike, for more than two millennia – have been getting things very wrong. Such wide-ranging ignorance and misconception – until professor Lane arrives on the scene with her keen wit and “interpretative framework” – cannot be ruled out completely, but it is still highly improbable. It is more likely that professor Lane is guilty of being too creative and innovative in her scholarship.

Most of Lanes’s criticism is directed to the rhetorical aspect of Socratic irony, which is not my primary subject. But her rejection of deeper and more philosophically interesting forms of irony in the dialogues goes to the heart of the topic. She rejects philosophically important irony of Socrates and it is to that type of irony I will now turn.

4. The Complex Irony of Gregory Vlastos

An irony is simple, according to Gregory Vlastos, when what is said does not, commonly understood, correspond to the real meaning of the statement. An irony is complex, on the other hand, when “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.”

Vlastos mentions an example from Xenophon’s *Symposium* where the character of Socrates is asked what art of his he takes great pride in and Socrates replies: “The art of procurer”, which is presumably false in its literary sense but probably true in the innovative but still apprehensible sense of Socrates. Vlastos mentions another such example from the same work: when Socrates is challenged to a contest in beauty with Critubulus, who was known for his good look. Socrates, who was not considered very handsome man, claimed to be more beautiful because he equates beauty with usefulness and he explained how useful his ugliest feature were. Here again Socrates is altering the sense of the term – and in an even more creative way than in the case of the procurer.

It is hard to see why Vlastos sees anything of value philosophically in these examples. Xenophon’s Socrates is replacing the meaning a term has acquired in a community by his own private meaning. He is playing with words, at best in an ingenious, humorous and perhaps mocking way, but not in a way that would make Socratic irony into something more than a simple rhetorical device. However, one has to keep in mind that it is uncertain how reliable Xenophon’s account of Socrates is; arguably it is much less reliable picture of Socrates than appears in Plato’s early dialogues.

Vlastos’ examples of complex irony in the works of Plato are more subtle and interesting, perhaps because Plato was more subtle and interesting author than Xenophon, perhaps because he knew Socrates better and gave a more accurate

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23 Ibid., 4.57 (Xenophon (2013)). – In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* Socrates also calls his followers girlfriends: “I have my own girlfriends (philai) who won’t leave me day or night, learning from me philtres and enchantments.” (3.11.16; Xenophon (2013); cf. Vlastos (1991), p. 30.

24 See e.g. Nehamas (1999), ch. 4.
account of him in his early dialogues than Xenophon does in his works, perhaps both are true. An example from Plato’s dialogues that Vlastos focuses on is Socrates’ encounter with Alcibiades in The Symposium, where Alcibiades wanted to give Socrates access to his young body in exchange for wisdom:

He heard me out. Then, most eirōnikōs, in his extremely characteristic and habitual manner, he said: ‘Dear Alcibiades, it looks as though you are not stupid (phaulos), 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 you 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”.

So, the offer is turned down in a witty way. Socrates’ first sentence is a good example of one of the most practical aspects of rhetorical irony, i.e. to insult in a manner which normally prevents an immediate hostile response form the person being insulted. When Socrates says “it looks as though you are not stupid” he is in fact saying “you are stupid”, but because of the ironic way of putting it, there is in the mind of the interlocutor a vague disarming doubt, which inhibits a payback, as well as politeness on the surface, which makes a payback ridiculous. Still, the insult is effective and the message gets thought. Such act boosts the ironist’s control over the situation and power over whom the irony is directed against.

What scholars have guessed about the historical Socrates is primarily based on the writings of four ancient authors: Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle. Socrates appears in the comic plays of Aristophanes and they are probably not a reliable source, although they might hint at some of his characteristics or how he was perceived among some of his contemporaries. Both Xenophon, who is notoriously apologetic of Socrates and depicts him in a more non-enigmatic way than Plato, and Aristotle, arguably use Plato’s dialogues as their main source (see e.g. Nehamas (1999), ch. 4), so if it is possible to reconstruct the character of Socrates the epicentre should be Plato’s dialogues. Vlastos has argued that Plato’s Socrates becomes a mouthpiece for new ideas of Plato himself in most of the middle and later dialogues, so only the early dialogues and a few transitional dialogues represent the historical Socrates, namely the following: Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Lesser Hippias (also trans. Hippias Minor), Ion, Laches, Protagoras, the first book of the Republic, Euthydemos, Greater Hippias (also trans. Hippias Major), Lysis, Menexenus, and Meno (the last five are labelled as transitional dialogues). Of these Vlastos relies to largest extent on Apology and, controversially, on Gorgias (e.g. Nehamas does not regard Gorgias as a reliable source in this regard; see Nehamas (1999), ch. 4).

The meaning of the passage is that Socrates values wisdom more than physical beauty. But, immediately after indicating that he does not want to exchange his wisdom for Alcibiades’s beauty, Socrates denies having anything to offer: “But look more closely, blessed boy, lest you have missed that I am nothing. The mind’s vision grows sharp only when eyesight has passed its peak, and you are still far from that.”

What is Socrates saying here? For sure, self-deprecating irony is often, as Leo Strauss points out, “a noble dissimulation of one’s worth, of one’s superiority”, but the context suggest that is not what is going on here. Rather, Socrates seems to be admitting that he has, after all, nothing to offer the boy. Vlastos identifies this as complex irony – and this is indeed an instance of irony that is philosophically interesting. Socrates seems to be indicating subtly and tactfully how he views ethical knowledge, namely that such knowledge cannot “be handed over in a swap,” as Vlastos puts it, and that it comes with age and experience. At the end of the day, virtue cannot be taught in the same manner as craftsmanship. If that would be the case we would probably have more of it. On the contrary, to acquire wisdom of the good and virtuous life – which is the same as living a good and virtuous life in Socrates scheme of things – one might need a degree of maturity, perhaps a dose of luck, even certain psychological make-up and character. This insight into ethical truth might be behind Socrates’ irony in his encounter with Alcibiades.

The view that I am suggesting should be attributed to Socrates is arguably most tactfully expressed subtly in the form of irony or other forms of indirect communication, as Ludwig Wittgenstein does in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein’s own ethical view, symbolised in the wisdom of father Zosima in the *Karamazov Brothers* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, is indicated in section 355 in the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein addresses expert judgment of expressions of feeling:

> Is there such a thing as ‘expert judgement’ about the genuineness of expressions of feeling? – Here too, there are those with ‘better’ and those with ‘worse’ judgement.

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In general, predictions arising from judgement of those with better knowledge of people will be more correct.

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through ‘experience’. – Can someone else be a man’s teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right tip. — This is what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ are like here. — What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them rightly. Unlike calculating rules.  

If similar view as Wittgenstein expresses is at the centre of Socrates’ ethical approach and if such truth plays a role in his irony, then Socratic irony is not merely a rhetorical device but has profound philosophical value.

The reason why indirect communication such as irony is necessary is that ethical educators, according to Wittgenstein and my hypothetical Socrates, cannot be dogmatic in their pedagogy. Rather, by the very nature of ethical knowledge they have to spark self-learning processes in the minds of their students. It is in such context that Wittgenstein says in *Culture and Value* that he “must be nothing more than the mirror in which [his] reader sees his own thinking with all its deformities & with this assistance can set it in order.” Wittgenstein wrote next to nothing on ethics; still he claimed to be first and foremost an ethical thinker. His communication on ethics was indirect, otherwise he would have risked being too dogmatic for the role of being a mirror for his readers with regard to ethics, according to his own view of the subject. A dogmatic view would imply both that the same set of rules apply to everybody and that they can be simply dictated; both is highly questionable and


31 See e.g. Schönbaumsfeld (2007), pp. 10-83 (Chapter 1: “Kierkegaard’s Influence on Wittgenstein’s Thought; and Chapter 2: “The Point of Philosophical Authorship”).

32 It has to be kept in mind that I use the term ethics in its broader meaning, how people should live their lives, which was also the ancient meaning of the term. The category of ‘ethics’ should be considered broad enough to include such ‘philosophy of life’, in contrast to ‘morality’ which is a narrower term referring to a field within ethics (social ethics; how one should treat other people).
plainly wrong according to the thesis I am proposing, even if there is a transcendent moral order and natural law.

Socrates’ claim that he has nothing to offer Alcibiades is of course closely related to his famous disavowal of knowledge. The Oracle of Delphi pronounced Socrates the wisest of Greeks. He was puzzled by this verdict, but after investigation in the form of questioning various people he came to the conclusion that the Oracle was right because he was conscious of his ignorance contrary to his fellow citizens who greatly overestimated their degree of knowledge:

Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. […]

[W]hen I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than [the people I have questioned] to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.33

The first sentence reflects Socrates’ reputation in Athens of relentlessly jesting with people, as is for example evident from Alcibiades comment in *The Symposium* that Socrates “spends his entire life *eirôneumenos* and jesting with people.”34 The disavowal of knowledge that follows is a clear instance of complex irony, according to Vlastos, and he explains:

When [Socrates] professes to have knowledge he both does and does not mean what he says. He wants it to assure his hearers that in the moral domain there is not a single proposition he claims to know with certainty. But in another sense of “knowledge,” where the word refers to justified true belief – justifiable through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument – there are many propositions he does claim to know.35

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Vlastos is probably right that two senses of knowledge play a role in Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge, but I agree with Nehamas that he is wrong in what two senses of knowledge Socrates has in mind. Vlastos seems too commit the fallacy of anachronism by attributing to Socrates an epistemological framework that only emerged later. Moreover, Nehamas’ sound criticism of Vlastos, who was his professor at Princeton, is on a much broader scale, because Nehamas argues that Vlastos’ account of Socrates is guilty of depicting Socrates too patently and imaginatively, so instead of the profound enigma which is at the centre of the Socratic irony in the early dialogues, a figure emerges through Vlastos’ interpretations that is suspiciously much in the image of the interpreter.

Still, in the last paragraph in his chapter on Socratic irony, Vlastos hits a note that is valuable for an understanding of such irony: “What [Socrates] is building on is the fact that in almost everything we say we put a burden of interpretation on our hearer. When we speak a sentence we do not add a gloss on how it should be read.”

This and earlier chapters have cast important light on the meaning of Socratic irony, but they have also partly served as a necessary prelude to the most accurate account of Socratic irony, which I will now turn to. The account I will offer is heavily influenced of two exceptional scholars who are fundamentally in agreement on the figure of Socrates: Hadot and Nehamas. I will begin with the latter’s view on the disavowal of knowledge, which surpasses the views of both Lane and Vlastos.

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36 E.g. in light of the fact that Socrates’ declarations of ignorance go hand in hand with his unequivocal acceptance of certain ethical views, including the following examples:
(1) “And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one’s superior, be he god or man.” (Plato (1997), Apology, 29b (p. 27)).
(2) “One should never do wrong in return, nor do any man harm, no matter what he may have done to you.” (Ibid., Crito, 49c (p. 44)).

37 Nehamas points out that a central problem with Vlastos’ view “is that the notion of ‘philosophical’ [or ‘certain’] knowledge,” as it is understood by Vlastos, “is systematically articulated only in the middle and later writings of Plato and in the works of Aristotle.” (Nehamas (1998), p. 74).


39 Vlastos (1991), p. 44.
5. The Meaning of Socratic Irony

Socrates in Plato’s early dialogues is first and foremost an ethical thinker and practitioner. The knowledge he is seeking is a knowledge of virtues (aretê) that he could articulate distinctly and teach to others like a craft, in a direct and craftsmanlike manner. But the wisdom, or knowledge in another sense, he has acquired through a long practice of the Socratic method, elenchus, has not proven to be articulated and taught in the same way. This is how Nehamas views Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge, namely that Socrates contrasts his acquired wisdom with the “knowledge he believes craftsmen and artisans possess”:

The problem with the artisans was that they seemed to believe that knowledge of their crafts also gave them knowledge of the good life, though it did not. In that respect, the artisans proved as ignorant as anyone else and to that extent less wise than Socrates, who was aware of his ignorance. […]

Socrates, of course, thinks that the sophists are wrong. They possess nothing like the technical knowledge of aretê he is after. Technical knowledge can be more or less articulated; one can transmit it to others, even if it sometimes takes time and trouble to do so. It enables you to give reasons for what you are doing in many particular cases.

If Nehamas is right, as I think he is, then Socrates found himself in a difficult situation, which required a subtle demeanour. He has become wise through experience, self-examination and enquiry – and he is able to apply this wisdom to his own life. But when he reflects on his wisdom in order to make it transparent to himself and others, he comes up as good as empty; he has no ethical system to transmit to others, no knowledge of virtue he can communicate except in a

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40 An Oxford English dictionary defines the Socratic elenchus as follows: “The Socratic method of eliciting truth by question and answer, especially as used to refute an argument.”

41 Nehamas (1998), pp. 75-76. – Nehamas maintains that his view is based on combining Vlastos’ idea that there are two kinds of knowledge with Terence Irwin’s account of Socrates (see T.H. Irwin (1995), Plato’s Ethics (New York, NY: Oxford University Press). Irwin was, like Nehamas, a student of Vlastos at Princeton.

42 Socrates’ situation could be described as tragicomic; perhaps he had his own life in mind when he argued in a conversation with his friends the night before his education that there was a close link between a tragedy and a comedy.
fragmented way. His superb ability of self-reflection made him very conscious of his short-comings in this regard. That awareness, according to his own conviction, was the reason the Oracle of Delphi considered him the wisest of Athenians. Still, the wisdom of Socrates was of course beyond such awareness: his vague, unarticulated, subjective wisdom, which manifested itself in his character and life, has been surpassed by few if any. This paradox is at the core of the Socratic irony and it is indeed irony that goes beyond rhetorical ironies and complex ironies, because it is a life and philosophy marked by an irony.

Socrates must have realised that his own way of acquiring wisdom of aretē – i.e. by experience, self-examination and enquiry – must be performed by other seekers of aretē. So as an ethical teacher, which he considered himself to be, he needed to be a vehicle of self-examination and ethical enquiry by his students. He needed to be a “mirror” in similar way as Wittgenstein wanted to be a “mirror”. An important aspect in this scheme of things is the view that the same set of personal values does not apply to everyone universally, that individuals are fundamentally different in a rich and interesting way.

Leo Strauss emphasises this aspect in relation to irony when he says in the chapter on Plato in his book *The City and Man* that “[i]f irony is essentially related to the fact that there is a natural order of rank among men, it follows that irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people.” In general there is nothing sinister about such behaviour; rather, there is a natural and practical need to talk differently to different kinds of people, as anyone who has reached maturity can confirm. One does for example not talk in the same way to a specialist in a field as one talks to a random person on the street. Such need is boosted by the subjective nature of personal ethics – and a particularly subtle way of talking is necessary.

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43 In Plato’s *Symposium* (175d) Socrates says the following to Agathon: “It would be a happy state of affairs, Agathon, if wisdom were something that could flow between us through mere contact, from the one who is full to one who is empty, like water flowing along a strand of wool from a full cup to an empty one.” (Plato (2008), p. 5). – The comment expresses frustration over difficulties with regard to transmission of knowledge.

44 This view does not at all require a rejection of a universal morality, i.e. the need that rational beings act responsibly and respect one another.

But what about the situations when one has to say something to a group of different people, as is always the case in for example public speeches and published works? Then irony, which allows multiple interpretations, becomes crucial. A message wrapped in irony is not only able to be understood on different levels, it is meant to be understood on different levels – and it becomes important as such both for Socrates’ oral teachings and Plato’s written dialogues. Only in this way can Socrates be a “mirror” which triggers reflectivity in other people, makes them examine themselves and enquire the nature of aretê.

With this discussion we arrive at the epicentre of Pierre Hadot’s conception of Socrates and Socratic irony. He focuses on Plato’s Symposium in his account of the figure of Socrates and he does so in relation to two philosophers he calls the “two great Socratics”, namely Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The latter said about Socrates: “[E]verything [in him] is at the same time hidden, reserved, subterranean” – and Hadot borrows Nietzsche’s mask-metaphor and applies it to Socrates: “Socrates masks himself, and at the same time is used as a mask by others”:

Because he was himself masked, Socrates became the prosopon, or mask, of personalities who felt the need to take shelter behind him. It was from him that they got the idea both to mask themselves, and to use Socratic irony as a mask. We have here a phenomenon extremely rich in its literary, pedagogical, and psychological implications.

Hadot then adds that the “original nucleus of this phenomenon was the irony of Socrates himself.” To recited implications in the passage we can add ‘philosophical’ to the list. Philosophers who have been occupied with self-examination and self-improvement have seldom failed to see value in Socrates. They have seen him as an exemplar, not necessarily in a substantial sense but in a methodological and structural sense, as a prosopon. Nietzsche said in Beyond Good and Evil that “whatever is profound loves masks” and that [e]very profound spirit needs a

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46 Hadot (1995), p. 147. – Apart from being an excellent scholar of ancient philosophy, Hadot was an expert on Goethe, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. He is accredited with introducing the last mentioned philosopher to French readers.


mask.” For Nietzsche, the concept of the mask does not only refer to the importance of exemplars in helping one becoming who one is or who one desires to be, but it is also a reference to how irony can, for instance, help philosophers to preserve their authenticity in a world where the mass of people is often fearful and hostile to ideas and perspectives which are uncommon or exceptional. An ironic mask is a way of communicating to those who are ready and receptive while concealing ones thought from the rest, without lying or acting otherwise deceitfully. It is in this context that one should understand the following words of Nietzsche on Socrates: “I believe I sense that Socrates was profound; his irony was above all the necessity to pass himself off as superficial, in order to be able to associate with people at all.”

Søren Kierkegaard noticed the same kind of practical application in cautiously masking himself, and applied it effectively to his own writings. Kierkegaard also learned from Plato to create a distance between himself as an author and his readers. Plato never appears in his dialogues, although it is commonly accepted that he has his mouthpieces, and Kierkegaard used multiple pseudonyms and published little under his own name. As a result, it becomes a more difficult task to break into their own minds and decipher their views.

Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on Socratic irony and he explained his task as a writer and philosopher by referring to Socrates: “O Socrates! Yours and mine are the same adventure! I am alone. My only analogy is Socrates. My task is a Socratic task.” The Socratic method, according to Kierkegaard, was a method of indirect communication and he considered himself and Socrates to be physicians of the soul.

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49 Friedrich Nietzsche (1986), *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, intro. Peter Gay (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2000), § 40 (pp. 240-241). – Nietzsche’s mask-concept was closely related to the figure of Socrates, as he e.g. poetically expresses in a note from 1885: “I believe that this was the magic of Socrates: he had one soul, and another one in behind it, and behind it still another one.” (see Hadot (1995), p. 151).

50 The quote is taken from an unpublished note Nietzsche made in 1885, referred to in Hadot (1995), p. 156; cf. Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*, April-June 1885, 34 (148), vol. 11, p. 470 (Collini/Montinari). – Nietzsche noticed this quality of masking in profound minds, but he himself was to a large extent unmasked in his writings and he paid the prize in the form of isolation and brush-off by his contemporaries. Still, it is evident from his letters how he often communicated indirectly with his readers in his books.

Kierkegaard would have agreed with Hadot on the pedagogical function of the Socratic method and the role of irony in it:

The absolutely essential point in [the] ironical method is the path which Socrates and his interlocutor travel together. Socrates pretends he wants to learn something from his interlocutor, and this constitutes his ironic self-deprecation. In fact, however, even while Socrates appears to identify himself with his interlocutor, and enter completely into his discourse, in the last analysis it is the interlocutor who unconsciously enters into Socrates’ discourse and identifies himself with him. Let us not forget: to identify oneself with Socrates is to identify oneself with aporia and doubt, for Socrates doesn’t know anything; all he knows is that he knows nothing. Therefore, at the end of the discussion, the interlocutor has not learned anything; in fact, he no longer even knows anything. And yet, throughout the duration of the discussion, he has experienced what true activity of the mind is. Better yet, he has been Socrates himself. And Socrates is interrogation, questioning and stepping back to take a look at oneself; in a word, he is consciousness.

So, Socrates asked questions skillfully in order to make his interlocutors more conscious about themselves, their ignorance, and how they view things. He disturbed people to the point that eventually sparked them to question their whole lives. After the death of Socrates a literary genre called logoi sokratikoi emerged, which had the goal of reproducing the effect of Socratic conversations. It was in this literary form which Socrates became a mask for others, as Hadot explains:

In these logoi sokratikoi, Socrates became a prosopon – an interlocutor or character – and hence, if we recall the meaning of prosopon in the ancient theatre, a mask. Especially in the subtle, refined form given it by Plato, the Socratic dialogue was intended to provoke in its readers an effect analogous to that produced by the living discourse of Socrates himself.52

Hadot is correct in giving a special credit to Plato. It has become a widespread tendency to praise Socrates and Aristotle but to decry Plato. Still, it is Plato who primarily preserved the richness of Socrates for future generations. With breathtaking sharpness he was able to express with sensitivity an enigmatic and complex character in the Socratic dialogues – and he was able to distinguish between what he understood about Socrates and what he did not understand in him, which required a degree of humility that only a very mature and noble soul would have been

able to convey. In this regard Plato was arguably a better student of Socrates than Aristotle was of Plato.

Just like Socrates did with his interlocutors, Kierkegaard’s aim was to increase his readers’ awareness and reflectivity; his intention was to lead them to genuine understanding of Christianity. Plato’s Socrates was not merely a methodological paradigm for Kierkegaard, because in a peculiar way he had also a Christian meaning for him, i.e. a predecessor with regard to substance. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates pioneered in bringing subjectivity and individual conscience to the world, which would later find expression in Christianity; he used sophistry and deceit to trick people to the truth. However, in Kierkegaard’s view, Socrates was not aware of the nature and significance of what he brought about. In fact, Kierkegaard was certain that irony was not Socrates’ way of concealing a grand philosophical thesis, rather it was an expression of something vague and cryptic, that what the readers of the dialogues find enigmatic about Socrates was an enigma to Socrates himself, the source of his wisdom was as hidden to him as it was to others:

Socrates’ life is like a magnificent pause in the course of history: we do not hear him at all; a profound stillness prevails – until it is broken by the noisy attempts of the many and different schools of followers to trace their origin in this hidden and cryptic source. His irony was not the instrument he used in the service of the idea; irony was his position – more he did not have.

Silence was at the core of Kierkegaard’s conception of Socrates: “[W]hat Socrates himself prized so highly, namely standing still and contemplating, in other words, silence – this is his whole life in terms of world history. He has left nothing by which a later age can judge him.”

Nehamas does not share Kierkegaard’s understanding of Socrates as a proto-Christian, but he agrees with him that silence is essential to a proper conception of Socrates. The socratic irony, according to Nehamas, is a way of remaining silent and

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53 I say Plato’s Socrates because it was first and foremost in Plato’s account of Socrates that was of value for Kierkegaard.


55 Ibid., p. 214.

56 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
undogmatic – and thus being of value in the delicate self-development of numerous philosophers, or what I have labelled, in the manner of Wittgenstein, a mirror.57

It gives support to this interpretation that Socrates has been perceived in a dramatically different way by philosophers. In his book, The Art of Living, Nehamas discusses the meaning of Socrates for Michel de Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, while Pierre Hadot focuses on the meaning of Socrates in relation to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in Philosophy as a Way of Life. Socrates not only has fundamentally different meaning for each of them, he stands for opposites: He is, to put it bluntly, at both ends of the spectrum. Is Socrates a proto-Christian or thoroughly pagan? Is he a sophist deceiving people into truth, as Kierkegaard considered him to be, or an anti-sophist stripped of deception, as Vlastos maintained? Is he the rationalist that Nietzsche both loved and hated him for being or is he, figuratively speaking, the embodiment of the anti-rationalist god Dionysus, as Hadot boldly argues?58 Is he confused by grammar, as Wittgenstein indicated, or is he subtly pointing out the limits of language, as Hadot states?59 It is curious that if Hadot is right, then Socrates was misconceived by later Nietzsche and later Wittgenstein to the extent that instead of being their anti-hero he ought to have been their hero.60

So Socrates’ mask of irony created a condition which helped different individuals in their ethical task of self-improvement. That function is intertwined with an aspect of Socratic irony, which helps to explain its overall function. This important aspect is a well described in a striking passage which is the culmination of

57 Still a mirror of special function, because either people tend to see themselves in this mirror or the the opposite of themselves.


59 Ibid., p. 163.

60 A lot has been written about Nietzsche’s ambivalent intellectual relationship with the figure of Socrates, but much less about Wittgenstein’s ambivalent stance. Wittgenstein did not read much philosophy, but he read Plato’s dialogues and there is some evidence that his reflection on them made him pregnant with some of his most valuable ideas. Furthermore, the Wittgenstein scholar David G. Stern points out that the strategic point of the argumentative voice in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations “only emerges once we see that the [book] has more in common with a Socratic dialogue, or an Augustinian confession, than a conventional philosophical treatise (David G. Stern (2004), Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 6).
Pierre Hadot’s life-long scholarship of Socrates, Plato, Goethe, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein:

Here we come upon one of the most profound reasons for Socratic irony: direct language is not adequate for communicating the experience of existing, the authentic consciousness of being, the seriousness of life as we live it, or the solitude of decision making. To speak is to be doubly condemned to banality. In the first place, there can be no direct communication of existential experience, and in this sense, every speech-act is “banal.” Secondly, however, it is this same banality which, in the form of irony, can make indirect communication possible.61

The problem of direct communication, which Hadot describes, is a condition of life, but what is the aim of the indirect communication enabled by irony? Hadot is certain that what lies behind the veil of Socrates’ irony is not a grand philosophical thesis, but an invitation to a new form of life: “Socrates had no system to teach. Throughout, his philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an invitation to a new way of life, active reflection, and living consciousness.”62 This account is in line with the experience of many of those who have engaged themselves with the figure of Socrates – and viewed as such, Socrates was far from taking a stance against life, as Nietzsche accused him of doing in The Twilight of the Idols.63 Rather the Socratic project, where irony plays a central role, is and has always been an invitation to a more meaningful life and thus, in a sense, an appreciation and celebration of life.

Perhaps we can now sufficiently comprehend the lines in Hölderlin’s poem about Socrates, quoted on the first page of this essay:

He who has thought most deeply
Loves that which is the most alive.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, “Socratic Irony: What is It?”, I have accounted for the term Socratic irony and explained its meaning. My focus has primarily been on the aspects of irony that are directly valuable philosophically, although such a task also requires a discussion of its mere rhetorical forms.

63 Nietzsche (1889), § 12 (p. 44).
I began by addressing the conceptual change caused by the figure of Socrates, primarily as he was depicted in the dialogues of his student Plato. I discussed how for example Aristophanes, Aristotle, Quintilian and Cicero conceived of the term and thus tracked the change of meaning from being a pejorative concept of bluff and dishonesty to acquire the positive sense of artful double, or multiple, meaning.

Then I discussed Melissa Lane’s criticism of the scholarship on Socratic irony in her chapter “Reconsidering Socratic Irony”, where she questions that irony should be juxtaposed as thoroughly with Socrates as it has been. I granted that Professor Lane might be right in claiming that more rhetorical irony is attributed to Socrates than should be, but I reject her more radical position that the entire concept of Socratic irony has been based on ill-founded ground.

Next, I explained Gregory Vlastos concept of complex irony, where an ironic uttering plays on two senses of what is said. Although Vlastos has some valuable insights with regard to Socratic irony his conception is faulty: epistemologically anachronistic as well too coloured by demystifying conjecture, which seems to impose the values of the expositor on the Athenian character. Vlastos is still close to capturing key elements of the meaning of Socratic irony, for instance when he addresses the hearer’s burden of interpretation.

Finally, before the conclusion and after the necessary prelude of earlier chapters, I reached the climax of the essay by giving a fully-fledged account of the philosophical meaning of Socratic irony. My guiding lights are the writings of two scholars who are both close to me intellectually, Pierre Hadot and Alexander Nehamas. I account for the latter’s elucidation of Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge, which is both an example of Socratic irony and deeply revealing with regard to its meaning. Socrates was an ethical teacher, full of vague wisdom, but without transmissible knowledge of virtue, comparable to knowledge of crafts. His situation required an ironic way of speaking, which apart from having rhetorical qualities had both a concealing function and the purpose of indirect communication, capable of being understood on different levels by different people.

According to the view I am proposing, Socrates realised that the only way for him to be an ethical teacher was to help people to become wise and virtuous by making them more reflective and by increasing their awareness. He subtly inspired them to take the same route to the good and virtuous life as he himself took: the route
of learning from experience, self-examination and enquiry. I turned to Hadot’s account of Socrates as a mask of personalities, with frequent reference to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in order to explain the profound role of Socrates and his irony for numerous individuals who get to know him through written account, especially through Plato’s dialogues. “Socrates masks himself, and at the same time is used as a mask by others,” as Hadot puts it, and it is crucial for his pedagogical role not to be dogmatic, but to help his students to become better versions of themselves. I use Wittgenstein’s metaphor of a mirror to describe the function of Socratic irony. In a non-trivial way, Socrates is a “midwife” of seeking minds. Important for that midwifery is the aura of silence that the ironic veil creates. This silence, which can also be seen as the mature neutrality of an educator, is necessary in order to reach the educational aim that Nietzsche has probably expressed more eloquently than any other writer: “Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the true basic material of your being is, something in itself ineducable and in any case difficult of access, bound and paralysed: your educators can be only your liberators.”  

Socratic irony is rooted in the rich variety of individuals, the limits of language and the a problem of communication. It is a rhetorical device, an art of honest concealment, an indirect expression and a valuable educational tool. Socrates’ life was marked by irony – and the lives of many of his students, from his own time to the 21st century, have been marked by engaging with that irony. Behind the veil of Socratic irony they find a new form of life, full of richness and possibilities.

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Asgeir Theodor Johannesson (Oscar Theodore)

64 Nietzsche (1874), “Schopenhauer as Educator”, p. 129.
Bibliography


