

interpretation

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Socratic *εἰρωνεία*

RONNA BURGER

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“Oh Heracles! Here is the customary *εἰρωνεία* of Socrates, and this I knew, and predicted that when it was for you to answer you would not wish to, but would be ironic and would do anything rather than answer if someone asks you something.”

— *Republic* 337a

Readers of the Platonic dialogues are surely familiar with this customary manner of Socrates and the reaction it provokes. But since, indeed, Socrates might be thought unrecognizable apart from his ironic speeches, and particularly his apparently dissembling professions of ignorance, it comes as a surprise to realize that there are only five references in the Platonic corpus to Socratic *εἰρωνεία*, two of these uttered by the same speaker in the same context, and one by Socrates, imagining this reproach against himself on the part of others. Assuming that Plato puts nothing into the dialogues arbitrarily, we are compelled to ask what it is which brings these cases together, apart from all others, in a class of their own.¹

The references to Socratic *εἰρωνεία* are, to begin with, accusations; they express hostility against the deliberate deceit practiced by one who says—particularly when he belittles himself—just the opposite of what he means. Aristotle treats *εἰρωνεία* as the defect, contrasted with boastfulness as the excess, in regard to the mean of truthfulness, or sincerity in speech and action (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1108^a23). This kind of self-depreciation is justified, Aristotle observes, only on the part of the great-souled man when compelled to deal with the many whom he despises (1124^b30); it is not, he implies, a weapon of self-protection in the face of one's superior or equal. If the practice of *εἰρωνεία* is motivated, then, by contempt for one's inferior, the suspicion that one is a victim of that practice would understandably arouse resentment. Of course, there is a certain pleasure, a sense of superiority presumably, for those who are spectators rather than victims.

It does not seem accidental that the only three individuals in the Platonic dialogues who make this accusation against Socrates might well be grouped together on independent grounds: certainly the speeches of Thrasymachus in the *Republic* and Callicles in the *Gorgias* have always struck readers as variations on a theme, and the third, that of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, shares certain fundamental features in common with them. This is reflected not only by the views these men express, but also by the structure of the dramatic representations in

1. These reflections on the references to Socratic *εἰρωνεία* were prompted by an opportunity to comment on Charles Griswold's paper, "On the Interpretation of Socratic and Platonic Irony," delivered at the meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in October, 1981.

which they appear. All three enter the discussion at the end of a succession of speakers, and each understands himself to occupy a crowning position. Alcibiades proposes to provide the fitting conclusion, which will illuminate the entire series of speeches on ἔργος, by transforming the topic into a speech about Socrates, the ironic beloved who pretends to be a lover (*Sym.* 214b–d). Both Thrasymachus and Callicles, after listening to the way Socrates has treated the two speakers before them, are filled with indignation; they explode furiously into the discussion—or Thrasymachus, Socrates suggests, at least pretends to—prepared to stand up against the unfair manipulations through which Socrates prevented the previous speakers from defending the implications of their views (*Rep.* 336c, *Gorg.* 482c–e).

Socrates is not only unfair, according to Thrasymachus and Callicles, but he is misguided in the opinions he is assumed to hold about the right way of life. Since this is just what he professes to be his primary concern, Thrasymachus and Callicles seem torn between pitying and blaming Socrates for his ignorance. In any case, the speeches they address to him are—or are meant to appear—so harsh that Socrates is compelled to beg them for gentleness if they expect their pedagogy to be successful. This, of course, they take only as another sign of Socrates' ironic stance toward them (*Rep.* 336e–337a, *Gorg.* 489d–e). In assuming, however, that Socrates is interested only in teaching, not in learning from them, they confirm their profoundly contradictory attitude toward him. On the one hand they must teach Socrates, because he is a simpleton who practices justice out of naïveté (*Rep.* 343a–d, *Gorg.* 484c–d); yet, on the other hand, they do not trust him and could not explain that distrust if he were as foolish and simple as they allege. They suspect there is more to him and resent the possible concealment of an inner core behind a facade of innocence. Now Alcibiades seems to be a step ahead: he no longer wavers between two views of Socrates, for his most intimate experiences, he discloses, have led him to see the truth of Socrates' character and of his speeches, hidden within a deceptive outer shell.

It is not only because of the superior insight they wish to communicate, but also because of their outspokenness in doing so that all three interlocutors consider themselves able to make an important contribution to the discussion. Alcibiades makes a point of excusing his frankness as the result of his present condition—*in vino veritas* (*Sym.* 217e). But Thrasymachus and Callicles are proud of their outspokenness as a confirmation of their teaching: it exemplifies just the kind of courage and freedom from constraint which they praise as the mark of human excellence. They believe themselves capable, therefore, of overcoming the limitations of those who preceded them, who were insufficiently radical because they were held back by shame, based on merely conventional grounds.

It is just the openness of which all three interlocutors are so proud, however, which Socrates puts into question when he accuses each of harboring hidden interests. Alcibiades, Socrates judges by the end of his speech, must in fact have

been very sober while pretending to be out of control: he almost succeeded in his attempt to veil the true object of his speech, namely to maintain Socrates as his undivided lover and Agathon as the undivided object of his love (*Sym.* 222c–d). With this rather light-hearted uncovering of Alcibiades' hidden motive, Socrates does not deny, of course, but ignores the possible truth of Alcibiades' portrait of him. He displays the same avoidance when he calls attention to Thrasymachus' self-concealment. It was evident, Socrates observes in his narrative report, that Thrasymachus only pretended to make a point of getting him to answer; in fact he was eager to speak in order to do himself credit, since he believed he had a most excellent answer to the question (*Rep.* 338a)—one which was meant, among other things, to advertise the usefulness of his own skills.

He was perhaps mistaken, Socrates admits after his long discussion with Callicles, in having assumed that Callicles was able and willing to be as open as he claimed to be (*Gorg.* 499c). Now Callicles, unlike Thrasymachus, may not have pretended to speak frankly and with good will in order intentionally to hide his true purposes: Callicles, unlike Thrasymachus, has no stake in an art of making things appear to be what they are not (cf. *Phaedrus* 261c–d). But the usefulness of Callicles' candor and friendship depends on a third condition, knowledge, and it should not be surprising if his satisfaction of that condition is put into question. Socrates first confirms his confidence in Callicles' wisdom by acknowledging that he has been sufficiently educated, "as the majority of Athenians would say" (*Gorg.* 487b); but what emerges as the conversation progresses is the extent to which Callicles maintains the opinions of an Athenian "gentleman," and it is this which determines the limits of his outspokenness with Socrates.

Socrates is appropriately playful in unveiling the hidden motives of those who accuse him of *εἰρωνεία*. In doing so, nevertheless, he turns the tables on his accusers; for while their claim to a superior insight depends on their freedom from convention, Socrates shows each to be far less liberated than he believes himself to be. None of them is able, therefore, to provide an adequate "touchstone" to test Socrates' soul (cf. *Gorg.* 486d–487a). Alcibiades, at least, seems to be aware of a tension within himself: he admits that the shame he feels in the presence of Socrates is a strength, while its disappearance as soon as he is away from Socrates is his greatest weakness (*Sym.* 216a–c). Thrasymachus and Callicles, in contrast, are proud of the radical teachings they expound; but they are unaware, at least at first, of their commitment to opinions inconsistent with those teachings, which furnish Socrates with the weapon he needs to refute them.

The alleged insight which Thrasymachus and Callicles share, despite their contrary interpretations of it, concerns the dialectical power play of master and slave. Justice, according to Thrasymachus, is nothing but the rules laid down by the stronger to further his own advantage (*Rep.* 338c–339a); it is that which is laid down, according to Callicles, by the weak who band together in self-defense against the naturally strong (*Gorg.* 483b–484c). While Thrasymachus betrays his self-understanding as a little man, resentfully compelled to satisfy the inter-

ests of the powerful, Callicles identifies himself with the naturally superior, resentfully restrained by the combined force of the inferior many. But Thrasymachus gets caught in Socrates' net because of the tension between his narrow understanding of self-interest and a standard of perfection in the arts to which he, as a practitioner of the "art of rhetoric," necessarily ascribes (*Rep.* 340c–342e). And Callicles gets caught because of the tension between his narrow understanding of pleasure and an unacknowledged standard, of nobility or greatness, which prevents him from defending the claim that all pleasures are equal, hence pleasure as such is *the good* (*Gorg.* 499b–c).

The tension which Alcibiades recognizes in himself, the tension implicit in the teachings of Thrasymachus and Callicles which Socrates brings to light and exploits, is the result, not of their liberation from convention, but of that liberation being insufficiently radical. Thrasymachus and Callicles might have overcome that insufficiency had they reflected adequately on the meaning of "the stronger" or "the superior by nature" who are entitled to rule, and what the self-interest is to which their efforts should be directed. Without that reflection, they may be on the way toward, but have not consistently carried through, the radical liberation which Socrates alone seems to have achieved. Yet while the doctrines of Thrasymachus and Callicles conflict with the conventional opinions whose trammels they believe they have cast off, the Socratic perspective seems, paradoxically, to support the conventional opinions from which it is more thoroughly liberated. It is this paradox that lies behind the contradictory attitude toward Socrates that Thrasymachus and Callicles display in their accusations against his ironic treatment of them: while Socrates seems to be an advocate of the conventions they scorn, his irony is a sign of superiority which could be explained only by freedom from the unreflective opinions of the many.

But while they may have an inkling of the self-sufficiency of Socrates, in their alienation from it, Thrasymachus and Callicles have no adequate understanding of its source. Having defined justice as the interest of the stronger, Thrasymachus tries to escape Socrates' attack by restricting the stronger to the ruler in the precise sense, who by definition cannot err (*Rep.* 340c–341a); by the end of their discussion, he seems to suspect, but without fully understanding, that Socrates alone may have the correct interpretation of this precise ruler, who is never mistaken about his true advantage. By the better who should rule, Callicles admits eventually that he means the wiser (*Gorg.* 491a–d); but, though he is unable or unwilling to be persuaded by him, he too suspects that Socrates alone may have the correct understanding of the wiser who are by nature stronger.

Now Alcibiades seems to have more than an inkling of Socrates' self-sufficiency, but just as little understanding, perhaps, of its source. He accuses Socrates of practicing *εἰρωνεία* in concealing his true status as beloved behind the guise of a lover. He claims to have opened up Socrates and discovered within the moderation which makes him look down on the beauty, wealth, and honor

admired by the many; the images he discovered within Socrates he found so divine and golden, so beautiful and wondrous, that he was willing to do whatever Socrates might command (*Sym.* 216c–217a). And the speeches of Socrates, Alcibiades adds as an afterthought, are themselves clothed with a ridiculous exterior; but when opened up, they show themselves to be more divine than all others, filled with images of virtue most fitting for whoever is to be a gentleman (221e–222a). But if Alcibiades has caught a glimpse of that ironic disdain for men which lies behind Socrates' outermost veil, he has not seen behind the images within Socrates and his speeches: he shows no comprehension of the nature of that *ἔρωσ* which does move Socrates, and alone accounts for his disdain of human *ἔρωσ*.

In order to bring to light the contradictory attitude of those who accuse him of *εἰρωνεία*, Socrates must disclose its root. What he discovers in all three cases is the desire to be master of the *δῆμος*. It is the need for honor from the many that is the source of Alcibiades' weakness, and that is precisely the uncomfortable truth about himself which he admits to having learned from Socrates (*Sym.* 216a–c). Thrasymachus believes he can shock the naïve Socrates by teaching him that the shepherd, far from being concerned with the good of the sheep for their own sake, cares for them only with an eye to the benefit for himself and his master (*Rep.* 343a–c). But Socrates puts Thrasymachus in his proper place by identifying him with this shepherd, subordinated to a master and dependent for his own good on the sheep he attempts to control through his art of speaking. Just as he himself, Socrates explains to Callicles, is moved by a dual love—of Alcibiades and of philosophy—so Callicles is moved by a dual love—of Demus, son of Pyrilampes, and of the Athenian *δῆμος* (*Gorg.* 481c–482c); yet in the case of Callicles' dual allegiance, unlike that of Socrates, the beneficial effects of one cannot serve as a corrective for the potentially disastrous effects of the other. If he is to achieve that friendship with the *δῆμος* for which he longs, Socrates reminds Callicles at the end of their discussion, he must make himself like it, which is just what Callicles wishes to avoid.

Having discovered the force which moves these men, Socrates has a common goal in his encounters with them: he must demonstrate that the desire for mastery over the *δῆμος* brings as its consequence enslavement to it. Since Socrates, in the eyes of his accusers, does not seem to have succeeded in attaining that mastery over the *δῆμος* which they consider so desirable, they disdain his apparent powerlessness. But the resentment they express in their accusations against his *εἰρωνεία* betrays just the opposite: they are half aware that his indifference to the desire for mastery over the *δῆμος* brings as its consequence freedom from it. To the extent that Socrates reveals their enslavement he implies his liberation, and thus turns their disdain into envy of what they suspect is his hidden power.

This unstable condition of envy and disdain is especially well illustrated by the otherwise puzzling exchange of accusations between Socrates and Callicles. When Socrates playfully warns Callicles that he must be more gentle if he wants

Socrates to continue attending his lessons, Callicles understandably charges him with being ironic. But Socrates forcefully denies the charge; he swears “By Zethus,” the Euripidean character to whom Callicles just appealed when, Socrates now retorts, he spoke so ironically to him (*Gorg.* 485e, 489e). But what exactly was Callicles’ irony? He alluded to Zethus, the man of the field, and to his musical brother Amphion to symbolize two ways of life, the private-philosophic and the public-political; and when he argued that the former should not be continued beyond youth, since real men must be devoted to the latter, he seemed only to express his genuine conviction, which he hoped to communicate to Socrates for his own good.

To describe the unmanly individual who needs a whipping for continuing philosophy beyond the appropriate time, Callicles cites a line from Homer: the philosopher, he charges, is compelled to whisper in a corner with a few boys, “shunning the *ἀγορά* where men get glory” (*Gorg.* 485d, cf. *Iliad* 1.490, IX.441). Callicles seems, in the first place, to be unaware of the fact that Socrates is seldom far from the *ἀγορά*; he has, after all, just described the philosopher as a man who knows nothing of the laws of the city, nothing of men’s characters, of human pleasures and desires (484c–d, cf. *Theaetetus* 173c–175b). Perhaps, however, Callicles’ irony is intended, in part, to imply the difference between the *ἀγορά* of the Athenian marketplace and that of the Homeric assembly. He has, in any case, made a rather odd choice to illustrate the limitations of the philosophic life by likening Socrates to Achilles; and while the context refers to Achilles sulking by his ship in private, out of wounded pride, he remains the great warrior whose absence only proves to his countrymen their utter dependence upon him. The line to which Callicles alludes, moreover, juxtaposes two signs of manliness—war and debate in the *ἀγορά* where men become preeminent; but Callicles omits the former, oddly enough, just when his purpose is presumably to advocate the strong man’s life of action. With this omission, his ambiguous words could be interpreted more as a praise of Socrates than a condemnation; of course, the irony which Socrates recognizes in these words, one can’t help but surmise, may have Callicles as its unwitting victim rather than intentional perpetrator.

That the accusations against Socrates betray more the limitations of the accuser than of the accused is confirmed by the only other reference in the Platonic corpus to Socratic *εἰρωνεία*. Near the end of his trial Socrates surmises that, if he were to justify his allegiance to the philosophic enterprise by appealing to his obedience to the god, the jury would think him ironic (*Apology* 37e); since they are in fact condemning him of impiety they must consider his entire *ἀπολογία* a long exercise in irony. But Socrates is in a bind: although he cannot appeal to the god, since they believe him impious, they would believe him even less, he adds, if he were to argue that his devotion to philosophy is based on the conviction that the unexamined life is not worth living (38a). The jury might resent the irony of Socrates’ claim to piety; yet such irony would be compelled by their inability to

comprehend the truth, which Socrates has simultaneously revealed, of his commitment to the self-justifying worth of philosophy.

Socrates' *ειρωνεία* is necessitated, Plato shows us here, by the ignorance of the *δημος*; it is equally necessitated, as the other explicit references show, by those whose desire to enslave the *δημος* binds them in an essential relation to it. They are prevented by this desire from being persuaded by Socrates even when they follow the implications of his arguments; they are forced to look up to Socrates with a suspicion of his strength, while looking down on him because they do not really understand it. Thrasymachus' resentful charge against Socrates' irony in refusing to offer his own answers to the questions he raises is thus paradigmatic: since Thrasymachus does not understand what philosophy is, what the standard of knowledge is which it presupposes but does not fulfill, he could not possibly grasp the truth behind Socrates' claim to possess only knowledge of his own ignorance. The charges against Socrates' self-concealing speeches and deeds can be ascribed to Plato, then, not as judgments of Socrates but of the speakers who express them, whose words mean more than they realize; the accusations against Socratic *ειρωνεία* are themselves represented in the Platonic dialogues ironically.