

Maieutic Irony: Socratic Method and Pedagogical Communication

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Abstract: Irony is an interesting yet understudied rhetorical scheme. In the current study, several notable uses of irony in the Socratic dialogues are investigated to explore 1. What is said, 2. What is interpreted by the interlocutor internal to dialogue, 3. The effect of employing irony on the interlocutor within the dialogue, and 4. What is interpreted by the reader as a literary piece. The results are presented with the attempt of understanding Socrates' intentional use of irony as a teaching and argumentative method, and to examine how the techniques and intended effects can be reproducible in a teaching context. From the exploratory dialogue method of Socrates, to the blunder invoking technique of Columbo, criticizing, and provoking confusion, maieutic irony has much to contribute to pedagogical practice.

Keywords: Socratic method, maieutics, irony, epoché, rhetoric, dialogues

Irony comes from the Greek εἰρωνεία (*eirōneía*) meaning “feigned ignorance,” from *eirōn* “dissembler.” The concept originally meant simulated ignorance that textually looks or verbally sounds like something radically different from what is communicated in the moment or later upon reflection. Now we communicators have developed a broader idea of irony to indicate when the meaning is flipped. There can be:

- **Dramatic irony**, or tragic irony, the favorite of Shakespeare, when the audience is aware of some information or fate that would help the characters. For instance, we as the audience know that Romeo and Juliet is a Shakespearian tragedy, and we feel sorrow when Romeo drinks the poison incorrectly believing Juliet lies dead.
- **Situational irony**, or cosmic irony, when reality contradicts the expected and insisted outcome. For instance, Greek mythology tells of Oedipus bringing about the fate that he tries to avoid by his very own avoidance tactic, as well as Chronos trying to avoid the same filial castration he committed and therefore becoming a terrible father who must be dethroned.
- **Verbal irony**, when the statement means the opposite of the meaning of the words. The listener or reader looks to attitude and tone to decide whether the statement should be interpreted at surface level or foundational level to understand verbal irony. For instance, *Casablanca's* Renault tells Rick while being handed his winnings: “I'm shocked, shocked, to find that gambling is going on in here.”
- And what is known as **Socratic irony**, feigned ignorance to expose someone's position and its grounding. Columbo the detective is famous for acting the bumbling, clumsy idiot to lull his interlocutor into a false sense of superiority, then with his “just one more thing” he puts the pieces together. This is the type that will be explored more in the proceeding study, although there may be the other types employed in the Dialogues at times.

Socrates often uses irony to teach. Socrates invites his interlocutor to argue his position, and instead of correcting, Socrates allows him to try his position, to compose an argument, and is open to the possibility that the argument can work. In this process, Socrates uses irony to do several things.

- His irony **exaggerates**: by being ironical and adding ridiculous detail to a position, he conflates, distills, or provides an extreme example.
- His irony **loosens**: his words loosen up the interlocutor, unstuck him from his own idea with humor, to make him open to another possibility, especially since he seems to be quite convinced and scandalized by any proposal to the contradiction of his assumptions.
- His irony **tests**: irony invites the other to see beyond the immediate, to check if his mind is active or dogmatic.

Interestingly, most irony has two opposing interpretations: it can be heavy, dark, closed, and tragic, or light, bright, open, and humorous. The fate of Romeo and Juliet could so easily be remedied: there is a note that does not reach him in time, there are misunderstandings and misdiagnoses. It is a complex set of circumstances necessary for the tragic, so intricate in its weaving that it would be laughable if not regarding the death of two young lovers. We can see how this intricate premise would be woven in a similar way for a comedy. We see the brilliance of an episode of Seinfeld's plot coming together as a well orchestrated joke of dramatic irony, and yet we still laugh as the punchline is revealed. This idea can be applied to interpreting Socrates' use of irony. We see Socrates inflate, negate, or parody a position. Depending on the attitude of the interlocutor, it is interpreted in a closed way as ridicule or in an open way as an invitation to think critically.

Form

Criticizing the Value

The Apology: [19e] Although, if a man is able to teach, I honor him for being paid. There is Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis, who go the round of the cities, and are able to persuade the young men to leave their own citizens [of the *polis*], by whom they might be taught for nothing, [20a] **and come to them, whom they not only pay, but are thankful [full of *pharis*] if they may be allowed to pay them.**

Socrates shows that the students value their lessons not because they learn ideas, but because they pay for the lessons. The students view the lessons as desirable not because of their inherent value, but because they have invested in the value of them.

Socrates describes to the jury that there are sophists who claim to train in the art of human virtue and their students gladly pay for this service. This story demonstrates that there are individuals who are guilty of his transgressions but that the others are accepted and even lauded for this work. Socrates claims to have no such abilities in this art, but he is playing here with the claim of corrupting the youth versus getting the youth to enjoy learning. He is criticizing the pride and

conceit of those who would have a skill of persuasion, claim to understand virtue (which is impossible), and at the same time charge people to learn it.

Criticizing via Contrast

The Apology: There is actually a Parian wise man [*sophos*] residing in Athens, of whom I have heard; and I came to hear of him in this way: I met a man who has spent a world of money on the Sophists, Kallias the son of Hipponikos, and knowing that he had sons, I asked him: “Kallias,” I said, “**if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in [20b] finding someone to put over them;** we should hire a trainer of horses or a farmer probably who would improve and perfect [lit: make them more *agathoi*] them in their own proper virtue and excellence [*aretē*]; but as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them? **Is there anyone who understands human and political virtue [*aretē*]?** You must have thought about this as you have sons; is there anyone?” “There is,” he said. “Who is he?” said I, “and of what country? and what does he charge?” “Evenus the Parian,” he replied; “he is the man, and his charge is five coins.” **Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he truly [*alēthēs*] [20c] has this knack, and teaches at such a modest charge. Had I the same, I should have been very proud and conceited; but the truth is that I have no knowledge of the kind.**

Evenus claims to teach virtue, and charges money for doing so. Socrates does not claim to be able to teach anyone how to be virtuous, and does not charge for the claim. Yet he is the one on trial for corrupting the youth, when he has made no claims of his abilities and charged no money. Socrates contrasts the Sophists who claim to be enlightened with the ability to teach virtue, and that they charge money to teach this virtue, with the idea that he makes no such claim, and he does not charge money for something so ridiculous. But he makes this statement look like a compliment almost, until we clearly see the irony in the proposal “Had I the same, I should have been very proud and conceited”. The idea that someone who is versed in virtue being consequently proud and conceited is the juxtaposition Socrates uses to express his opinion of such a claim.

Playing the Ignorant

The Apology: [21a] [Chaerephon] asked the oracle to tell him whether there was anyone wiser [more *sophos*] than I, and the Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser [more *sophos*.] ... [21b] When I heard the answer, I said to myself, “**What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle [*ainigma*]?** For I know that I have no wisdom [*sophiā*], small or great. **What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest [most *sophos*] of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature [= *themis* does not allow it].” ... I reflected that if I could only find a man more *sophos* than myself, [21c] then I might go to the god with a refutation of the oracle [*manteion*] in my hand. I should say to him, “Here is a man who is more *sophos* than I**

am; but you said that I was the most *sophos*.” Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of being wise [*sophos*] and observed to him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really *sophos*, although he was thought *sophos* by many, and more *sophos* still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself *sophos*, but was not really *sophos*; [21d] and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. . . . [22a] And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth [*alēthēs*]—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better.

Socrates’ role testifying for himself to his jurors is a delicate position, especially when he declares that he is the wisest man in all of the world. It is a bold statement, and one that takes self assurance to declare. So he recounts the story not of his self-proclamation, but of disbelief in the Oracles’ assertion, and his effort to disprove it. Only after searching far and wide, according to his narrative, did he accept the wisdom of the Oracle. There is irony in the role of this story within the trial--remember this is meant to be a defense against the charges of corrupting the youth and impiety. The tone is one of piety, but it thinly veils the declaration, and finally the acceptance of it by Socrates. His defense is not full of demonstrating his piety to prove the charges wrong, but the opposite--a case that he has a right to be impious.

Playing the Innocent

The Apology: I must perform for you the tale of my wandering [*planē*], just as if I had been laboring [*poneîn*] to achieve labors [*ponoi*] that I endured for this purpose: that the [god’s] oracular wording [*manteiā*] should become impossible to refute. When I left the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, [22b] and all sorts. I am almost ashamed to speak the true [*alēthēs*], but still I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. That showed me in an instant that not by wisdom [*sophiā*] [22c] do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners [*theo-mantis* plural] or soothsayers who also say many fine [*kala*] things, but do not understand the meaning of them. And the poets appeared to me to be much in the same case [literally have the same *pathos*, experience]; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the most *sophos* of men in other things in which they were not *sophos*. . . . At last I went to the artisans, [22d] for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine [*kala*] things; and in this I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were more *sophos* than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell

into the same error [*hamartia*] as the poets; **because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters**, and this defect in them overshadowed their *sophiā*.

[23a] This investigation has led to my **having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind**, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called *sophos*, **for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the *sophiā* which I find wanting in others**: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that the god only is *sophos*; and in this oracle he means to say that the *sophiā* of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, [23b] **he is only using my name as an illustration**, as if he said, He, O men, is the most *sophos*, who, like Socrates, knows that his *sophiā* is in truth [*alēthēs*] worth nothing.

Socrates asserts that any idea of him having wisdom is the conclusion the interlocutors come to when they are proven to lack wisdom. There is even a denial in that the Oracle even meant Socrates is wise in presenting an interpretation that the statement just means that mankind is not wise. The contradictions here are laughable. Of the hundreds of Athenians in the jury, it is likely some have experienced speaking with Socrates and demonstrating their foolishness. Yet he excuses his attitude by saying that everyone lacks wisdom, even himself who can make them feel the fool.

Criticizing via Absurdity

The Apology: I would have you know that, if you kill such a one as I am, **you will injure yourselves more than you will injure me**. Meletus and Anytus will not injure me: they cannot; for it is not in the nature of things [*themis*] [30d] that a bad man should injure a better than himself. I do not deny that he may, perhaps, kill him, or drive him into exile, or deprive him of civil rights [literally: rob his *tīmē*]; and he may imagine, and others may imagine, that he is doing him a great injury: but in that I do not agree with him; for the evil of doing as Anytus is doing—of unjustly [without *dikē*] taking away another man's life—is greater far. And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the god, or lightly reject his boon by condemning me.

The court proceedings, a guilty verdict, and the judicial sentence would be retributive justice. But Socrates explains that convicting him does the opposite of what they intend to do: it convicts them--as transgressors against the gods, against reason, against innocence. Turning the outcome around, showing how it will punish them instead of him, is playing with the absurdity: you want to punish me, but you will be punished. Socrates argues that they are the ones who will suffer. It would be illogical to convict, as it convicts themselves of greater offenses.

Criticizing via Transvaluation

[30e] For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the god; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and **requires to be stirred into life**. I am that gadfly which the god has given the state and **[31a]** all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, **arousing and persuading and reproaching you**. And as you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that **you may feel irritated at being suddenly awakened when you are caught napping**; and you may think that if you were to strike me dead, as Anytus advises, which you easily might, then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless the god in his care of you gives you another gadfly. And that I am given to you by the god is proved by this: **[31b]** that if I had been like other men, I should not have neglected all my own concerns, or patiently seen the neglect of them during all these years, and **have been doing yours, coming to you individually, like a father or elder brother, exhorting you to regard virtue [aretē]**; this I say, would not be like human nature.

Socrates presents an ironic argument that he should not be condemned because someone who will irritate the citizens of Athens will be difficult to replace. The official charges, corrupting the youth and impiety, can even be thought of as a formal way of condemning him for being irritating, and here he is, aware of this, embracing it, and arguing that despite their irritation they need his “gadfly” urging in order not to live dully. The irony is that he embraces his role of irritating them, and tries to persuade them that life is better with someone to irritate them.

Fatalism - Situational Irony

The child says to his parent: “whatever I do, I will be punished anyhow.” The child expresses that he might as well enjoy or even capitalize on his act of offense, since he believes he is destined to be punished whatever he does. Playing with fate, accepting fate, is to take a form of power by surrendering.

The Apology: [The *daimones*] a voice which comes to me and always forbids me to do something which I am going to do, but never commands me to do anything, and this is what stands in the way of being engaged in matters of the state. And rightly, as I think. For I am certain, O men of Athens, that **if I had engaged in politics, I would have been put to death long ago** and done no good either to you **[31e]** or to myself. And do not be offended at my telling you the truth [*alēthēs*]: for the truth is that no man who goes to war with you or any other multitude, honestly struggling against the commission of unrighteousness and wrong in the state, will save [*sōzein*] his life; **[32a] he who will really fight for the right, if he would be safe [sōzein] even for a little while, must have a private life and not a public one [= one concerned with the *dēmos*].**

With a little joke, in the middle of Socrates' self defense, Socrates teases that he would have been put to death long ago if he had been a politician because he fights for what is right. It is a form of situational irony to point out the fateful role their trial and condemnation plays. Destiny would have led him down the same path whatever life he chose because he follows truth. It is an insult to politicians, and Socrates has clearly presented the art of politics, rhetoric, and pandering in juxtaposition to speaking in parrhesia, honestly and for the good of people despite any distaste to it.

Function

Criticism

The Apology: [17a] How you have felt, O men of Athens, at hearing the speeches of my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that **their persuasive words almost made me forget who I was—such was the effect of them; and yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth** [*alēthēs*]. But many as their falsehoods were, **there was one of them which quite amazed me**—I mean when they told you to be upon your guard, and **not to let yourselves be deceived** [17b] by **the force of my eloquence**. They ought to have been ashamed of saying this, because they were sure to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and displayed my deficiency; they certainly did appear to be most shameless in saying this, unless by **the force of eloquence** they mean **the force of truth** [*alēthēs*]; for then I do indeed admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! Well, as I was saying, **they have hardly uttered a word, or not more than a word, of truth** [*alēthēs*]; but you shall hear from me **the whole truth** [*alēthēs*]: **not, however, delivered after their manner, in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases**. No indeed! [17c] **but I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment**; for I am certain that this is right, and that at my time of life **I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator**—let no one expect this of me. And I must beg of you to grant me one favor, which is this—if you hear me using the same words in my defense which I have been in the habit of using, and which most of you may have heard in the *agora*, and at the tables of the money-changers, or anywhere else, [17d] I would ask you not to be surprised at this, and not to interrupt me. For I am more than seventy years of age, and **this is the first time that I have ever appeared in a court of law, and I am quite a stranger to the ways of the place**; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom **you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue**, [18a] and after the fashion of his country—that I think is not an unfair request. Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the justice [*dikē*] of my cause, and give heed to that: let the jury decide with their virtue [*aretē*] and **the speaker speak truly** [*alēthēs*].

Socrates just listened to the prosecution put forth their case against him. He knows they described him in an unflattering and conflated way--dishonestly--but he states that listening to them makes him doubt himself. He says he is affected by the performative. He pretends to have cognitive dissonance. By employing irony here, he mocks their case, a form of criticism.

The prosecution warned the jury about Socrates, that he would use rhetoric skills to confuse them as he has done with the people of Athens to lead him to be put on trial, but he denies being eloquent or convincing. They confuse eloquence and truth regarding the effect of words on people. Socrates claims to not be skilled in rhetoric, and to only be able to speak truth in contrast. Of course he knows of what he is accused, and he speaks unapologetically in identifying with that man. Can he speak with rhetoric? Yes and no, because on the one hand he understands the competency, he knows how it works, yet on the other hand, it is against his nature to bend the truth and tell the jury what they would want to hear in order to win their “not guilty” vote.

There is a deception and warning against this power of words in his use of irony. He creates an opposition between the force of eloquence (the skill of the sophists, which is ornamented) and the force of truth (the skill of philosophers, which is naked): both affect the listener. Rhetoric is not his native tongue he says. The idea is symbolic, and he claims *logos* as his native tongue instead. He proposes he is a “stranger,” like the freed slave who comes back to the cave to persuade his friends in the *Allegory of the Cave*. As revolutionaries, philosophers are strangers to civil laws. If someone is not skilled in rhetoric, the law is not written for them.

Provoking

The Apology: And so he proposes death as the penalty. **And what shall I propose on my part, O men of Athens? Clearly that which is my due. And what is that which I ought to pay or to endure [*paskhein*]?** What shall be done to the man who has never had the wit to be idle during his whole life; but has been careless of what the many care about—wealth, and family interests, and military offices, and speaking in the assembly, and magistracies, and plots, and parties. **[36c] Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to follow in this way and be saved [*sōzein*],** I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to everyone of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions. **What shall be done to such a one?**

[36d] Doubtless some good thing, O men of Athens, if he has his reward; and the good should be of a kind suitable to him. What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, who desires leisure that he may instruct you? There can be no more fitting reward than maintenance in the Prytaneion,² O men of Athens, a reward which he deserves far more than the citizen who has won the prize at Olympia in the horse or chariot race, whether the chariots were drawn by two horses or by many. **[36e] For I am in want, and he has enough; and he only gives you the appearance of happiness [with good *daimōn*], and I give you the reality.** And if I am to estimate the penalty justly [*dikaiōs*], **[37a] I say that maintenance in the Prytaneion is the just return.**

Perhaps you may think that I am braving you in saying this, as in what I said before about the tears and prayers. But that is not the case. I speak rather because I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone, although I cannot convince you of that—for we

have had a short conversation only; but if there were a law [*nomos*] at Athens, such as there is in other cities, [37b] that a capital cause should not be decided in one day, then I believe that I should have convinced you; but now the time is too short. I cannot in a moment refute great slanders; and, as **I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not wrong myself.** I will not say of myself that I deserve any evil [*kakos*], or propose any penalty. Why should I? Because I am afraid of the penalty of death which Meletus proposes? When I do not know whether death is a good [*agathos*] or an evil [*kakos*], why should I propose a penalty which would certainly be an evil?

He is being condemned by the jury of Athens, and when he proposes his punishment for what he has done, he suggests he be elevated to the Prytaneion. To have a place in the Prytaneion is a position of honor, eating with the Athenian dignitaries of government, art, and sport, as one of the great men the city lauds. He is reversing the idea of punishment when they ask for his recommendation--he claims he should be rewarded instead. It is bold, even audacious, to propose a punishment which is not a punishment, but a position of honor. The jury chooses from the two proposals put forth, and the prosecution has proposed the death penalty. Surely the courts expect a softer penalty as an option, which would be the responsibility of the defendant to suggest. By suggesting an honor in place of a punishment, Socrates removes the option of a more lenient condemnation, and the practical result is a verdict of not guilty or the death penalty. By reversing the idea of a punishment, Socrates mocks the proceedings and the interpretation of the Oracles' declaration, Socrates' role in Athens, and those who find being challenged to think distasteful. Proposing a reward instead of a punishment shows how little Socrates takes the trial seriously or how little he fears death, both being positions unexpected by the people of Athens. They are now in a difficult position: they must rule him not guilty, or condemn him to death.

Dedramatizing

Dedramatizing employs irony to lessen or negate the effects of the initial statement or situation. It nullifies, it takes away the potency, like blunting a knife. When a child is being scolded, if he smirks or laughs, and says he would have to go to bed because it is his bedtime anyway, the parent sees in this reaction that the child lacks the seriousness the parent wants him to match, and will likely not learn the lesson the parent means to convey with the scolding. The parent is not taken seriously, and thus loses his potency in rebuking, shaming, or teaching the child a lesson.

The Apology: [38c] Not much time will be gained, O Athenians, in return for [= from the cause of, *aitiā*] **the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city [*polis*], who will say that you killed Socrates,** a *sophos* man; for they will call me wise even although I am not *sophos* when they want to reproach you. **If you had waited a little while, your desire would have been fulfilled in the course of nature. For I am far advanced in years, as you may perceive, and not far from death. [38d]** I am speaking now only to those of you who have condemned me to death.

Socrates is approximately 71 years old when he is sentenced to death. Here he points out that nature would have soon condemned him to the fate the jury now unnaturally forces upon him. But with the conviction, the Athenian government is responsible for his death, when the citizens could have just had a little bit of patience and no liability for disposing of the troublemaker. Making light of the death sentence by showing its insignificance dedramatizes the serious threat.

The Apology: In the past, the oracular [*mantikē*] art of the superhuman thing [*to daimonion*] within me was in the habit of opposing me, each and every time, even about minor things, if I was going to do anything not correctly [*orthōs*]. But now that these things, as you can see, have happened to me—things that anyone would consider, by general consensus, to be the worst possible things to happen to someone— |40b the signal [*to sēmeion*] of the god [*theos*] has not opposed me, either as I was leaving my house and going out in the morning, or when I was coming up to this place of judgment, or as I was speaking. No, it has not opposed me about anything I was going to say, though on other occasions when I was speaking, it [= the signal] has often stopped me, even when I was in the middle of saying something. But now in nothing I either said or did concerning this matter has it opposed me. So, what do I take to be the explanation of this? I will tell you. **Perhaps this is a proof that what has happened to me is something good [*agathon*], |40c and it cannot be that we are thinking straight [*orthōs*] if we think that death is something bad [*kakon*]. This is a great proof to me of what I am saying,** since the signal [*to sēmeion*] that I am used to would surely have opposed me if I had been heading toward something not good [*agathon*].

Let us think about it this way: there is plenty of reason to hope that death is something good [*agathon*]. I say this because death is one of two things: either it is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness for the person who has died, or, according to the sayings [*legomena*], there is some kind of a change [*meta-bolē*] that happens—a relocation [*met-oikēsis*] for the soul [*psūkhē*] from this place [*topos*] to another place [*topos*]. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, |40d but a sleep like the sleep of someone who sees nothing even in a dream, death will be a wondrous gain [*kerdos*]. For if a person were to select the night in which he slept without seeing anything even in a dream, and if he were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life in a better and more pleasant way than this one, I think that any person—I will not say a private individual [*idiōtēs*], but even the great king— |40e will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. **Now if death is like this, I say that to die is a gain [*kerdos*];** for the sum total of time is then only a single night. But if death is the journey [*apo-dēmiā*] to another place [*topos*], and, if the sayings [*legomena*] are true [*alēthē*], **that all the dead are over there [*ekei*], then what good [*agathon*], O jurors, [*dikastai*], can be greater than this?**

41a If, when someone arrives in the world of Hādēs, he is freed from those who call themselves jurors [*dikastai*] here, and finds the true [*alētheis*] judges [*dikastai*] who are said to give judgment [*dikazein*] over there [*ekei*]*—*Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aiakos and Triptolemos, and other demigods [*hēmi-theoi*] who were righteous [*dikaioi*] in their own life*—*that would not be a bad journey [*apo-dēmiā*], now would it? To make contact with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer*—*who of you would not welcome such a great opportunity? **Why, if these things are true [*alēthē*], let me die again and again.** |**41b** I, too, would have a wondrous activity [*diatribē*] there, once I make contact with Palamedes, and with Ajax the son of Telamon, and **with other ancient men who have suffered death through an unjust [*a-dikos*] judgment [*krisis*].** And there will be no small pleasure, I think, in comparing my own experiences [*pathos* plural] with theirs. Further*—*and this is the greatest thing of all*—***I will be able to continue questioning those who are over there [*ekei*],** just as I question those who are over here [*entautha*], and investigating who among them is wise [*sophos*] and who among them thinks he is wise [*sophos*] but is not. Who would not welcome the great opportunity, O jurors [*dikastai*], of being able to question the leader of the great Trojan expedition; |**41c** or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or one could mention countless other men*—*and women too! **What unmitigated happiness [*eudaimoniā*] would there be in having dialogues [*dialegesthai*] with them over there [*ekei*] and just being in their company and asking them questions!** And I say it absolutely: those who are over there [*ekei*] do not put someone to death for this; certainly not. I say that because those who are over there [*ekei*] are happier [*eu-daimonesterōi*] than those who are over here [*entautha*]. And they are already immortal [*athanatoī*] for the rest of time, if in fact the sayings [*legomena*] are true [*alēthē*].

But even you, O jurors [*dikastai*], should have good hopes when you face death, and you should have in mind [*dia-noeisthai*] this one thing as true [*alēthes*]: |**41d** that nothing bad [*kakon*] can happen to a good [*agathos*] person, either in life or when he comes to its completion [*teleutân*]. The events involving this person are not neglected by the gods [*theoi*]. Nor is it by chance that the events involving me have happened. Rather, this one thing is clear to me, that **to be already dead and to be in a state where I am already released from events involving me was better for me.** And it is for this reason that the signal [*sēmeion*] in no way diverted me from my path.

Further, **it is for this reason that I am not at all angry with those who accused me or with those who condemned me.** Granted, it was not with this in mind that they accused me and condemned me, since they thought they were doing me harm, |**41e** and for this they deserve to be blamed.

Socrates dulls the sting of the sentence, blunts its impact, by arguing that death will be a greater opportunity to question great people. He names heroes of literature and mythology, bragging even that he now welcomes death as a way to dialogue with a more prestigious crowd. Thus the

jury's decision becomes a sort of honor as he proposed, to dine and discuss with the dignitaries of not just the city of Athens, but the great philosophical tradition beyond the constraints of time. In saying this, Socrates also makes it clear that he is unrepentant and plans to continue bothering people with his questions in whatever afterlife there is. Their punishment loses its potency with this attitude of irony.

Deepening

Deepening irony doubles down on the initial issue. By denying or defending, the actor is committing the offense he is denying being guilty of. To deny is to confirm. When a child denies having drawn on the wall, but inadvertently confirms that he is aware that someone drew on the wall by stating this unprompted, the parent knows the child has information and feels guilty. The child has confessed by denying.

The Apology: [39c] And now, O men who have condemned me, I want to prophesy to you; for **I am about to die**, and that is the hour in which men are gifted with prophetic power. And **I prophesy to you who are my murderers, that immediately after my death punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you.** Me you have killed because you wanted to escape the accuser, and not to give an account of your lives. But that will not be as you suppose: far otherwise. For I say that there will be more accusers of you than there are now; **[39d]** accusers whom hitherto I have restrained: and as they are younger they will be more severe with you, and you will be more offended at them. **For if you think that by killing men you can avoid the accuser censuring your lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honorable; the easiest and noblest [kalos] way is not to be crushing others, but to be improving yourselves.** This is the prophecy which I utter [*manteuesthai*] before my departure, to the judges who have condemned me.

Socrates comes to the end of his testimony and seems convinced that he will be convicted of corrupting the youth and impiety. And yet we see that he can not help himself but treat the jury as he has treated any other Athenian, the very interactions he is supposed to be defending himself of not doing! He takes this opportunity of having an audience to try to persuade them to think, to improve themselves. He does it via a thinly veiled prophesy, a man who is not prone to prophetizing, but one who acknowledges with this prophesy that the jury is not in the thinking mode, but into the spectacle of the court, the seriousness of the death penalty, and the drama of Athens' reputation.

Conclusions

Based on this examination of forms and functions, we can draw some conclusions of Socratic irony as to the effectiveness and employment of irony for teaching.

Irony induces thinking.

Teachers may think of jokes as accidental or setting a tone, but not necessarily a modality to encourage the thinking process. Here we see that Socrates provides several instances where thinking is induced because of irony, where it can be light or critical, deepening or dedramatizing. But in each instance the irony is playing with ideas, proposing them, testing them, examining them.

Irony induces objectivity.

Irony is the mechanism to provoke getting out of subjectivity because it plays with absurdity, extremes, or the subjective drama. It creates distance via the other introducing different proposals, thus loosening them from their own dogma, assumptions, or viewpoint. It invites the student to consider that he is thinking in his own subjectivity, to consider that there are other possible perspectives, or to stop being so heavy. Taking distance from their own ideas, they can recognize them as only one way of thinking.

Irony induces openness.

The trademark irony of Socrates is learned ignorance in his dialogues, where he is open to exploration via epoché (ἐποχή, “suspension of judgment and withholding of assent”). He takes the position as if he is the one in search of answers, not knowing, without assumptions. He questions and he critiques from the outside, as a stranger to the world and preconceived ideas. In doing so, he is free from ideologies, free to examine without prejudice, free to accept or reject based on reason. He uses this irony to invite the interlocutor to join him in this freedom to think critically.

Irony induces critical thinking.

Irony invites critical thinking because the point of irony is to not take the content as it is presented, but to question it. There can be uncertainty via ambiguity. There can be a direct opposition of what is said and what is meant. By speaking what is not meant and meaning what is not spoken, the student is meant to do some work of understanding what is not nicely laid out in lecture form. The student takes the role of decipherer and questions whether to accept or interpret.

Author Notes

Paper presented to the Semiotic Society of America 2021 Conference, October 20, 2021, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

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