

## The Irony of Socrates

We are not exalted by the destruction of the great, we are reconciled to its destruction by the fact that truth is victorious, and we are exulted by its victory.

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*

To specify the particular approach of this paper toward the subject of Socratic irony, it is necessary to begin with some terminological distinctions. The Greek noun '*eirōneia*' is standardly understood as *deception* or *dissembling*, but in its earliest recorded usage, namely, among Aristophanes' comedies and Plato's early dialogues, the latter of which will be the focus of this paper, '*eirōneia*' and its cognates have a more precise sense. In discussing cunning intelligence among the Greeks, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant cite the following description of the fox from Oppian's treatise *On Hunting*. When he sees a flock of wild birds, the fox crouches low to the ground and pretends to be asleep so that when his unsuspecting prey approach him, he can effectively spring upon them.<sup>1</sup> The fox's hunting tactics well illustrate the concept of *eirōneia* in its earliest usage; *eirōneia* is the use of deception to profit at the expense of another by presenting oneself as benign in an effort to disarm the intended victim.

In the phrase "Socratic irony," which, as here, is principally used with reference to Plato's character Socrates, 'irony' is also commonly understood to mean *dissembling* or *disingenuousness*. This usage is clearly informed by the conventional understanding of '*eirōneia*,' but 'irony' does not mean *deception*. There are two basic kinds of irony, verbal and situational. Verbal irony occurs when a speaker deliberately highlights the literal falsity of his or her utterance, typically for the sake of humor. For example, a tennis player mocks a lousy shot with "brilliant!" Consequently, a crucial dis-

inction between verbal irony and *eirōneia* is the absence, in the former case, of intended deception. Verbal irony succeeds when the intended audience grasps that the speaker is highlighting the literal falsity of the utterance, whereas if the audience were to grasp the speaker's sincere belief, *eirōneia* would fail. Furthermore, the intent of the verbal ironist is benign, whereas the *eirōn* is malevolent.<sup>2</sup>

Situational irony entails a certain incongruity between what a person says, believes, or does and how, unbeknownst to that person, things actually are. Oedipus vows to discover Laius's murderer, unaware that Laius was his father and that he himself is guilty of patricide. Whatever the precise nature of the incongruity involved in situational irony, verbal and situational irony loosely share a conceptual core of incongruity, often tending toward polar opposition between two elements, such as a semblance of things and reality.

Dramatic irony is further distinguishable as a type of situational irony; it is simply when situational irony occurs in a drama. The incongruity is between what a dramatic character says, believes, or does and what, unbeknownst to that character, the dramatic reality is. The example in the preceding paragraph is specifically of dramatic irony.

Given these distinctions, the question of whether Socrates is ironic is ambiguous. It could be interpreted to inquire whether Socrates exhibits *eirōneia* or verbal or situational irony. More precisely, since there is reason to assume that Socrates is not a strictly trans-textually identical character among Plato's dialogues, the question should be whether in any particular instance Socrates is being verbally or situationally ironic or *eirōn*.

As far as we know, the ancient tradition was principally concerned with Socratic *eirōneia* and other ancestral relatives of verbal irony. It is only

to be a clear case of verbal irony. In arguing that Socrates is not verbally ironic in this passage, a number of fundamental interpretive questions will be broached. The most fundamental of these questions concerns the extent to which Plato portrays Socrates in a realistic manner. Generally, it will be argued that there are limits to the realism of the early dialogues. Specifically, it will be argued that Socrates is sincere in the *Euthyphro* passage and that this sincerity is unrealistic.

So much for an introduction—let us now begin the argument. The definition of verbal irony given above provides a clear criterion for determining whether a speaker is being verbally ironic. Since the ironist, unlike the *eirôn*, does not intend to deceive, but to highlight the falsity of the literal meaning of his or her utterance and typically for the sake of humor, the reaction of the interlocutor should give some indication of whether the utterance is verbally ironic (hereafter, referred to simply as “ironic”). Granted, attempted irony may fail because a speaker is too subtle or an interlocutor too obtuse, but even if that occurs, the speaker’s response to the audience’s response should correct misunderstanding—save in the exceptional case where the ironist allows the point to die.

Armed with this criterion, I turn to a passage that is widely regarded as exemplifying the trope. As such, the passage offers a powerful test case. The passage occurs at the beginning of *Euthyphro* where Socrates is recounting to Euthyphro the nature of his suit and prosecutor.

What sort [of case is Meletus prosecuting]? No mean one, it seems to me, for the fact that, young as he is, he has apprehended so important a matter reflects no small credit upon him. For he says he knows how the youth are corrupted and who those are who corrupt them. He must be a wise man, who, seeing my lack of wisdom and that I am corrupting his fellows, comes to the state, as a boy runs to its mother, to accuse me. And he seems to me to be the only one of the politicians who begins in the right way, for the right way is to take care of the young men first, to make them as good as possible, just as a good husbandman will naturally take care of the young plants, as he says. Then, after this, when he has turned his attention to the older men, he will bring countless most precious blessings upon the state—at least that is the natural outcome of the beginning he has made.<sup>14</sup>

Consider a representative response to this passage and to Socrates’ treatment of Euthyphro in

general. Nehamas refers to the “incredibly heavy-handed irony with which Socrates treats [Euthyphro] throughout the dialogue,” and he claims that “Socrates’ irony is so extreme that it soon ceases to be humorous.”<sup>15</sup>

In view of the definition given, if Socrates’ remarks are verbally ironic, then he is intending to highlight their falsity for humorous effect. Accordingly, it is to be expected that Euthyphro would laugh at or comment on the absurdity of Socrates’ praise of Meletus. Here is Euthyphro’s response: “I hope it may be so, Socrates, but I fear the opposite may result, for it seems to me that he begins by injuring the state at its very heart when he undertakes to harm you. Now, tell me, what does he say you do that corrupts the youth?”<sup>16</sup>

Euthyphro responds as though Socrates has spoken in earnest. Moreover, Socrates does not correct Euthyphro’s interpretation of his remarks; he proceeds to answer Euthyphro’s question. Thus, Euthyphro’s response and Socrates’ response to Euthyphro’s response indicate that Socrates’ initial remarks are not verbally ironic.

This argument is unlikely to receive warm welcome. It will be vigorously objected that one of the dialogue’s basic features is Euthyphro’s obtuseness; therefore, it is natural that Euthyphro fails to appreciate Socrates’ irony. Again, Nehamas claims that “Plato’s *Euthyphro* . . . is unusually stupid” and “remains totally impervious to [Socrates’ irony].”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the reaction may come that to interpret Socrates’ remarks as earnest is as dim-witted as Euthyphro himself and as Meletus for prosecuting Socrates in the first place.

Since a clear criterion for verbal irony has been given and the passage has been shown to fail to satisfy it, it is necessary to consider why readers so readily attribute verbal irony to Socrates in a case such as this. One reason is supplied by a recent scholarly discussion of so-called conditional irony. Conditional irony is said to occur when the speaker asserts a proposition to which he or she is sincerely committed, but that is explicitly or implicitly embedded as the consequent in a conditional, the antecedent to which the speaker does not sincerely believe. Vasiliou suggests that Socrates’ remarks in *Euthyphro* contain the following example of conditional irony. Socrates claims that “(1) Meletus charges Socrates with a charge that is not ignoble, for it is no base thing for a young man to have knowledge of such

a subject."<sup>18</sup> But the irony here depends on the assumption that Meletus possesses knowledge of excellence (*aretê*) so that:

in (1) the implied conditional is: *if* Meletus has knowledge of [excellence], it is surely no base thing and the charge he has raised against Socrates is not ignoble. Socrates literally means this, but *we know* that Socrates does not believe the antecedent. Given *this*, however, Meletus' false pretence to knowledge and his charge against Socrates based on that pretence *are* base and ignoble.<sup>19</sup>

But let us press Vasiliou. How do "we know" that Socrates does not believe Meletus has knowledge of excellence? Vasiliou writes: "we know from [Socrates'] treatment of Meletus in the *Apology* (esp. 24b–28b), as well as from the other dialogues, that Socrates does not believe that Meletus truly fits [(1)]."<sup>20</sup>

Consider the matter now from the perspective interior to the texts' fictional worlds. Regardless of when Plato composed *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, Socrates' chance meeting with Euthyphro at the Basileic Stoa precedes Socrates' trial. Accordingly, Socrates' discussion with Meletus at *Apology* 24b–28b provides no evidence that Socrates knows that Meletus lacks knowledge of excellence. Furthermore, in *Euthyphro*, Socrates explicitly relates that he hardly knows Meletus: "I don't know the man very well myself, Euthyphro, for he seems to be a young and unknown person. I believe, however, that his name is 'Meletus' and that he is of the deme Pitthus—if you recall any Meletus of Pitthus with long hair, a short beard, and a hooked nose."<sup>21</sup> Socrates gives the impression that he has seen Meletus, but had little if any contact with the man. How, then, could Socrates know that Meletus lacks knowledge of excellence? I emphasize that Plato, certainly, believes that Meletus lacks knowledge of excellence and so that Socrates' praise of Meletus is dramatically ironic. But dramatic irony is beside the point—except, we might add, insofar as the reader is confusing Socrates' assumed verbal irony with Plato's genuine dramatic irony.

Granted, from the fictional perspective interior to the texts, Socrates cannot know that Meletus lacks knowledge of excellence insofar as Socrates has never met Meletus. However, let us now consider a second objection to my claim that Socrates is not verbally ironic in the *Euthyphro* passage.

On my interpretation, Socrates' sincerity would be intertextually inconsistent. In other words, to interpret Socrates' praise of Meletus as earnest would yield inconsistency with other of Socrates' experiences and utterances in other dialogues. For example, in *Gorgias*, Socrates emphasizes that if he is ever brought to court on a capital charge, "it will be some villain who brings me there, for no honest man would prosecute a person who had done no wrong."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Socrates' praise of Meletus occurs at the end of his life, which has been devoted to examining excellence with his contemporaries. In all the ethical investigations that Plato portrays in the early dialogues, Socrates' interlocutors are revealed to be ignorant of excellence, and in *Apology*, Socrates emphasizes his fellow citizens' ignorance of their ignorance. Regardless of whether Socrates has so interrogated Meletus himself, such experience with so many others should provide strong grounds upon which to assume that Meletus does not have knowledge of excellence.

Precise support for this view comes from the beginning of *Meno*, where Socrates claims: "I have never come upon anyone who, in my opinion, knew [what excellence is]."<sup>23</sup> The dramatic date of *Meno* surely precedes that of *Euthyphro*. And so—the argument may run—it is unbelievable that in *Euthyphro* Socrates would sincerely assume that Meletus possesses such knowledge.

My response to this objection will proceed in two steps. First, I want to dwell on Socrates' specific claim in *Meno*. Subsequently, I will address the topic of inconsistency among Socrates' utterances as a general hermeneutic problem.

First, observe that Socrates' remark in *Meno* happens to be inconsistent with a passage at the beginning of the investigation of courage in *Laches*.

[So.] Then it is necessary that we begin by knowing what excellence is, for, surely, if we had no idea at all what excellence is, we could not possibly consult with anyone regarding how he might best acquire it. [La.] I certainly think not, Socrates. [So.] Then we agree, Laches, that *we know what it is*. [La.] We do. [So.] And what we know we can, I suppose, describe. [La.] Of course. [So.] Then, my good man, let's not at once examine the whole of excellence, for that may be too much work. Rather, let's first look at a part of it to see if we have sufficient knowledge of that. And, most likely, this will make our inquiry easier . . . So, then, which part of excellence should we choose? Or isn't it clear that it is the part that *is believed*

(*dokei*) to pertain to the study of fighting in arms? And, I believe, this is thought by many (*dokei tois pollois*) to be courage.<sup>24</sup>

This passage is remarkable in a number of respects. It is the only passage in the early dialogues where Socrates presumes to know what excellence is. Also, Socrates explicitly bases his conception of courage and the relation between courage and excellence on conventional views.

Penner, who maintains that Socrates regards excellence as a unity, appeals here to Socrates' disingenuousness, a trait frequently conflated with irony: "Since the primary way in which Socrates identifies the parts of [excellence] he wants to narrow the inquiry down to, is as the part that has to do with fighting in heavy armor, he must be *wickedly trying to lure* Laches into giving the account of courage he knows Laches is itching to give anyway."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Irwin, who maintains that Socrates is committed to the unity of excellence, claims that the "assumption that bravery is a proper part of [excellence is] introduced to make the inquiry easier, because bravery [seems] to be the [part of excellence] most closely connected with training in armed combat."<sup>26</sup> In short, Penner and Irwin appeal to Socratic "irony" in order to explain away a Socratic claim, which, if accepted as sincere, would jeopardize their thesis that Socrates (and therefore Plato) is committed to the unity of excellence.

In contrast, Brickhouse and Smith use the *Laches* passage in their argument that Socrates is committed to the disunity of excellence. Thus, they criticize Penner's appeal to "irony": "One dubious consequence of [Penner's position] is that Socrates feels free to exempt himself from the requirement he so often places on his interlocutors, that when developing an argument about a moral matter that they always 'say what they believe.'"<sup>27</sup>

This scholarly dispute suggests that the attempt *locally* to resolve problematic passages such as that in *Laches* is unlikely to succeed. Likewise, the appeal to the *Meno* passage as evidence that in the *Euthyphro* passage Socrates is conditionally ironic is also problematic. Satisfactory treatment of these local problems is going to require plumbing deeper, more general assumptions that govern the interpretation of the dialogues. The general problem is that to a considerable extent Socrates' statements among as well as within individual early dialogues are inconsistent.<sup>28</sup>

Scholars tend to treat Socrates' intertextual and intra-textual inconsistencies as though they were merely apparent. There are various ways in which this is done; but the variety may be conceived as ranging between two poles. At one end, apparent inconsistency is resolved by appeal to so-called irony and various forms of disingenuousness, from polite concession to *ad hominem* argumentation to jesting to pedagogical savvy. Let us call this style of interpretation and its accompanying conceptualization of Socrates as characteristically insincere the complex view. At the other end of the spectrum, Socrates' claims are accepted as sincere, and their apparent inconsistency is resolved by appeal to developmentalism or to deeper, subtler unifying principles. Let us call this style of interpretation literalist.

Interpretations of Socrates' epistemological commitments provide a good and, as we will see toward the end of this paper, topically relevant example of this range of responses. According to the complex view, Socrates' denials of knowledge are insincere. As such, they tend to be interpreted as serving some pedagogical function. According to the literalist view, Socrates' disavowals of knowledge are accepted as genuine, yet it is observed that Socrates also occasionally sincerely avows knowledge. The inconsistency is resolved by appeal to explanations such as that Socrates uses words for knowledge in two different senses or that Socrates avows knowledge of certain propositions, but disavows knowledge of how such propositions are true, or that Socrates disavows expertise, but avows nonexpert knowledge.

However, the very conceptualization of Socrates' apparent or genuine inconsistencies as an interpretive problem itself rests on a deeper assumption about the nature of intertextual interpretation. A remark Socrates makes in one text that is inconsistent with a remark Socrates makes in another text need not be conceived as a hermeneutic problem unless it is already assumed that intertextual interpretation involving the assembly and distillation of all of Socrates' utterances is itself a legitimate, indeed, *the* legitimate interpretive procedure. But on what grounds can that assumption be justified?

Typically, the kind of justification given is post hoc; the interpreter's success in demonstrating a consistent set of Socratic philosophical principles is taken to confirm what begins as a methodological presupposition. In the case of many

philosophical texts, that kind of approach may be well warranted. However, in the particular case of Plato's early dialogues, good reasons can be marshaled against this sort of intertextual interpretation.

Even granting the possibility of revisions and overlapping or relatively simultaneous composition, Plato must have written the dialogues in some chronological order. Accordingly, some dialogue—or, if one insists, some small set of dialogues—was composed first. Consequently, Plato's first dialogue could not have been interpreted intertextually and could not have been intended to be interpreted intertextually. What if *Euthyphro* were the first Platonic dialogue? In fact, in the traditional organization of the corpus transmitted since Diogenes Laertius, *Euthyphro* is the first dialogue. How, then, would a reader be situated to recognize the verbal irony in Socrates' remarks when Euthyphro himself does not?

This suggestion is weak. The corpus of Thrasyllus, which Diogenes adopts, probably does not reflect Plato's intended order. There are more concrete and compelling reasons against the sort of intertextual interpretation of the dialogues in question, the most important of which is that each text shares what I have elsewhere described as a common doxastic base.<sup>29</sup> By "common doxastic base" I mean a common intellectual point of departure. The point of departure for the discussion in every early dialogue is conventional opinion. For example, no discussion introduces a concept or proposition whose comprehension within the framework of the discussion requires prerequisite understanding that must be gained from some other early dialogue. This is precisely unlike the case of a textbook, the comprehension of whose successive chapters depends on comprehension of preceding chapters. In the early dialogues, where a novel concept is introduced early in a discussion, such as Form (*eidos*) in *Meno* and *Euthyphro*, Socrates endeavors to clarify the concept.

Related to the early dialogues' doxastic base is the prevalence of a certain organizational feature among the texts, which, again, I have discussed elsewhere and that I call "a-structure."<sup>30</sup> A-structure serves a linear pedagogical function: to lead the intended audience from a conventional conception of the topic treated in the text to a novel, unconventional Socratic-Platonic conception of that topic.<sup>31</sup> For example, *Ion* begins with the assumption that Ion, an inspired rhapsode, has

knowledge, but concludes with the novel view that knowledge is not equivalent to that kind of divine inspiration. *Apology* begins with Socrates' articulation of the common perceptions of himself and his guilt and ends with his confirmation of his innocence and beneficence. In general, the investigations in the definitional dialogues begin with conventional conceptions of the *definienda* and advance toward novel Socratic-Platonic conceptions.<sup>32</sup> Note also that a-structure may function as a broad feature, organizing whole discussions, as well as in a more limited way.

The fact that a-structure and a common doxastic base are basic features of the early dialogues strongly encourages the view that Plato conceived the reading of each of the early dialogues individually in the sense proposed. Consequently—to return to the *Euthyphro* passage—it is difficult to see how a reader could be expected to appreciate verbal irony in Socrates' remarks to Euthyphro about Meletus. Moreover, appeal to the operation of a-structure can be made to support the view that Socrates is being sincere in his praise of Meletus. *Euthyphro* begins by suggesting an analogy between Meletus and Euthyphro as individuals who are allegedly knowledgeable about affairs of importance to the state. In contrast, Socrates initially appears to be relatively ignorant and their intellectual inferior. However, in the course of the investigation, Euthyphro and, by analogy and implication, Meletus are gradually revealed to be ignorant and ignorant of their ignorance, while Socrates' humility emerges as well founded and enlightened. In short, the function of a-structure explains why Socrates so confidently claims that Meletus is praiseworthy and that Euthyphro has expertise in theological matters.

Granted this, the appeal to the operation of a-structure does not adequately explain why, from a realistic historical and psychological perspective, Socrates so confidently claims that Meletus is praiseworthy and that Euthyphro has expertise in theological matters. With this point we come to a further question pertaining to the sort of intertextual interpretation under scrutiny and to the interpretation of the early dialogues still more broadly. Given that the dialogues were intended to be read individually in the sense proposed, what significance does this have for our conceptualization of the character Socrates? Specifically, what grounds remain to support the view that Plato conceptualized and composed the character Socrates as

having a strict trans-textual identity among the early dialogues? Furthermore—and the following question remains alive even if strict trans-textual identity is denied to Socrates—to what extent did Plato intend to portray Socrates in any given dialogue as historically and psychologically realistic?

Let me reiterate here the relevance of the question to the *Euthyphro* passage. An objection to my view that Socrates is sincere in praising Meletus is that Socrates, then, emerges as historically and psychologically implausible, in other words, unreal. Consequently, let us examine the parameters of realism in the early dialogues.

Realism, the prevailing dramatic mode of the early dialogues, is achieved through three complicit dimensions: the discursive style in which the characters engage, the portrayal of the psychological profiles of the dramatic characters through their speech and nonverbal action, and the historicity of the settings and characters. To this may be added the following two salient features of these texts: the language of prose versus poetry and the unities of time and place. The events portrayed in the early dialogues largely occur in real time, and the discussions are set in a single location.<sup>33</sup> Note that the latter is true even in the case of dialogues such as *Protagoras*, for Socrates recounts to the anonymous aristocrat the events that transpired at his and then Callias's house. Likewise, in *Republic I*, Socrates narrates from a single unspecified location his and Glaucon's meeting with Polemarchus and company somewhere between Athens and Piraeus and their subsequent visit at Cephalus's house.

In comparison with almost all earlier Greek literature, the realism of Plato's dialogues is extraordinary. On the other hand, Plato's intentions were ultimately not to represent historical events that actually occurred, nor, to the extent that Plato employed history instrumentally, to represent events with precise and accurate historical details. Furthermore, Plato's intentions were *ultimately* not to portray the uniqueness of subjective experiences, the historically conditioned individuality of personal psychologies, or, more generally, the actual character of human psychology, including Socrates'. Plato surely was concerned to portray human psychology, as he conceived it, insofar as this was instrumental to the achievement of particular ethical-pedagogical objectives. But—and this is the fundamental point—Plato's dramaturgical

objectives principally were philosophical, and realism, to the extent that it is employed, is done so in the service of philosophical objectives. Consequently, however psychologically fascinating certain modern scholars find the character Socrates, it should be appreciated that Plato was not *principally* concerned to portray a psychologically fascinating individual. Likewise, however much certain modern scholars seek to infer about the identity of the historical Socrates from Plato's characters named 'Socrates,' it should be appreciated that Plato's principal objective was not to portray the historical Socrates as he actually was, nor to represent the precise details of episodes in Socrates' life.

Indeed, as is often the case in literature, realism in character portrayal serves or, more strongly, is compromised to serve other dramaturgical objectives. This subject has received little treatment in Greek literary scholarship. I emphasize that we are not here dealing with the topic of the representation of personhood or individuality in Greek literature, a subject that has received a good deal of attention. Rather, our interest is in the fact that although Plato generally tends to portray his characters in a relatively realistic manner, such realism may be compromised in the service of other dramaturgical objectives.

Of course, all literature, even the most realistic, is selective in the aspects of the fictional world it portrays. One could spend pages detailing all that occurs when a person turns his or her head. It is a matter of relative degree of detail. More importantly, it is a matter of the manner of handling the details selected. In developing and clarifying the point, it will be helpful to refer to Michael Silk's discussion of character portrayal in Aristophanes, specifically through his attention to inconsistencies in style of speech.

For stylistic idiom to be compatible with realism, it must involve a range of expression that is *consistently* related to a vernacular language, a language of experience, a language of life. Either the idiom is felt to amount to a "selection of the language really spoken by men," as Wordsworth called it; or alternatively it involves a broadly consistent stylization, like (for instance) the stylization of Greek tragic language, which does not constitute anything like a language of life, but is, nevertheless, fixed and conventionalized at a set, comprehensible distance from some hypothetical and more naturalistic idiom, which *would* pass for a language of life à

la Wordsworth . . . In Aristophanes, the inconsistency within a given speaker's range of idiom points the opposite way. The style in which his people are made to express themselves is incompatible with any kind of realism; and more fundamentally, as this consideration of style serves to suggest, the people of Aristophanes *per se* are not strictly containable within any realist understanding of human character at all.<sup>34</sup>

In describing realism in characterization, Silk emphasizes internal consistency, however stylized, unnaturalistic, and unrepresentative of the language of life a character's manner of discourse. Silk calls the dramaturgical deployment of discontinuous stylistic idiom and, by extension, character *imagistic*, in contrast to realistic.

Words used in images—that is, words used tropically, and especially words used metaphorically—disrupt the terminological continuity of their context. Like words used literally, they evoke some reality. Unlike words used literally, they evoke their reality through discontinuity . . . Aristophanes' characters, similarly, have their realist elements, or moments, or sequences, disrupted by [imagistic] elements, or moments, or sequences.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps we might replace the word 'imagistic' by 'poetic' or 'tropical' insofar as such discontinuities are hallmarks of literary and especially poetic composition in general and because, as Silk observes, they operate not only in tropical constructions at the level of the phrase or clause, but, as in Aristophanes, analogously in characterization more generally. In fact, it can be seen that such discontinuity often operates at the level of the entire drama or story. Consider a play such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or, to take more commonplace examples from ancient literature, the fables attributed to Aesop or the sort of parables we find in the New Testament. In these cases, the drama, story, or episode is in its entirety to be understood as metaphorical.

Whatever we choose to name this discontinuous mode of literary or linguistic form, it is also convenient to retain more commonsensical notions of non- or anti-realism that we associate with unnatural idiom, as most saliently in versification, distortion, and deformation of character, as often found in comedy, as well as the impossible events and elements of, say, fantasy and science fiction. In short, this general literary mode, which we may call nonrepresentationalism, and unlike imagism,

involves, as Silk describes it, a relatively internally consistent departure from reality.

Plato's early dialogues and, specifically, Plato's characterization of Socrates in large measure are realistic in the sense of representational; however, they also involve some admixture of imagism. It will be helpful to consider some striking unrealistic and specifically imagistic moments in the portrayal of Socrates. Note that the following two are complicated by the fact that they turn on a literary distinction introduced by Gérard Genette between narrated time and narrative time.<sup>36</sup> Narrative time is the chronological sequence of the fictional events; narrated time is the sequence in which fictional events, however chronologically ordered, are ordered in the literary work. Clearly, the two sequences may be inconsistent; for instance, when a narrative begins at the end of events and proceeds to recount how things came to pass.

The first movement of *Protagoras* consists of Socrates encountering an anonymous aristocrat in an unidentified location in Athens. The aristocrat questions Socrates about his relationship with Alcibiades. Socrates responds that at Callias's house from which he has just come, he ignored Alcibiades and was far more impressed by the wisdom of Protagoras. Socrates proceeds to recount the earlier events of the day when Hippocrates awoke him at home and then urged him to go to Callias's house to meet with Protagoras. This constitutes the second movement of the dialogue. The events and discussion at Callias's constitute the third and main movement of the dialogue. In narrated time, Socrates' discussion with the anonymous aristocrat precedes the third movement, but in narrative time it occurs after the third movement, in which Protagoras's claims to wisdom are undermined. Therefore, when Socrates meets the anonymous aristocrat in the first movement of the dialogue and praises Protagoras's wisdom, Socrates has already undermined Protagoras's claim to wisdom.

A similar inconsistency occurs in *Euthydemus*. According to the chronological order of fictional events, the first movement of the dialogue in which Socrates is talking with Crito is temporally posterior to Socrates' discussion with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, which, according to the narrated order, follows the first movement. In the first movement, Socrates praises the brothers' wisdom. The final movement of the dialogue returns to Socrates' conversation with Crito. The first and final movements are temporally contiguous;

no event has intervened except the story of the meeting with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus that Socrates recounts and that constitutes the main body of the dialogue. However, in concluding his discussion with Crito, Socrates suggests that, as in all fields, there are also pseudo-practitioners of philosophy who must be avoided. Socrates does not explicitly cite the brothers as examples, but this clearly is Plato's point.

In these passages from *Euthydemus* and *Protagoras*, Socrates is psychologically inconsistent or implausible. On the other hand, both examples are explicable as serving a dramaturgical function in accordance with a-structure. Both texts begin with Socrates praising the wisdom of individuals who will become his principal interlocutors. Thus, the reader begins with the conventional notion that these celebrated individuals will demonstrate their intellectual capabilities. Naturally, these expectations are subverted as the ensuing discussion reveals that they cannot satisfactorily answer Socrates' questions.

This pervasive feature of the early dialogues does not depend on the complication of inconsistency between narrative and narrated time. Generally speaking, when Socrates begins a discussion with an alleged expert or authority figure, he praises that individual and, as in the *Euthyphro* passage, there is no indication in these instances that Socrates is being verbally ironic. The traditional tendency, of course, is to interpret Socrates' praise as disingenuous, but, again, I submit that in such instances, Socrates is used, in accordance with the function of a-structure, to introduce a conventional conception that the ensuing dialogue proceeds to undermine. According to this interpretation, Socrates sometimes does emerge as a remarkably naïve individual, indeed, as an unrealistically naïve individual relative to his hypothetical fictional history and to the discursive sophistication he demonstrates in the ensuing discussions. Likewise, Socrates' praise of Meletus is remarkably naïve. However, I submit that this is one strategy within Plato's multifarious dramaturgical arsenal, an arsenal not beholden to realist injunctions.

Other notable examples of imagistic treatment of Socrates' character in the early dialogues include Socrates' interpretation of Simonides' ode in *Protagoras*, Socrates' argument in response to Polemarchus's definition of justice in *Republic I* to the effect that the just man is a thief, and, perhaps most remarkably, Socrates' disguised self-

reference through much of his discussion with Hippias in *Hippias Major*. It is perhaps especially noteworthy that all these characterologically unrealistic and imagistic moments, passages, or aspects of the texts have a comic dimension. Indeed, I venture that imagism may be particularly suited to comedy insofar as it is one species of a common and general comic maneuver, the amusing distortion or, more radically, subversion of reality.

With this, we come to one further objection that is likely to be made to my thesis that, given Euthyphro's response and Socrates' response to Euthyphro's response, Socrates' remarks are in earnest. The objection is that Socrates is being verbally ironic, but that this irony is not intended for Euthyphro, who indeed is a dullard. Rather, the target audience of Socrates' verbal irony is the intended reader of the dialogue. It is the reader who appreciates Socrates' sense of humor at the expense of and, in fact, compounded by Euthyphro's obtuseness.

This sort of consideration is particularly appropriate in the context of a discussion of the limits of realism in character portrayal. For Socrates to be verbally ironic and for this irony to be directed over the head of his fictional interlocutor and at the flesh-and-blood intended reader, Socrates would have to be portrayed as conscious of himself as within a fiction and of the reader as privy to this fiction. Moreover, this is precisely the sort of nonrealism in which literature may indulge, a salient example of this kind being the aside in drama.

However, while this is the kind of dramaturgical move that can occur, as a matter of fact there is no compelling evidence that it does occur in *Euthyphro*. Generally speaking, there is not a single instance in the early dialogues where Plato makes Socrates say or do something that indicates Socrates' awareness of himself as within a fiction and of the reader as existing in a world beyond the fiction. Moreover, while there is some precedent for a related dramaturgical technique within Greek literature, namely, the *parabasis* in Aristophanic comedy, that device operates in a most conspicuous fashion. Were Plato to have adapted and applied such a device to the early dialogues, it would presumably bear more striking resemblance to the original. Consequently, there would be no doubt whether it was occurring. In short, I submit that the claim that Socrates' irony is directed at the intended reader is another case



of the misidentification of Plato's genuinely dramatic, situational irony as Socratic verbal irony.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, if Socrates is, in any instance, being verbally ironic, given that the intended audience of his irony is his interlocutor and not Plato's intended reader, the response of his interlocutor should, for the most part, confirm that verbal irony is occurring. Accordingly, as a matter of fact, Socrates seldom is verbally ironic. Instances occur here and there, as do instances of sarcasm, both of which are to be expected in some measure among a set of dramatic dialogues that employ natural language. But verbal irony is not a dominant trait of Socrates. Consequently, since we introduced the problem of Socratic verbal irony as a potential hermeneutic problem, we can conclude that in fact Socratic verbal irony does not present a problem for the interpretation of Socrates' utterances.

Generally speaking, it should be emphasized that in those instances where Plato thought it important to register Socrates' psychological states, but not transparently through Socrates' directly corresponding utterances, he employed other means to do so. For example, in *Charmides* when Charmides proposes a definition of sound-mindedness and Critias denies that he is its source, Socrates at that moment grants that the identity of its author is unimportant. However, shortly afterward, he notes—in the narrative, but not aloud to the interlocutors—that he had thought Critias was responsible for the definition.<sup>38</sup> Later in *Charmides* when Socrates has shown that the knowledge of knowledge and all other knowledges and lack of knowledge is unlikely even to exist and Critias cannot bring himself to admit his confusion and ignorance, Socrates narrates, but does not say to the interlocutors, that he conceded the possibility of its existence “to advance the discussion.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, Socrates reveals that he acted tactfully in order not to humiliate Critias. In *Lysis*, once Socrates has humbled Lysis through an *ad hominem* argument whose conclusion is that Lysis' parents will not love Lysis to the extent that he lacks knowledge, Socrates casts a look at Hippothales to indicate that this is how one should treat one's beloved.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Socrates confirms his intentions in the argument with Lysis without actually vocalizing them to the interlocutors. Still further, in *Protagoras*, following Protagoras's account of the relativity of goodness, Socrates claims that his memory is poor and, therefore, that he is unable to hold a conversation with Protagoras unless

Protagoras refrains from speechifying. Shortly afterward, Alcibiades remarks that Socrates was not seriously claiming to have a weak memory.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Socrates is tactfully self-deprecating to avoid upsetting Protagoras for failing to adhere to the discursive mode of succinct question and answer. In short, to a large extent, when Socrates does not mean what he says or does not say what he believes, Plato has dramaturgical means by which the interlocutors or Socrates himself are made to acknowledge this.

The general literalizing interpretation of Socrates' utterances that I am advocating yields a character who sometimes is less psychologically complex and unified than is often conceived, while at the same time more dramaturgically complex as well as psychologically unrealistic, specifically imagistic and discontinuous. If this is correct, then we present-day interpreters of Plato's early dialogues find ourselves in an awkward position. Rather deep and unconscious realist assumptions inform seemingly natural readings of the texts and yet, perhaps especially in view of intertextual inconsistencies that are the inevitable consequence of those realist assumptions studiously applied, we have found reason to question those very assumptions.

Misinterpretation of Socratic irony is, then, to be fully explained by tracing scholarship back through the much broader context of the history of realism as well as its cousin historicism. At the other end of Western literary history, the ideas advanced here invite more thorough consideration of the conventions of characterization in the genre of *sokratikoi logoi* (Socratic discussions) specifically. If more examples of this relatively widely practiced literary form had survived, our preconceptions in reading Plato's Socrates would surely be altered. Although relatively little does survive, among Xenophon's work and the pseudo-Platonic dialogues there is enough to say considerably more than what has been said.

In closing, let us turn to consider from a more limited perspective how misunderstanding of Socratic irony arose. The topics of Socratic verbal irony and situational irony share a conceptual ground, Socrates' attitude toward knowledge, specifically, Socrates' tendency to disavow knowledge. On the one occasion where an interlocutor speaks of Socrates' “customary” *eirōneia*, it is because that interlocutor, Thrasymachus, thinks that Socrates is concealing beliefs and shielding

himself from the sort of scrutiny to which he allegedly subjects others.<sup>42</sup> Why Thrasymachus should suspect this is not hard to understand. Socrates is portrayed as spending most of his time engaged in philosophical discussions, and in doing so he displays remarkable facility in argumentation, particularly in criticizing conventional beliefs. It is reasonable to suppose that such an individual would have achieved a sophisticated grasp of the topics with which he is so preoccupied, indeed a far more sophisticated grasp than those with whom he holds these discussions. In this light, it is reasonable for Thrasymachus to challenge Socrates to articulate his views and for Thrasymachus to suspect that Socrates' resistance bespeaks a sort of insincerity.

I suspect that such a perception of Socrates, especially Socrates' ease in criticizing his interlocutors' beliefs, is responsible for the tendency to regard his disavowals of knowledge as disingenuous, but this is an impressionistic conception. More careful examination of Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge throughout the early dialogues yields a different conclusion. Among the early dialogues, Socrates does not consistently disavow all knowledge. Socrates is not a Cartesian skeptic preoccupied with the grounds of ordinary knowledge claims. Moreover, while Socrates does disavow eschatological and theological knowledge on a few occasions, such disavowals are relatively marginal to his interests and investigations. It is Socrates' frequent disavowals of ethical knowledge that distinguish him from his interlocutors and that must have distinguished the historical Socrates from his contemporaries—if, that is, the historical Socrates did disavow ethical knowledge. Xenophon, for instance, does not portray Socrates as characteristically disavowing ethical knowledge. Furthermore, it is not that Plato portrays Socrates as a noncognitivist; Socrates clearly believes ethical propositions are truth-functional—he is an ethical realist. It is just that Socrates is emphatic about the difficulty for humans of achieving ethical knowledge.

To the extent that Socrates' sensitivity to the difficulty of attaining ethical knowledge was extraordinary—and it was—it is not difficult to see why those insensitive to the problem would have presumed that he must secretly harbor such knowledge. In addition, the Platonic epistemology of the early dialogues entails requirements for ethical knowledge that are wholly uncon-

ventional relative to Socrates' interlocutors and Plato's contemporaries. In short, misinterpretation of Socrates as an *eirôn* and subsequently as verbally ironic begins with Socrates' own interlocutors' misunderstanding of Platonic epistemology among the early dialogues.<sup>43</sup>

Interpretation of Plato's early dialogues is haunted by the specter of Socrates, specifically by the deeply embedded idea that beyond or at least within the texts there is a strange and remarkable individual driving the philosophical enterprise. Whether this individual is identified with the historical Socrates, with Plato's conception of the historical Socrates, or, finally, with Plato's construction of a literary figure, in all cases it is assumed that this figure is a unity and so a unified source. In contrast, I emphasize that the character Socrates is not only a literary construction—whatever its debt or causal relation to the historical Socrates—but that in accordance with certain dramaturgical objectives, Plato takes liberties in his treatment of this character that transgress realism. Socrates' unrealistically naïve, sincere praise of Meletus at the beginning of *Euthyphro* is one such instance. In the face of such passages, the quick appeal to Socratic "irony" prevents interpreters from appreciating the strange complexity of Plato's dramaturgy and the various uses to which he put his favored character.

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1. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence and Greek Culture and Society* (Humanities Press, 1978), p. 35; *Oppian*, II., 107–118.

2. 'Eirôn' is the adjective from 'eirôneia.'

3. Norman Knox, "Irony," in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1973), p. 628; Norman Knox, *The Word "Irony" and its Context 1500–1755* (Duke University Press, 1961), p. 5. See also D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 16; G. Sedgewick, *Of Irony Especially in Drama* (University of Toronto Press, 1935). Note that Quintilian, *Institutio*, IX.ii., 44–53, distinguishes three categories of irony: an isolated trope, a character of an entire speech, and a quality of a man's life.

4. N. Knox, *The Word "Irony" and its Context*, p. 6. For a more recent and exhaustive study, see Dilwyn Knox, *Irony Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), which demonstrates the diversity of Italian Renaissance conceptions and treatments of Socratic irony

in particular. Here, D. Knox writes that while conceptions of *ironia* persisted "[d]uring the Latin Middle Ages . . . the fortunes of *ironia socratica* declined. Indeed, the notion appears to have been almost entirely unknown to medieval authors, even though they were well enough acquainted with *ironia* as a figure or trope, including *ironia* similar in kind to that which classical and Renaissance authors often associated with Socrates, and also with many aspects, whether apocryphal or otherwise, of Socrates' life and teaching" (*Ironia Medieval*, pp. 97–98).

5. The first occurrence of 'yronye' is in *Thordynary of Crysten men*. The phrase "esoteric and technical" comes from Knox, *The Word "Irony" and its Context*, p. 7. See Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, pp. 16–18.

6. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 20.

7. On the German Romantics, see N. Knox, "Irony," pp. 629–630. Compare Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (University of California Press, 1998), p. 94: "The real authority of Plato as the true source for the historical Socrates is the product of Romanticism, and I am convinced that the importance of irony both to Plato and to the Romantics played a crucial role in that transformation." For a thorough treatment of the rise of the Socratic problem in the eighteenth century, see M. Montuori, *De Socrate Iuste Damnato* (Amsterdam: Grieben, 1981), pp. 9–29, and *Socrates Physiology of a Myth* (Grieben, 1981). See N. Knox, "Irony," p. 628. "The nineteenth century provided many terms for this generalization of ironies of events: *Ironie des Schicksals*, *ironie du malheur*, *du monde*, *de l'histoire*, *du sort*, *de la nature*, *de nos destinées*, *de l'existence*, irony of fate, of circumstances, of time and of life" ("Irony," p. 629).

8. N. Knox, "Irony," pp. 628–632.

9. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 19.

10. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, chs. 1–3; see also Nehamas's review of Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cornell University Press, 1991), "Voices of Silence: On Gregory Vlastos' Socrates," *Arion* 2 (1992): 157–186. This is not to say that Vlastos is disinterested in Socrates as an ironic figure; Socrates' strangeness (*atopia*) is fundamental to Vlastos's broad perspective. Conversely, Nehamas certainly regards Socrates as verbally ironic, but that is not the focus of his discussion. This ambiguity surfaces in J. Gordon, "Against Vlastos on Complex Irony," *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996): 131–137, who writes: "One of the main weaknesses of Vlastos' definition is that it views irony as limited to language proper, i.e., 'things said', as opposed to, for example, how something is said or in what context. Most of the time, what we perceive as ironic, on Socrates' part, is so in the context of complex drama . . . I would like to redefine a kind of irony which encompasses all off these things and so incorporates elements of the dramatic context as essential to Socratic irony" ("Against Vlastos on Complex Irony," pp. 131–132).

11. In "early dialogues" I include: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic I*. Note that it is debatable whether *Hippias Major* is spurious as well as whether *Republic I* was composed independently of and significantly prior to the rest of *Republic*. Although I refer to *Republic I* and *Hippias Major* in my discussion, my argument would not be seriously jeopardized if *Hippias Major* were spurious or if *Republic I* were composed during Plato's middle period.

12. The view that Socrates is generally portrayed as a seeker of truth and as cooperatively engaged in investigations of ethical claims with his interlocutors is defended in David Wolfsdorf, "Socrates' Pursuit of Definitions," *Phronesis* 48 (2003): 271–312.

13. I. Vasilioiu, "Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues," *Classical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 456–472, see p. 456. Note that Vasilioiu is here interpreting 'irony' to mean *deception* or *disingenuousness*. This sort of abuse pervades the history of modern Platonic scholarship. D. Knox discusses some examples from the Renaissance in *Ironia Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony*, pp. 102–109.

14. *Euthphro*, 2c2–3a5. The translation follows H. N. Fowler, *Plato I* (Harvard University Press, 1914).

15. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 37.

16. *Euthphro*, 3a6–9.

17. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, pp. 37–38.

18. I have inserted the numeral to facilitate exegesis.

19. Vasilioiu, "Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues," pp. 468–469 (emphasis added). The word '*aretē*' is often translated as 'virtue'; but 'excellence' is better because it does not require that '*aretē*' be a psychological condition.

20. Vasilioiu, "Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues," p. 468.

21. *Euthphro*, 2b7–11.

22. *Gorgias*, 521d1–3.

23. *Meno*, 71c3–4.

24. *Laches*, 190b7–d5 (emphasis added).

25. T. Penner, "What Laches and Nicias Miss—and Whether Socrates Thinks Courage Is Merely a Part of Virtue," *Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1992): 1–27, quote found on p. 16 (emphasis added).

26. T. Irwin, "Socratic Puzzles," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1995): 241–266, see p. 243.

27. T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, "Socrates and the Unity of the Virtue," *Journal of Ethics* 1 (1997): 311–324, see p. 318, n.20.

28. Examples here are legion. For a discussion of the problem with examples, see David Wolfsdorf, "Interpreting Plato's Early Dialogues," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004): 15–40.

29. Wolfsdorf, "Interpreting Plato's Early Dialogues."

30. Wolfsdorf, "Interpreting Plato's Early Dialogues."

31. Note that a-structure operates regardless of whether the discussion ultimately concludes in *aporia*.

32. Note that this is so even though the early definitional dialogues invariably conclude their investigations in *aporia*. The progress of the early definitional dialogues is discussed in Wolfsdorf, "Socrates' Pursuit of Definitions," and by Dunamis in "*Laches*," *Phoenix* 59 (2005): 324–347, especially pp. 340–347.

33. *Apology* is slightly exceptional since there are time lapses between the conclusion of Socrates' defense, his suggestion of a fine, and his concluding comments.

34. M. Silk, "The People of Aristophanes," in *Individuality and Characterization in Greek Literature*, ed. C. Pelling (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 150–173, see p. 154.

35. Silk, "The People of Aristophanes," p. 159.

36. G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 1980).

37. Another problem for the objection has to do with the background conditions of the culture or, more accurately, subculture in which the intended reader of *Euthyphro* is

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embedded. The objector must assume that the intended reader's situation would enable him or her to appreciate Socrates' statement as verbally ironic. But what evidence is there that the intended reader would be situated in such a subculture? If, indeed, the function of the early dialogues is to win adherents to philosophy, then presumably the reader would not already be sympathetic to Socrates' mission. Thus, it also falls to the objector to show that the subculture in which the intended reader would have been embedded would have enabled him or her to appreciate Socrates' utterance as verbally ironic.

38. *Charmides*, 161c, 162c.

39. *Charmides*, 168c–d.

40. *Lysis*, 210e.

41. *Protagoras*, 335b–c, 336c–d.

42. *Republic*, I 337a4.

43. These epistemological topics are more fully discussed in David Wolfsdorf, "Socrates' Avowals of Knowledge," *Phronesis* 49 (2004): 74–142, and "The Socratic Fallacy and the Epistemological Priority of Definitional Knowledge," *Apeiron* 37 (2004): 35–67.