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The Dual Function of Socratic Irony in Philosophical Interactions: Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony versus Alcibiades' Speech

La doble función de la ironía socrática en las interacciones filosóficas: el concepto de "ironía" de Kierkegaard frente al discurso de Alcibíades

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Abstract

This paper explores Socratic irony as reflected in the famous passages of Alcibiades' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, focusing on the relationship between ironic utterance and the philosophic guidance process. Reviewing the diverse meanings of the term *eirôneia* in Greek comedy and philosophy, it examines the way in which Plato employs irony in fashioning Socrates' figure and depicting the ideal of philosophic guidance as the "art of midwifery." It then analyzes Kierkegaard's most positive perception of Socratic irony as a necessary methodical element in the Socratic maieutic process of "deceiving into the truth." Contrasting Kierkegaard with Alcibiades' scathing critique, it reads the latter in a combined dramatic-philosophical perspective, as presenting irony as an anti-philosophic phenomenon, leading to cognitive puzzlement and Dionysian irrationality. Alcibiades' negative stance will be manifested via analyzing his use of four literary rhetorical devices: comparing Socrates with the Silenoi, drawing an analogy between ironic speech and Marysas' satyric flute playing, symbolizing philosophy as snake venom, and presenting the scene of Socrates' seduction as dramatic irony. The discussion shows, then, that there are two distinct manifestations of Socratic irony drawn from Plato's writings, destructive and constructive, derived from the character of his philosophical pupils.

Keywords: irony; Socratic irony; philosophical interaction; Socrates; Plato; Kierkegaard; Alcibiades.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la ironía socrática tal y como se refleja en los famosos pasajes del discurso de Alcibíades en el *Banquete* de Platón, centrándose en la relación entre el enunciado irónico y el proceso de orientación filosófica. Repasando los diversos significados del término *eirôneia* en la comedia y la filosofía griegas, examino el modo en que Platón emplea la ironía para modelar la figura de Sócrates y describir el ideal de la orientación filosófica como el "arte de la partería." Después analizo la percepción más positiva que Kierkegaard tiene de la ironía socrática como

elemento metódico necesario en el proceso mayéutico socrático de "engañar para llegar a la verdad." Contrastando a Kierkegaard con la crítica mordaz de Alcibíades, leo a este último desde una perspectiva dramático-filosófica, presentando la ironía como un fenómeno antifilosófico que conduce al desconcierto cognitivo y a la irracionalidad dionisíaca. La postura negativa de Alcibíades se manifestará analizando el uso que hace de cuatro recursos retóricos literarios: comparar a Sócrates con los silenos, establecer una analogía entre el discurso irónico y el tocar la flauta del sátiro Marsias, simbolizar la filosofía como veneno de serpiente y presentar la escena de la seducción de Sócrates como ironía dramática. La discusión muestra, pues, que hay dos manifestaciones distintas de la ironía socrática extraídas de los escritos de Platón, la destructiva y la constructiva, derivadas del carácter de sus alumnos filosóficos.

Palabras clave: ironía; ironía socrática; interacción filosófica; Sócrates; Platón; Kierkegaard; Alcibíades.

Introduction

The concept of irony is one of the most influential, yet most obscure and controversial, notions in Western thought. The philosophical discussions of this concept are anchored in the figure of Socrates, "the Ironical," and in the varied descriptions from antiquity of his use of irony during his public conversations. In this matter, too, there are many interpretations regarding the unique character of Socrates, his influence, his philosophical path, and his distinctive usage of ironical utterances.

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the nature, impact, and mode of operation of Socratic irony, mostly as expressed, theoretically and dramatically, in Plato's work. In a more pedagogical formulation, the paper aims at demonstrating how Socrates operates as an ironic instructor during his philosophical conversations and how he utilizes ironic utterance and conduct during "the mutual and continuous quest" (*suzethesis*) for genuine truth.

The discussion will manifest the acute bipolarism of Socratic irony, presenting it, on the one hand, as an effective pedagogical tool aimed at accelerating the "birth of truth," and, on the other hand, as

an oppressive and violent mechanism that paralyzes the philosophical student and pushes him towards Dionysian irrationality. This bipolar trait will be presented via two contradictory interpretations regarding the philosophical function of Socratic irony. First, Kierkegaard's view, based on his concept of indirect communication, which perceives irony as an indispensable methodological instrument whose purpose is to diminish the tutor's presence and empower the pupil during philosophical interaction, and thereafter, the famous exquisite speech of Alcibiades (as it appeared in Plato's *Symposium*) which manifests, from a bitter pupil's viewpoint, Socratic irony as a malignant philosophical tool, using four literary rhetorical devices: comparing Socrates with the Silenoi, drawing an analogy between ironic speech and Marysas' satyric flute playing, symbolizing philosophy as snake venom, and presenting the scene of Socrates' seduction as dramatic irony.

The main contribution of this paper stems, then, from its holistic presentation of Socratic irony as a bipolar philosophical-pedagogical instrument: irony as medicine and as poison in the service of the quest for genuine knowledge.

1. Socratic irony

Observing the fact that "no one was left indifferent by this altogether unusual character: everyone who has written about him was also reacting to him in one way or another," Guthrie (1971, p. 4) sums up the burden that lies upon every commentator when addressing the "Socratic problem" of reconstructing Socrates' historical image and thought (Moore, 2019). Having left no writing of his own behind him, we are dependent for all our information about Socrates on the (albeit extensive) testimony of his peers—primarily Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato. Moreover, the Socratic enigma is largely a function of his distinctive form of speech: as Kierkegaard remarks, unlike a

> […] philosopher delivering his opinions in such a way that just the lecture itself is the presence of the idea […] what Socrates said meant something different. The outer was not at all in harmony with the inner but was rather its opposite, and only under this angle of refraction is he to be comprehended (1989, p. 12).

This mode of expression embodies Socratic irony, which so frequently confounds his companions. The complexity of his character—

he consistently follows in the footsteps of the *logos* while at the same time attesting to an inner voice that is "a divine sign [*daimonion*] from the god" (*Apology*, 31c)—is compounded by irony's own elusive nature. Fluid and mutable, there is "no algorithm, no amount of brute force philology that will demonstrate the presence of irony to someone who doesn't see it, or the reverse" (Morrison, 2007, p. 241). This obliqueness finds expression in the weighty shifts in semantic meaning to which the term was subject in antiquity: while in the Greek world irony customarily carried explicitly negative connotations, centuries later Cicero regarded it as the "height of urbanity, elegance and good taste" (Vlastos, 1987, p. 84).

Even within the ancient Greek context, however, *eirôneia* was not a stable term. During the classical period, it bore two central meanings. Around the fifth century BCE, the language-game of irony was intimately linked to the clearly negative valence of concealing and feigning. Clear examples of this are found in Aristophanes' *The Birds* (l.1211) and *The Wasps* (l.174), an even more prominent case occurring in *The Clouds* (11.449ff), which revolves around a caricature of Socrates. Oppian's *On Hunting* (2.107-118) likewise depicts the fox as pretending to be asleep and then pouncing on a flock of birds when they come to peck what they think is his carcass. As Wolfsdorf notes, "[t]he fox's hunting tactics well illustrate the concept of *eirôneia* in its earliest usage […], the use of deception to profit at the expense of another, by presenting oneself as benign in an effort to disarm the intended victim" (2007, p. 175).

Aristotle bestows a new meaning upon *eirôneia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While preserving the idea of deception, he sets the "boaster […] who pretends to creditable qualities that he does not possess, or possesses in a lesser degree than he makes out" against the "self-depreciator [who] disclaims or disparages good qualities that he does possess" (1127a4). While the *eirôn* stands on a higher ethical rung than the boaster here, both are inferior to the "man of truth" who walks the "golden mean." In this softer form of self-deprecation, Aristotle moves us closer to the modern sense of irony.[1]

Although Aristophanes and Aristotle both regard irony negatively, they adopt very different attitudes towards it. In the plays, irony is

[1] Aristotle seems to manifest a contradictory view in the *Rhetoric* (3.18, 1419b8), wherein he writes: "irony is more proper to the free man than buffoonery." The meaning of this vague remark is obscure, however.

directed towards the other in order to take advantage of him for heartless profit and gain; in the *Ethics*, it is orientated inwards, towards the self, thus bearing an element of humility. Kierkegaard follows Aristotle's line of thought in asserting that irony is "isolation, according to its concept" (1989, p. 249).

Aristophanes and Aristotle lie either side of Plato. The latter portrays Socrates as a highly complex narrative, dramatic, and theoretical character. This fact is due, above all, to the polished dialogical form of Plato's writing, which creates a "philosophical drama" populated by interlocutors. Playing the lead actor, Socrates embodies the new Greek logocentric intellectual ideal—the wisdom-loving philosopher who follows in the footsteps of the *logos*, dedicating himself to unbounded philosophical inquiry and encouraging debaters to look inwards. Plato's Socrates is thus the complete antithesis of the Sophist who boasts of his fabricated wisdom and, deriding objective truth, wanders from place to place, giving instruction in the craft of rhetoric for a flat fee.

Sophistic rhetoric is thus the antipode of Socratic philosophy, which incessantly seeks the truth through intellectual dialogue (*dialektike*), cross-examining premises and principles (*elenchus*), and an ongoing common searching (*suzethesis*) (Guthrie, 1971, p. 129).[2] Philosophical inquiry finally reaches its apogee when "as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it [true knowledge] is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself" (Plato, *Letter VII*, 341c). Plato's writings thus reflect a rigid, relentless process of philosophical instruction guided by the wisdom-loving Socrates, whose supreme goal is perfect intellectual comprehension of the truth and its clear vision through the "eye of the mind."[3]

If Socrates represents the teacher, guide, and truth-seeker in Plato, what role does Socratic irony play in the philosophical teaching process? This question may also be formulated in terms of the philosophical-

[2] *Contra* Corey's (2015) argument that Socrates in fact exhibits significant affinities with the Sophists with whom he engages in conversation, Socrates' "ideal of knowledge unattained" (Hackforth, 1933, p. 17) essentially diverges from the sophistic approach.

[3] Plato refers to eternal, ontological truth as *idea*, a notion derived from the root *idein*, "to see." For the Platonic notion of "seeing the truth" with the "eye of the mind," see Friedlander (1958).

pedagogic function of Socratic irony. According to Vlastos, it constitutes a form of "complex irony" that paradoxically interweaves saying and non-saying, truth and cunning: "what is said both is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another" (1991, p. 31).[4] But how does this paradoxality operate in the subtle interaction characteristic of philosophical instruction: does it carry a positive or negative valence? Plato's treatment of Socratic irony is itself a narrative thicket, the philosopher beguilingly depicting the process of philosophical instruction as a form of "midwifery":

> All that is true of their [women's] art of midwifery is true also of mine, but mine differs from theirs in being practiced upon men, not women, and in tending their souls in labor […]. But the greatest thing about my art is this, that it can test in every way whether the mind of the young man is bringing forth a mere image, an imposture, or a real and genuine offspring (*Theaet*. 150b-c).

The following section discusses Kierkegaard's reading of this imagery, according to which irony plays a key role in the birthing of the truth.

2. Kierkegaard: Maieutics and Socratic irony

> Ye gods! here we have the well-known irony of Socrates, and I knew it and predicted that when it came to replying, you would refuse and dissemble and do anything rather than answer any question that anyone asked you (*Resp.* 1, 337a).

Thrasymachus' outburst here constitutes one of the comic-dramatic moments in the *Republic*, embodying Socratic irony in its full force. His bitterness derives from the fact that irony and mockery sow confusion and deception amongst the interlocutors, raising strong emotions in their breasts. Above all of them stands the inebriated Alcibiades, who moans about Socrates' exploits and the "chaffing and making game" in the tortuous speech he gives in the *Symposium*. We shall revisit his

[4] See *infra*.

words a little later. First, however, we must address the question of how Socratic irony and "making game"—embodied in disingenuity and self-mockery—function in the philosophical teaching process.

As we have already noted, Plato describes the pedagogic dimension of irony as a form of midwifery. In the well-known passage in *Theaetetus*, Socrates adduces the strange nature of his craft:

> For I have this in common with the midwives: I am sterile in point of wisdom, and the reproach which has often been brought against me, that I question others but make no reply myself about anything, because I have no wisdom in me, is a true reproach; and the reason of it is this: the god compels me to act as midwife, but has never allowed me to bring forth (150c).[5]

Even if this is itself an example of a Socratic ironic statement belittling the speaker, Plato's Socrates embodies here the philosopher-teacher as an incomplete seeker of truth, who knows that he does not know—and yet capable of causing others to inquire after and beget truth. In this case, "chaffing and making game" represent the paradox of the impotent midwife, while the student's resentment and irritation being no more than an expression of the fact that he is "in pain and full of trouble night and day" (151a). Guthrie concisely concludes the Socratic art of midwifery as follows:

> […] the maieutic method based on the professed barrenness of the midwife means getting the patient, or pupil, to make a general statement, usually, though not always, in the form of saying 'what *x* is' (and often, as in the case of Theaetetus and Meno, after rejecting as inadequate a random enumeration of examples), and by discussion showing that it is in some way defective. The pupil then proposes another, which will improve on the previous one and so bring him nearer the truth. Yet a third may be required, and even the last to be

[5] The Platonic analogy between intellectual conception and procreation also appears in *Symposium* (206c) and *Republic* (490d). In these passages, the lover of wisdom is depicted as "having intercourse" with true reality in order to breed genuine knowledge and truth.

> suggested often breaks down and the dialogue ends with a confession of failure, but at the same time on a note of hope. Thus Socrates makes Theaetetus abandon successively the notions that knowledge is (*a*) sensation, (*b*) true belief, (*c*) true belief plus explanation or account (*logos*). This exhausts the tale of Theaetetus' embryo thoughts, but, says Socrates, if he conceives again his offspring will be all the better for the scrutiny of these, and if he does not, he will be a better man for the knowledge of his own ignorance […] (1972, p. 125).

Guthrie goes on, underscoring the favorable aspects of this harsh and incessant process. In light of Socrates' "unshakable conviction" that knowledge is in principle attainable, he first assumes that the "debris of confused and misleading ideas" must first be cleared away:

> Only then could the positive search for knowledge begin. Once his companion had understood the right way to the goal (the *method* in its Greek sense), he was ready to seek it with him, and philosophy was summed up for him in this idea of the 'common search' [*suzethesis*], a conception of the purpose of discussion directly contrary to the sophistic idea of it as a contest aiming at the overthrow of an opponent. Neither knew the truth yet, but if only the other could be persuaded of this, they might set out together with some hope of finding it, or at least approaching it more closely, for the man who has rid his mind of a false conception is already nearer the truth (1972, p. 129).

Although this analogy reveals an illuminating aspect of the philosophic instruction process, we still remain in the land of hints and clues. What role does Socratic irony play in the course of the philosophic quest for true knowledge? At this point, Kierkegaard can step in to help us out. His fascination with Socrates from an early age is reflected in his doctoral dissertation, entitled *On the Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates.* Written in the spirit of Hegelian philosophy, this

makes an intriguing argument regarding the nature and function of irony.[6]

In the first part, Kierkegaard reviews the three central textual Greek testimonies concerning Socrates—Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato. Following a detailed analysis, he concludes (in the spirit of a Socratic *aporia*) that none fully or properly understand the concept of irony, thereby failing to reconstruct Socrates' historical image. In this stance, the "Socratic problem" thus remains unresolved. While accusing Plato of shrouding and obscuring the real Socrates in the *Dialogues*, he concedes that, on occasion, a "gleaming poetic truth" shines through his dramatic representation that sheds light on his inner character.[7]

In the second part, Kierkegaard strives to define the nature of irony clearly and succinctly. Herein, he distinguishes between irony as a figure of speech, in which the meaning is the opposite of the actual words, and irony as an existential stance. The latter is the pure manifestation of irony in its elevated sense. Under Hegelian influence, Kierkegaard imbues this with a negative valence, arguing that it is nothing other than an expression of "infinite absolute negativity"—an inexorable negation of reality due to Socrates' unfamiliarity with the concept of the absolute. The *eirōn* is thus the complete antithesis of the religious subject. On this reading, Socrates cuts a tragic figure who, while almost being graced with faith, is not given any absolute divine (Christian) revelation.

We still have not yet reached the full dimensions of the methodic aspects of irony, however, namely, the transformative *effect* irony exerts on Socrates' interlocutors and the essential *role* it plays in the teaching process of philosophy (Johansson, 2019, p. 10). This only receives in-depth treatment—from a relatively sympathetic perspective—in

[6] The scholarly literature on Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the concept of irony in general, and Socratic irony in particular, is quite abundant. These studies discuss the issue in different and varied aspects: pedagogical dimensions, existential characterizations, the nature of subjectivity, the status of truth, rhetorical mechanisms, the affinity for philosophical idealism, and the dimensions of moral commitment and religious belief. For a clear and extensive review of this research literature and its interpretive trends, see Stewart (2015), Söderquist (2013), and Lippitt (2000).

[7] Rather surprisingly, Kierkegaard regards Aristophanes' delineation of irony—as deception and disingenuousness—in his comedies as the most accurate account of the historical Socrates.

Kierkegaard's journals and papers.[8] In these, Socratic irony establishes the foundation stone of philosophical maieutics, constituting a necessary skill that heightens the pupil's quest for truth.

The concept of Socratic irony is linked in Kierkegaard's notebooks and journals to the notion of indirect communication, which is based on his fundamental idea of "truth within subjectivity." The latter doesn't mean, of course, that he subscribes to sceptical or relative viewpoints, assuming that, "of all things the measure is Man," like the Greek Sophist Protagoras.[9] Rather, it means that the most profound truth (which is, for him, the absolute truth of God) lies in the depth of human consciousness. This stance is not far from the Platonic idea of *anamnesis*, according to which learning is actually a "recollection" of archetypical facts which we possessed before incarnation into human form (Allen, 1959); in both cases, the quest for genuine knowledge must be directed inwardly, since truth resides in the depth of human consciousness.

Kierkegaard (1941, pp. 67-72) distinguishes here between two kinds of truth: objective truth, in which certain knowledge is conveyed directly from the speaker to the addressee, and subjective truth, in which what is conveyed is not content but the insight that the truth is always in a process of becoming within human consciousness. This distinction implies in his view a differentiation between two kinds of communication, direct and indirect (1941, p. 98). In this context, Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the Socratic method, in which thoughts are masked by irony, motivated his interest in experiences that cannot be conveyed directly. This led him to expose the essential affinities between indirect communication—i.e., communication in which messages are conveyed covertly—and the inner, subjective truths regarding the essence of ethics and religion (1967, p. 512). The key to understanding his view of irony as a form of indirect communication is found, however, in §§ 617-681 of the first

[8] In the following discussion on Kierkegaard's journals and notebooks (KJN), I use the classical translation of Hong (1941), which I find lucid and accurate. It should be mentioned that in recent years a new scientific translation of KJN was published by Princeton University Press. See, for instance, Kierkegaard (2007).

[9] "Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not" (DK 80B1).

volume of his journals (1967, pp. 252-319).[10]

"The perplexity of the modern age," he writes in §§ 649-645, "manifests itself in the confusion between the direct communication of science and the indirect communication of art and religion" (p. 269). In science, the aim is to convey knowledge to an addressee; in art or religion, by contrast, we may assume that the addressee is already in possession of the pertinent knowledge, so the goal is to make them put it into practice. Ethics and religion are characterized, then, by indirect communication: ethics—and art—, because it concerns the transformation, not of ignorance into knowledge, but of knowledge into reality (p. 271); and religion, because it requires each individual to stand *alone* before God (p. 273). Since ethical knowledge is simply self-knowledge, the aim of indirect communication is not some factual content conveyed to the addressee, but the addressee's own inner self (p. 281). Religious and ethical communications are not concerned, then, with conveying some remote factual content. Their purpose, rather, is to evoke the addressee's introspection and to "seduce" him to genuine spiritual awakening. Such a seduction, however, which involves internal guidance towards subjective truth, can only be achieved indirectly. Genuine indirect communication thus depends on minimizing or even removing the speaker's presence: in order to let the addressee evoke her inner truth, the speaker is obliged to disguise herself (p. 307).

This bears in mind our previous discussion of the Socratic art of midwifery in the *Theaetetus*. In fact, Kierkegaard himself calls indirect communication "the method of midwifery," assuming a method whose purpose is "to help the other to stand *alone* [before absolute divine truth]" (p. 280). It is the inner tension evident in this formula, the opposition between "standing alone" and "being helped by another" that underlies in his view every instance of ironic speech. This tension also characterizes the ironic position of the "midwife" engaged in every indirect communication: the ironist conceals himself from the addressee in order to avoid being perceived as an authority, for in such a case the addressee would merely emulate the teacher without evoking self-knowledge, replacing the indirect communication of values with the

[10] For a contemporary discussion of the pedagogical dimensions of Kierkegaard's journals and notebooks, see Johansson (2019) and Söderquist (2016).

direct communication of facts, thereby obstructing the path to genuine subjective truth.

It follows that indirect communication is possible only by virtue of the mask of irony that conceals the speaker's presence (pp. 274-276). The ironist thus usually presents himself as frivolous, and his deception is required in order to deliver genuine earnestness from the addressee, a type of action Kierkegaard astutely calls "deceiving into truth" (p. 288). Thus, irony is the highest earnestness:

> Irony—the highest earnestness. Earnestness is that I as an individual relate myself to God [absolute truth] and thus to every human being. People stupidly think it is earnestness to have many followers who are willing if necessary to die for me. Stupidity. To help a man relate himself to God as an individual is earnestness. But it must be done indirectly, for otherwise I become a hindrance to the one who is helped (1967, p. 274).

Ironic concealment as the highest form of indirect communication thus aims at supreme philosophical and religious seduction: the seduction to stand alone in the presence of absolute truth.

In the notebooks and journal Kierkegaard offers, then, a clear and coherent analysis of the methodological role Socratic irony plays in the process that leads to genuine, unshakable truth (the eternal archetypes, according to Plato; God, according to Kierkegaard). Although not involving pure *suzethesis* (the *eirōn* not entertaining any real form of cooperation), the teacher's ironic guise clearly induces the pupil to quest for the truth.

Seen from this Kierkegaardian viewpoint, Socratic irony may thus be considered as a distinctive type of Greek *eirôneia*: an intricate blend of Aristophanian "deception and disingenuity" and Aristotelian "self-depreciation" whose goal is strictly philosophical: leading human thought towards the truth. Extending the imagery in the *Theaetetus*, it can be said that irony serves as a catalyst for the philosophic maieutic process, the germ of the inner, "living" truth that emerges out of the pupil's consciousness. In Platonic phraseology, the ironic midwife stimulates philosophical recollection of the truth (*anamnesis*), grasped by the soul's eye prenatally. This state finds its clearest Platonic expression in the above-cited lines of *Letter VII*: "as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it [genuine knowledge]

is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself" (341c). Disingenuous irony and philosophic autarchy are therefore two sides of the same coin—two ends of the Platonic movement towards ultimate truth.

Elsewhere, however, Plato surprisingly levels covert criticism against the "venom" of Socratic irony, a critique that bursts, in half-joking bitterness, out of the wounded Alcibiades' mouth. As we shall see below, here it becomes a form of philosophic poison to the truth-seeker.

3. Alcibiades: Socratic irony as venom

The complex relationship between Socrates and his ambitious pupil Alcibiades, member of the preeminent Alcmaeonid family and pupil of Pericles, has been a subject of a long controversy since classical antiquity. It was rumored in ancient Athens that Socrates had "corrupted" Alcibiades, and this suspicion might have contributed to the old philosopher's conviction. Moreover, Socrates apparent failure to educate the unrestrained young Alcibiades has raised doubts regarding the purpose and effectiveness of Socratic philosophical education (Lutz, 2018, p. 378). This relationship is of special importance for us since—as will be shown below, it sheds an important light on the nature of Socratic irony.[11]

Socrates is called an *eirōn* by three central figures in Plato's writings: Thrasymachus (*Republic*), Callicles (*Gorgias*), and Alcibiades (*Symposium*). The first two complain bitterly about irony during their conversation with Socrates, this being nothing more than a dramatic respite in a discussion revolving primarily around a conceptual search for a definition. Their charge that Socrates is unwilling to express his opinion and his pretense of ignorance also appears in Aristotle, Xenophon, and others. Alcibiades' diatribe in the *Symposium*, in contrast, is much lengthier and more complex. It is thus of much greater significance for our present purposes, since:[12]

[11] For ancient Socratic literature regarding the image of Alcibiades, see Boys-Stones & Rowe (2013); for a comprehensive review of the literature concerning the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades. see Littman (1970).

[12] Plato depicts the image of Alcibiades in three different texts: *First Alcibiades*, *Second Alcibiades*, and the last part of the *Symposium*. The first two have been considered spurious by classical scholars, based on the claim that they lack the typical subtlety of Platonic argument. The *Symposium,* on the other hand, is

a) It deals extensively—and with a rich matrix of imagery and proverbs—with the nature of irony in relation to Socrates' enigmatic figure.

b) It constitutes a direct address on the part of the philosophy student to the ironic effect of the philosophy teacher, thereby enabling us to examine the "deceiving into truth" Kierkegaard lauds from the other side of the debate, with the blade of critical exegesis.

Alcibiades' speech also forms one of the narrative peaks of Plato's writings, serving as a preeminent example of classical Greek philosophical prose. A comprehensive literary-philosophical analysis of the speech, that takes seriously both the philosophical arguments and the use of proverbs and metaphors in the framework of Socrates' dramatic situation, will allow us to discover the delicate, intricate mechanism of irony in Socrates' maieutic craft. The following discourse thus belongs to what is known in Platonic studies as the "literary camp," blending literary analysis with a philosophical discussion (Press, 1993).

Dating to the middle period of Plato's career, the *Symposium* consists of a stratified set of speeches in honor of Eros, the "ancient of ancients" in Hesiod's works, seeking to elucidate his nature and his distinctive status amongst the Olympians gods. The series of speakers includes Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus the physician, Aristophanes the playwright, Agathon, and Socrates himself. This Socrates is typical of the middle period of the dialogues, not only inquiring and asking but also taking philosophical and metaphysical positions in lengthy monologues.

In his encomium to Eros, Socrates employs a narrative ploy, presenting his own view regarding Eros' nature and then describing a dialogue with Diotima, a priestess who initiates him into the secret art of erotica. Here, Plato constructs a delicate narrative structure of a speech within a speech, wherein Socrates finally stops asking questions and becomes the subject of his teacher's cross-examination. Moreover,

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not only an undoubtedly genuine Platonic text, but it also comprises an ingenious speech addressing the unique nature of Socratic irony as perceived by the old philosopher's direct pupil. Hence, it will stand in the spotlight of our discussion. For a detailed study regarding Plato's writings on Alcibiades, see Helfer (2017).

when Diotima seeks to instruct him drawing a picture for him of Eros' deepest aspects, her account closely corresponds to Socrates' own figure: like him, Eros is poor; while not handsome in his own right, a trap for the beautiful; tough and barefoot, and a wisdom-seeker who stands "between wisdom and ignorance"—i.e., a philosopher. As such, his greatest desire is:

> […] begetting on a beautiful thing by means of both the body and the soul […]. 'All men are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul: on reaching a certain age our nature yearns to beget. This it cannot do upon an ugly person, but only on the beautiful: the conjunction of man and woman is a begetting for both. It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal; and it cannot occur in the discordant' (206b-c).

The erotic man's summarizing depiction similarly points with a thick finger at Socrates as possessing a "pregnancy of soul." This type of person, Diotima observes,

> […] goes about seeking the beautiful object whereon he may do his begetting […] and if he chances also on a soul that is fair and noble and well-endowed, he gladly cherishes the two combined in one; and straightway in addressing such a person he is resourceful in discoursing of virtue and of what should be the good man's character and what his pursuits; and so he takes in hand the other's education. […] [B]y contact with the fair one and by consorting with him he bears and brings forth his long-felt conception (209b-c).

This is philosophy as the science of the erotic: brimming with desire and wisdom, vitality and dynamism, fertility, and begetting upon beauty. While it was in Socrates' own account of himself that he was a philosophical erotic who yearns to conceive beauty, this is not how things look when he finally encounters Alcibiades. Following Socrates' layered speech, the young, handsome Alcibiades takes the stage, perfumed with wine. On seeing Socrates, he jumps to his feet as though bitten by a snake. After some discussion, he agrees to join the circle of orators.

While he is willing to praise, he will laud not Eros but Socrates. This state of affairs, in which the Socratic venerator is drunk, serves as a dramatic device that guarantees that the speaker's words will reveal an inner truth about the philosopher—"wine, as the saying goes, whether you couple 'children' with it or no, is 'truthful'" (217e).

Alcibiades' speech opens with the tried and tested argument: "You must know the case is quite the contrary of what he was saying" (214d). This is a simple form of irony, in which the meaning contradicts the words.[13] He then promises to reveal Socrates' true face, remarking: "The way I shall take, gentlemen, in my praise of Socrates, is by similitudes. Probably he will think I do this for derision; but I choose my similitude for the sake of truth, not of ridicule" (215a). Then follows a lengthy monologue, at the heart of which lie four rhetorical moves: he likens Socrates to the Silenoi, Socrates' speech to the satyr Marsyas' flute playing, Socratic philosophy to a snake bite of the soul, finally giving a dramatic account of the homoerotic state, at the core of which lies his own abortive attempts to seduce the old philosopher. As we shall see, each of these strategies illustrates an aspect of Socratic irony.

3.1. The Silenus-figures simile

> For I say he is likest to the Silenus-figures that sit in the statuaries' shops; those, I mean, which our craftsmen make with pipes or flutes in their hands: when their two halves are pulled open, they are found to contain images of gods […]. [H]e spends his whole life in chaffing and making game of his fellow-men. Whether anyone else has caught him in a serious moment and opened him, and seen the images inside, I know not; but I saw them one day, and thought them so divine and golden, so perfectly fair and wondrous, that I simply had to do as Socrates bade me (215a-b & 216e-217a).

[13] In the *Apology*, Socrates surprisingly presents the opposite argument: "Perhaps someone might say, 'Socrates, can you not go away from us and live quietly, without talking?' Now this is the hardest thing to make some of you believe. For if I say that such conduct would be disobedience to the god and that therefore I cannot keep quiet, you will think I am jesting and will not believe me" (37e).

Hybrid Greek mythological figures—part human, part horse—, the Silenoi or centaurs are generally described as wild, cruel, and lustful. Nesus, for example, brings about Hercules' death by cunningly getting his wife to smear his coat with poison. This portrayal lying behind Alcibiades' simile, it intimates that Socrates the *eirōn* shares the same traits. The "image within an image" portrayal also symbolizes the essential nature of Socratic ironic speech, namely, the gap between the comic verbal exterior (foolishness and laughter) and inner meaning attended by pure wisdom. In other words, it constitutes the mythological representation of double-faced Socratic irony.

The simile also hides within it, however, a piercing criticism of ironic speech, which disguises and conceals Socrates' common sense and wisdom to the point that no one has ever discerned them. Wisdom not profiting anyone if it is not visible, Alcibiades depicts irony here as a form of dissemblance and dissimulation—a view closely corresponding to the Aristotelian concept of *eirôneia*. From the perspective of the philosophical instruction process, such disingenuity attests to condescension and alienation, a shunning of mutuality, and a scorn for ethical interaction out of respect for distance—that which Levinas refers to as "rapport de face à face" (1985). It also negates the supreme philosophical ideal of the Platonic *dialektike*: precluding any genuine reciprocity, *suzethesis*—joint ongoing search for (the) truth—is impossible.

3.2. Marsyas the satyr

> And I further suggest that he resembles the satyr Marsyas. […] You are a fleering fellow, eh? […] Are you not a piper? Why, yes, and a far more marvellous one than the satyr. His lips indeed had power to entrance mankind by means of instruments; a thing still possible today for anyone who can pipe his tunes […] You differ from him in one point only—that you produce the same effect with simple prose unaided by instruments […] so soon as we hear you, or your discourses in the mouth of another […] we are all astounded and entranced […]. For when I hear him I am worse than any wild fanatic; I find my heart leaping and my tears gushing forth at the sound of his speech […]. When I listened to Pericles and other skilled orators I thought them eloquent, but

> I never felt anything like this; my spirit was not left in a tumult and had not to complain of my being in the condition of a common slave: whereas the influence of our Marsyas here has often thrown me into such a state that I thought my life not worth living on these terms (215b-216a).

The most well-developed simile, this revolves around the analogy drawn between Marsyas' flute playing and the misleading nature of ironic speech.[14] The effect of the latter upon the listeners is deep, hypnotic, and powerful, Alcibiades comparing their ecstatic reaction with the Corybantes and possessed bacchants—the ecstatic dancers and followers of the goddess Cybele, who whirl and dance when in a trance—as well as with poets inspired by the Muses, who also recite verse under divine influence when out of their senses.[15]

Alcibiades's speech is thus a mythic account of enchanting ironic speech that arouses Dionysian ecstasy and madness in those who hear it. From a Platonic perspective, this analogy has significant ramifications: rather than leading the listeners towards rationality—the clear vision of truth through the mind's eye—, it resembles the mythological recitation of the poets that sends people into ecstasy and madness.

This fact is further complicated by Plato's argument in the seventh book of the *Republic* that poetry undermines the soul by arousing bestial feelings, thereby empowering the "many-faced monster" that lies in wait in the depths of the human personality. As he notes in the tenth book:

> Let us, then, conclude our return to the topic of poetry and our apology, and affirm that we really had good grounds then for dismissing her from our city, since such was her character. For reason constrained us. And let us

[14] Alcibiades later heightens the Marsyas effect of Socratic speech, identifying it with the Sirens whose voice draws sailors to their death (*Odys*., 12.216a) and declaring: "So I withhold my ears perforce as from the Sirens, and make off as fast as I can, for fear I should go on sitting beside him till old age was upon me" (216a).

[15] Plato draws an explicit analogy between the two in *Ion*: "Just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses" (534a).

> further say to her, lest she condemn us for harshness and rusticity, that there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry (607b).

Here, he draws an adamantine line between poetry and philosophy, myth and logos.[16] In this context, Alcibiades' ironic Socrates, the doppelgänger of Marsyas the flute-player, serves as the arch-antitype of the Platonic philosopher.

Socrates' ironic speech thus not only does not help but directly impedes the soul's journey towards the light of truth. If Socrates as Silenus is implicitly associated with the Sophists who, disguising themselves, mislead their audience, as a satyr his speech resembles the ecstatic inspiration of the poet and the Dionysian madness the latter exhibits. Unsurprisingly, the satyr here is thus identified as Marsyas, the mythological creature who demonstrated his *hubris* in inviting Apollo to a music contest, the god nailing his skin to a pine tree in punishment.

3.3. Philosophy as snake venom

> Now up to this point my tale could fairly be told to anybody; but from here onwards I would not have continued in your hearing were it not, in the first place, that wine, as the saying goes, whether you couple 'children' with it or no, is 'truthful'; and in the second, I consider it dishonest, when I have started on the praise of Socrates, to hide his deed of lofty disdain. Besides, I share the plight of the man who was bitten by the snake: you know it is related of one in such a plight that he refused to describe his sensations to any but persons who had been bitten themselves, since they alone would understand him and stand up for him if he should give way to wild words and actions in his agony. Now I have been bitten by a more painful creature, in the most painful way that one can be bitten: in my heart, or my soul, or whatever one is to call it, I am stricken and stung by his philosophic discourses, which adhere more fiercely than any adder when once they lay hold of

[16] For the ancient debate, see Rosen (1994).

> a young and not ungifted soul, and force it to do or say whatever they will […]. I have only to look around me […], every one of you has had his share of philosophic frenzy and transport […] (*Symp*. 217e-218b).

What can a philosopher say that is more dangerous than a snake bite? One of the characteristics of Socrates' ironic speech is the false adulation and flattery it heaps on the "wisdom" of his interlocutors when his cross-examination in fact reveals their crassness and ignorance. This dissonance confuses and angers the stunned speakers, injuring their pride and self-confidence. As Lane argues, this situation has important pedagogical-philosophical implications:

Being wounded by Socratic irony will engage the pride of the interlocutors in a desire to prove it wrong. The sting of humiliation will prompt them into wishing to pursue philosophical discussion, in order either to prove their worth and the worth of their current knowledge, or in order to learn what is true in order to better themselves (2010, p. 252).

Here, irony arouses philosophical astonishment in the interlocutors, prompting them to go in search of (the) truth—in the process of which they will naturally become wiser and better, or at least less foolish. This serves as irony's rationale within the philosophical instruction process—it is a bitter concoction that nevertheless acts as medicine. Socrates undoubtedly alludes to this aspect of irony in his defense speech in the *Apology* when he compares himself to a pestiferous gadfly:

> For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, who, to use a rather absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging. I think the god fastened me upon the city in some such capacity, and I go about arousing, and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long (30e).

Does the gadfly always goad the horse into motion, however? We hear other voices in Plato, one of whom is Menon, who likens Socrates to a predatory fish (*narkē*) and his speech to an electric current that stuns and paralyzes its prey. As he himself can attest, Socrates is known for confusing and astounding his audience with his questions: "for truly,

both in soul and mouth, I am numb [*narkan*] and have nothing with which I can answer you" (80b).

Narkan refers to a lack of feeling, shock, and paralysis—an emotional and psychological state of helplessness and, even more importantly, an intellectual stupor that prevents any conceptual searching. It is thus the complete antithesis of the wonder (*thaumazein*) that informs philosophy.

It is precisely to this paralysis that Alcibiades refers in speaking of philosophy as the "snake bite of the soul." Socrates' words—now attributed to "madness", "the Bacchic frenzy"—dominate the speaker's inner focus of control, bringing out of him deeds and utterances of which he is not the author. At this point, he is more embarrassed and amazed than when he embarked upon the philosophical instruction process—alone, paralyzed in thought, and wounded in soul.

From the perspective of the heart-stricken Alcibiades, Socrates' speech—both his cross-examination and his stinging irony—has a destructive effect on the philosophy initiate. Even more seriously, it arouses irrational, bestial feelings of anger, insult, and pride that paralyze thought. This is Socratic irony in its most debilitating, damaging, and anti-philosophic form, a viewpoint that corresponds to Nietzsche's argument that Socratic dialectics is nothing other than a demonstration of cruel dictatorial tyranny towards one's interlocutors (2005, II, § 7).

Even here, however, we are not completely certain to which "philosophical utterances" Alcibiades is alluding in his speech. The following section addresses this question, focusing on the scene of Socrates' sexual seduction read as situational or dramatic irony.

3.4. Dramatic irony: the erotic seduction of Socrates

Dramatic or situational irony is created by a disparity between a character's words and deeds and a set of specific circumstances (Wolfsdorf, 2007). Oedipus, for example, swears that he will exile Laius' murderer—without knowing that actually he is the culprit. This volatile, dramatic state is evident in Alcibiades' speech when we compare Diotima's prior elocution with his description of his intimate encounter with Socrates.

The state of affairs depicted here is ironic in the extreme, being recounted against the backdrop of the Athenian custom of conducting homo-erotic relations with young men (Vlastos, 1987, p. 85). Alcibiades sets the scene himself, in the first person and with great bitterness: a handsome lad, he relates that he thought Socrates was "making a move

on him" because of his beauty and youth. This belief fits in perfectly with Diotima's earlier speech, in which she claims that the erotic person welcomes the "beautiful rather than the ugly bodies […] in his pregnancy, and if he chances also on a soul that is fair and noble and well-endowed, he gladly cherishes the two combined in one"—and thus "straightway in addressing such a person he is resourceful in discoursing of virtue and of what should be the good man's character and what his pursuits; and so he takes in hand the other's education" (209b-c). Convinced that he is such a beloved, Alcibiades determines that if he cultivates Socrates' advances and gives his youth to him, the elusive philosopher will tell him all he knows—the Silenus figure opening up to reveal the statues within itself. Hereby, Alcibiades will improve himself, the ephebe bestowing upon Socrates the beauty of his youth in exchange for the graybeard's philosophical wisdom.

The erotic Socrates, however—whom Alcibiades assumes to be "seeking the beautiful object whereon he may do his begetting, since he will never beget upon the ugly"—acts completely contrary to his expectations, doing nothing. While they are sleeping in the same room one cold night, Alcibiades gets out of his bed and gets under Socrates' cloak in an overtly seductive act—to which Socrates makes no response! The erotic situation happens to be asexual, the young man realizing in the morning that "I had in no more particular sense slept a night with Socrates than if it had been with my father or my elder brother" (219c-d).

Here, the erotic norm is confuted by Socrates' non-erotic behaviour. Making no sexual move at all, Socrates compounds Alcibiades' confusion and perturbation, responding to the attempt at seduction by "put[ting] on that innocent air which habit has made so characteristic of him" and saying:

> My dear Alcibiades, I daresay you are not really a dolt, if what you say of me is the actual truth, and there is a certain power in me that could help you to be better; for then what a stupendous beauty you must see in me, vastly superior to your comeliness! And if on espying this you are trying for a mutual exchange of beauty for beauty, it is no slight advantage you are counting on—you are trying to get genuine in return for reputed beauties, and in fact are designing to fetch off the old bargain of "gold for bronze" (218d-219a).

Spoken in great irony, these words leave Alcibiades bewildered and befuddled, torn between his admiration for Socrates' "sobriety and integrity" and shame, embarrassment, anger, and humiliation. Embodying the "soul that is fair and noble and well-endowed […], the two combined in one," he is nonetheless spurned, the comeliness and freshness of his youth counting for nothing. In despair, he "was at a loss, and wandered about in the most abject thraldom to this man that ever was known" (219e).

The effect of the dramatic irony joins that of its preceding similes, the courter being courted. Everything, in fact, turns upside down under the shadow of irony, the speaker becoming paralyzed instead of spurred to movement, enslaved to his teacher rather than gaining philosophical independence, wandering aimlessly in confusion instead of "deceiving into truth," trapped in a snare of negative emotions and ashamed of his existence rather than being restored to clear thought, wanting to die instead of enjoying an eruption of erotic life. This is no common, ongoing search, pregnancy, or begetting of beauty, but a barren philosophical guidance, an arid infertility manifest in the sterilization of any form of erotic sexuality between teacher and student. The whole scene of dramatic irony thus symbolizes the philosophical infecundity of the Socratic "art of midwifery."

4. Destructive irony, constructive irony

By way of conclusion, let us review Alcibiades' speech from a bird's eye perspective. Vlastos clearly and precisely outlined the logic of the argument, contending that Socratic irony here is completely devoid of any deception or Aristotelian misleading, Socrates' behaviour in fact embodying a form of complex irony in which, paradoxically, every phenomenon is also its antithesis—what is said both is (in one sense) and is not (in another sense) what is said. Here, the arrow of criticism is turned back against Alcibiades' embittered heart:

> Yes, Alcibiades was deceived […], but by whom? Not by Socrates, but by himself […]. The irony in his love for Alcibiades, ridding from the start, persisted until the boy found the answer the hard way, in a long night of anguished humiliation, naked next to Socrates, and Socrates a block of ice (Vlastos, 1987, p. 93).

As meticulous as it may be, this exegesis nevertheless is at odds with Alcibiades's own words as reviewed above, in effect constituting a type of *ad hominem* argument designed to absolve Socrates of all guilt and blame. The inconsistency may be a function of Vlastos' interpretive approach: focusing on a structural and philological analysis, he tends to ignore the text's dramatic-narrative dimension, i.e., the circumstances in which the words are spoken: the analogy between Socrates and the Silenoi and Marysas the satyr, that between philosophy and venom, and the dramatic irony of the seduction scene.[17]

When treated as a depiction that seeks to say something essential about Socratic irony, these add up to a scathing indictment of irony, bringing a weighty charge against Kierkegaard's conception of irony as a methodical tool for philosophical inquiry *par excellence*. Alcibiades stands in sharp opposition to Plato's maieutic image of the Socratic philosophical instruction process, presenting irony as the symbol of impotence and infertility that destroys clear thinking, tears at the strings of the soul, the ferocity of its bite paralyzing the philosophical search and extinguishing the flame of wonder. Here, Socratic irony is thus the complete anti-philosophical adversary of the yearning for wisdom rather than the catalyst that drives philosophical midwifery.

The question nonetheless remains—why does Plato resolve to present here a position so contrary to the image of Socrates as the exemplary maieutic philosopher, shaped by a theoretical and literary craftsman in other dialogues? What meaning should we give to this disparity? We may conjecture—albeit on reasonable grounds—that Plato seeks to present two dichotomous types of Socratic irony.[18] "Positive," healthy irony is more subtle in expression, closely corresponding to the speaker's personality and intellectual level. It thus prompts a common searching and philosophic wonderment—to the point at which "it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark […] and thereafter […] nourishes itself" (*Letter VII*). This form of irony acts as a midwife who helps the student give birth. "Negative," morbid

[17] See also Lane's (2010, p. 249) criticism of Vlastos.

[18] Although Kierkegaard similarly distinguishes between "healthy" and "morbid" irony, he relates it to the ironic subject itself rather than the ironic effect on the other: "[Socratic] irony is a healthiness insofar as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity; but it is sickness insofar as it cannot bear the absolute, except in the form of nothingness" (1989, p. 77).

irony, in contrast, wounds its companions, being experienced as violent by inducing intellectual paralysis and psychological frustration in the speaker.

This is the dark side of Socratic irony: its demonic power and delusion. Finding the truth through the process of philosophical instruction is thus always accompanied by the risk of failure and injury—"a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces" (Jer. 23:29), a double-edged sword (*sayfun ḏū ḥaddayni*), the medicine of life or a deadly poison (b. Šhab. 88b).

So, finally, we have, on the basis of the Platonic depiction of Socratic irony, Kierkegaard on the one hand and Alcibiades on the other. Both agree that irony plays a dominant role in the process of philosophical guidance. Yet, the one underscores the constructive, bright aspect of irony as a maieutic tool while the other points at its destructive dark power. The divergence may be a function of the Socratic pupil's aptitude for walking the steep path of philosophic instruction: the first being Plato, the prince of philosophy, the second the wounded Alcibiades.

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