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## Socrates' Life of Irony

[H]e is always poor, and he's far from being delicate and beautiful [...]; instead, he is tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless [...]. [...] he is a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life, a genius of enchantments, potions, and clever pleadings.

—Diotima's description of the spirit called  
"Love," *Symposium*, 203c-d.

In much recent scholarship on Socrates we are presented with a picture of him that denies that irony plays any essential role in his philosophy or in the man himself.<sup>1</sup> No one denies that Socrates on occasion gives his words an ironic twist. What is disputed, however, is the idea that his irony goes any deeper than this, that irony could in any way be fundamental to Socrates' practice of philosophy or to his moral outlook or to his very mode of existence. I want to resist this picture of Socrates. I think it has a tendency to lose track of much of what gives Socrates his moral depth and originality, and to deny that there is anything deeply unsettling or puzzling about him. Instead, when seemingly forced to choose between an ironic seducer and a morally upright Socrates, present day accounts readily opt to abandon the apparent unseemliness of irony and offer us

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see C.D.C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989); T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) and *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984). While the significance of irony in Socrates is not explicitly targeted by Irwin, he does not give irony any prominent role to play in his account. See T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

as an alternative a moralized Socrates, transparent and sincere, someone who is “completely straightforward and honest,” and who “mostly means just what he says” (Kraut, 311; Reeve, xiii).

In what follows, I argue that one source of the urge to de-ironize Socrates is an impoverished conception of irony itself. I illustrate what, on this overly simple conception, irony is envisaged to encompass but then reject the thought that we can conclude on such a basis that “there is no fundamental irony in Socrates” (Reeve, 184). Rather, if we are to keep Socrates in view in all his complexity what we require is a much richer conception of irony. There are two obvious places to look for such a conception: in the recent work of Vlastos<sup>2</sup> and in the work of Kierkegaard.<sup>3</sup> To begin reckoning with these two very different views I sketch some key aspects of each view, noting points of agreement and disagreement between them. I then recount in some detail Alcibiades’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*—a key text on Socratic irony for both Vlastos and Kierkegaard—followed by a consideration of the competing readings of this speech offered by the two of them. I claim that of the two views of Socratic irony, Kierkegaard’s is the more promising and, so, close with a few general remarks about how his vision of Socrates might generate a neo-Kierkegaardian approach to irony and its relationship to the enigma we call Socrates.

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<sup>2</sup> See especially his “Socratic Irony” in G. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 21-44.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); see also the two works by his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; 1992).

## I. Simple Irony

Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or  
am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and  
gentle nature?  
—*Phaedrus*, 230

Even a sober and unclouded mind would find it hard to come  
to terms with [Socrates'] bizarreness!  
—*Symposium*, 215a

A constant theme in the stories and myths about Socrates is his strangeness, his uniqueness, his being what the Greeks call “*atopos*.”<sup>4</sup> His contemporaries apparently did not know quite what to make of him. They found him fascinating, seductive, frustrating, elusive, and depicted him sometimes as the most self-controlled and rational human being there ever was, sometimes as a buffoon and joker who never takes things seriously. Diogenes Laertius, for example, reports that, according to Demetrius of Byzantium, “owing to [Socrates'] vehemence in argument, men set upon him with their fists or tore his hair out; and that for the most part he was despised and laughed at, yet bore all this ill-usage patiently” (*D.L.* 2.20-21). In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades charges Socrates with outright deception: “[Socrates] has deceived us all: he presents himself as your lover, and, before you

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<sup>4</sup> Vlastos highlights the “strangeness” of Socrates on the very first page of his book—*Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*—and says that he has written his book particularly in mind of “readers of Plato's early dialogues who have felt this strangeness, have asked themselves what to make of it, have pondered answers to its enigmas, and are willing to work their way through yet another.” I will argue below that while Vlastos' position is much to be preferred to views that seem constitutionally “deaf” to Socratic irony, his own position, nevertheless, does not in my view remain true to his desire to “keep faith with Socrates' strangeness” (*SIMP*, 3).

In contrast to Vlastos' desire to keep Socrates' bizarreness in view, a number of commentators seem worried that we will lose track of the more straightforward aspects they claim to find in Socrates. For example, Kraut worries that if we are not careful we will lose track of what he takes to be Socrates' “honest perplexity”: “When Socrates confesses his confusion at the end of the *Protagoras*, he must be taken at his word, for this is just what we have come to expect from a Socratic dialogue. Honest perplexity is his hallmark, and attempts to interpret it away falsify Plato's picture of the man” (288).

know it, you're in love with him yourself!" (*Smp.* 222b)<sup>5</sup> To be infuriating or a moral exemplar or a teacher or ignorant or a lover or a seducer—none of these on their own is particularly significant; but that these many qualities—several of which are opposites of one another—should be attributed to one and the same person: that is the riddle that Socrates sets us.

But is there really anything so puzzling about Socrates? Surely people have exaggerated this side of him. Yes, it is true that he sometimes engages in a playful irony and this is a part of what we find charming and quintessentially Socratic. But is there good reason to push an ironic reading on Socrates if we can avoid it? One of the beliefs that motivates these sorts of questions is the view that whatever role irony may play in some of Plato's so-called early or Socratic dialogues, there is *no room* for a comparable role in the non-aporetic, more historical works, such as Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*.<sup>6</sup> Two main reasons

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<sup>5</sup> But cf. *Smp.* 184c-185b on when it is and is not shameful to be deceived: "If someone decides to put himself at another's disposal because he thinks that this will make him better in wisdom or in any other part of virtue, we approve of his voluntary subjection: we consider it neither shameful nor servile. [...] Only in this case, we should notice, is it never shameful to be deceived; in every other case it is shameful, both for the deceiver and the person he deceives. Suppose, for example, that someone thinks his lover is rich and accepts him for his money; his action won't be any less shameful if it turns out that he was deceived and his lover was a poor man after all. For the young man has already shown himself to be the sort of person who will do anything for money—and that is far from honorable. By the same token, suppose that someone takes a lover in the mistaken belief that this lover is a good man and likely to make him better himself, while in reality the man is horrible, totally lacking in virtue; even so, it is noble for him to have been deceived. For he too has demonstrated something about himself: that he is the sort of person who will do anything for the sake of virtue—and what could be more honorable than that?"

<sup>6</sup> Whatever their degree of historicity, these dialogues are not treated by all commentators as immune from Socratic irony, use of parody, indirection, and so on. For example, on the *Apology* see R. E. Allen, *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 3-16—surprisingly, Allen does not, however, appear to give any prominence to the role of irony in the *Crito*; see also K. Seeskin, "Is the *Apology* of Socrates a Parody?," *Philosophy and Literature*, 6 (1982):94-105; on the *Crito* see R. Weiss, *Socrates Dissatisfied* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)—while Weiss' account is very attentive to the literary structure of the work, I ultimately think that she overstates her case, requiring on the one hand that the Laws strictly represent bad oratory and on the other hand that Socrates decides to make use of this form of oratory when it becomes "clear" to him that Crito is immune to elenctic persuasion (cf. *Smp.* 199b, where Socrates ambiguously claims he "wouldn't be able" to give a eulogy using the methods of bad oratory); see also M. Mitchell, "'The Arguments I Seem to Hear': Argument and Irony in the *Crito*," *Phronesis*, 41.2 (1996):121-137.

are given for this. First, while there might be grounds for thinking that Socrates uses irony in the aporetic dialogues as a way of engaging an interlocutor in discussion or leading that interlocutor to question further some proposed definition, there is nothing comparable when Socrates is brought to trial and required by law to defend himself against the charges leveled against him:

The function assigned to irony in an elenchus does not carry over in a plausible way to the courtroom situation. Socrates is not examining the jurors, after all. His aim [...] is to prove his innocence, not to awaken in the jurors a sense of their own ignorance (Reeve, 178).

[T]he *Apology* is unique among the dialogues in (among other things) presenting Socrates in a setting where he cannot practice his elenchus upon his principal audience. Though he does so engage Meletus (24c9-28a1), he cannot question the jury and respond in stages as their answers are given. So if he is to employ irony in this setting, it cannot be as bait for an elenctic trap (Brickhouse and Smith, *SOT*, 41).

On this understanding of irony, its purpose is to “awaken” another individual—one’s interlocutor—to her or his ignorance. Let us call this the **educative** conception of irony: under this aspect, irony serves as an instrument to educate another person. Whether or not, however, Socratic irony is essentially bound up with Socrates’ helping another individual to become aware of her/his ignorance, it does seem clear that Socrates frequently finds himself in situations that invite such a characterization of irony.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion of Reeve and Brickhouse/Smith is that if irony does play an educative role in the process whereby an interlocutor comes to discover her/his ignorance, then there is no such comparable process in the *Apology*. Nothing like the give and take familiar to the early dialogues exists in

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Socrates’ description of what often happens when he tries to draw a person’s attention to her or his thinking s/he knew something when s/he does not: “[W]hen I examined this man [...] my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but that he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders” (*Ap.* 21c-d).

Socrates' relationship with his jurors, and so, insofar as it is tied to this educative function, Socratic irony does not appear to play any essential role in Socrates' courtroom activity.

A second, related, reason for rejecting any fundamental role for irony in the *Apology* is the belief that the use of irony is not only not suited to Socrates' defense of himself in court; its use actually may fly in the face of any legally legitimate and morally appropriate defense. For example, Brickhouse and Smith argue that Socrates' commitment to upholding the laws and to the jury's carrying out its duty rules out any behavior on his part that would interfere with these laws and the jury's successfully arriving at a judgment:

Socrates' principles require that he honor and obey just legal institutions; so as he presents his defense he must do everything within his power compatible with law and morality to make the truth known to the jurors about the real nature of the activities for which he has been brought before them. Were Socrates intentionally to risk misleading the jurors in any way, he would be guilty of the very disregard for law, justice, and the truth of which he accuses Meletus (24c4-8, d7-9; 25c1-4; 26a8-b2; 34b5). And if he should in any way encourage the jurors to fail to perform their properly sworn duty, he would thereby become guilty of impiety, the very crime he has been wrongly accused of committing (35c5-d5). If irony is to be found in Socrates' presentation, therefore, it must in no way interfere with the jurors' capacity to judge the case correctly.

Socrates, we believe, is convinced of his innocence. For him to act in such a way as to risk carelessly the condemnation of the jury would show a disregard for the law requiring juries to discern the relevant facts of the case; it would also demonstrate an impious disregard for the oath each juror swears to uphold that law. Socrates' sense of obligation to the state and its laws, therefore, requires him not only to undertake a defense, but to make this defense as effective as possible within the limits of the laws, time, and his other principles (Brickhouse and Smith, *SOT*, 43).

But to use irony in such a situation—especially given Socrates' inability to engage the jury in a sustained discussion—is just the sort of activity that would appear to go against such a commitment. Brickhouse and Smith, in fact, argue that to the extent that there is a reasonable chance that even a single jury member might be misled or incited by Socrates' use of irony he is thereby morally bound to avoid its use:

If the jury should *take literally an ironic remark*, their mistake could not emerge in subsequent conversation for Socrates to correct. So *if Socrates speaks ironically on a matter of substance at his trial, he risks causing some jurors to believe what is false*, the degree of risk corresponding inversely with the jurors' present ability to interpret calmly and intelligently such wry playfulness or subtle sarcasm. Their ability to do so would never be a matter of complete confidence and in any case is especially impaired in the present circumstance, given the grave and slanderous allegations they have heard against Socrates (Brickhouse and Smith, *SOT*, 41, italics mine).

[Socrates] must avoid *willful dishonesty, misdirection, or even irrelevant playfulness* if he is not to undermine the jury's performance of its pious and legal duty. Indeed, even the most transparent irony still carries a risk as long as one or more of the jurors would not understand it or would respond prejudicially to it (Brickhouse and Smith, *SOT*, 44, italics mine).

Insofar as it is Socrates' duty to tell the plain, literal truth, irony appears—on this view—to be something unwelcome and diametrically opposed to what the law requires. Since Socrates has sworn to tell the truth, if he is being ironic, he either conceals the truth or speaks in such a way that his audience may not cotton on to the real point of what he is saying and so fail to understand the truth behind his words. Let us call this the **non-substantive** conception of irony. On such a view, irony is understood to stand in opposition to the literal truth. If one speaks the literal truth, then one does not speak ironically, and vice versa. Literal truth is connected by commentators with “sincerity” and “seriousness”; irony, by contrast, with “deception” or “indirectness” and “nonseriousness” and “playfulness”:

[N]one of the knowledge claims Socrates makes in the *Apology* threatens the *sincerity* of any of his disclaimers or gives us any compelling reason to treat them as *nonseriously* or ironically tendered (Reeve, 56, italics mine).

We are also not insisting that Socrates' principles require him *never* to engage in irony, but only never to do so in such a way as might needlessly interfere with the jury's capacity to judge the case correctly. In fact, we believe that characteristic Socratic irony can be found in his speech, though never on any issue of *direct substance* to his defense (Brickhouse Smith, *SOT*, 46, last italics mine).

Irony, then, characterized as non-substantive is incompatible with the literal truth. It is deceptive and/or involves the opposite of the truth.<sup>8</sup> It need not, however, involve lying or deception per se, since a person can speak indirectly or nonseriously—perhaps in the service of the educative aim described above—without actually speaking falsely. What is essential to this aspect of irony is that truth and seriousness have nothing to do with irony and—insofar as these are of premium importance (e.g., in a court trial)—should be, accordingly, protected from the potentially damaging effects of irony.

To sum up, the two main reasons one might make use of irony—to educate another and to speak nonliterally and nonseriously (what I have called the educative and non-substantive conceptions of irony)—are both rejected as inappropriate to the setting of the courtroom. While not explicit in the views I have discussed so far, there exists a third reservation, I think, which lingers in the background of these commentators’ minds, namely, why else would someone possibly want to speak ironically? What would be the point? And shouldn’t we be deeply suspicious of any such activity?<sup>9</sup> Given Socrates’ commitment to tell the truth in court (see, e.g., *Ap.* 17c) and the supposedly non-educative setting of the courtroom, “[t]here is, therefore,” in Reeve’s words, “no fundamental irony in Socrates. Rather he is—like Cassandra, that other misunderstood servant of Apollo—someone it has proved very difficult to take at his word” (184).

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<sup>8</sup> Reeve, e.g., approvingly quotes Quintilian’s definition where irony is defined as “something contrary to what is said to be understood” (Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 9.2.44), 5. Irony is objectionable in the case of Socrates’ defense because “what is said to be understood” is supposed to be the truth; if Socrates speaks ironically on this view, then he speaks with an intention directly opposed to his explicit commitment to tell the truth.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Nehamas draws attention to how “a large number of people, ancient and modern alike, have always found in Socrates what seemed to them a suspicious, if not actually repugnant, aspect”—see his “What Did Socrates Teach and to Whom Did He Teach It?,” *Review of Metaphysics* 46 (December 1992):279-306. In the next section I suggest that what is limited about the conception of irony guiding these two criticisms is that it cannot conceive of any further reason of substance for why someone would give irony a role to play in her/his life and her/his philosophy.



## II. Complex Irony vs. Lived Irony: Vlastos and Kierkegaard

The ironic in Xenophon is never the floating of irony blissfully resting in itself but is [merely] a means of education.

—*Concept of Irony*, 25

To keep faith with Socrates' strangeness some way has to be found to save both the assertion of his ignorance and the implied negation.

—*Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 3

Even if we are sympathetic with the general thrust of what Reeve and Brickhouse/Smith have to say about irony, I do not think we have to follow them in denying any essential role to irony in coming to terms with Socrates. What is valuable about their criticisms is twofold: any account of Socratic irony (1) must explain its role (if there is one) in contexts where he does not appear to be educatively engaging another individual; and (2) must not accuse Socrates of lying or of speaking in a way that conflicts with his commitment to telling the truth. These are important qualifications that may identify weaknesses in some past views of commentators who have wanted to claim that irony plays an essential role in Socrates' life and philosophy. But, while I think it is possible to accept these qualifications on what uses of irony are compatible with Socrates' moral commitments, I do not think it follows that, as a result, there is "no fundamental irony in Socrates." Rather, I think the discussions of Reeve and Brickhouse/Smith help us to see that if we want to continue to attribute a significant role to irony in arriving at an understanding of Socrates, then we require a richer notion of irony than commentators—both defenders and critics—have tended to make use of in the past.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In Vlastos' opinion, nothing about Socrates has "been less well understood than [his irony]" (*SIMP*, 13).

There are two attempts that stand out that seek to provide just such a richer notion: one, more recently offered, by Vlastos and the other, a bit distant from mainstream analytic philosophy, by Kierkegaard.<sup>11</sup> On both views, Socrates' strangeness or bizarreness is a central feature that they claim any successful picture of him cannot ignore. Both also take seriously what Vlastos terms "Socrates' paradoxes": for example, "Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and of teaching" (*SIMP*, 32). But there are significant differences between the two views as well.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Vlastos starts with the ordinary, rhetorical definition of irony and argues that the image of Socrates as a deceiver does not follow from such a definition, Kierkegaard locates irony in Socrates' whole manner of living or being (as opposed to his occasional use of certain ironic turns of phrase)<sup>13</sup> and argues that this feature of Socrates points up a radical sense in which Socrates' philosophical activities are directed solely towards himself and make no genuine contact with the people of Athens.<sup>14</sup> In relation to the simple conception of irony discussed above, we might say that Kierkegaard especially takes aim at the first objection, namely, that irony is used by Socrates primarily as a means for educating his interlocutors, while

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<sup>11</sup> Beginning with this paper, it is my hope to mark out more clearly to what extent this apparent "distance" is an artifact of Kierkegaard's heavy reliance on Hegelian and Hegelian-like terminology and to what extent this indicates a genuine foreignness (by modern lights) in his conception of philosophy itself. In my view, Kierkegaard has a much greater affinity with the ancients than is often realized; insofar as he remains foreign to contemporary conceptions of philosophy, so too do the ancients.

<sup>12</sup> In Nehamas' opinion, these two approaches are almost inversely related: "Kierkegaard [...] is not often mentioned in Gregory Vlastos' *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Nevertheless, the portrait Vlastos paints in this work seems at times to have been composed specifically in order to dispute Kierkegaard's picture"—see his "Voices of Silence: On Gregory Vlastos' Socrates," *Arion*, Third Series, 2.1 (Winter 1992):156-186, p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to Quintilian's definition cited by Reeve (see above), Quintilian also seems to allow for an account of irony that points to *the whole* of a person's life: "In the schematic form of irony the meaning is disguised, as the whole life of Socrates was colored by irony: he went about like an ignorant man wondering at the wisdom of others" (*Inst. Or.* 9.2.46, p. 224 in Little; quoted in Vlastos, "Socratic Irony," 29n).

<sup>14</sup> For one discussion of the distinction between irony conceived as a rhetorical device and irony conceived as a mode of being, see David Berger's "The Problem of 'Charged' Terms in General and, in Particular, Some Tempting Ways to Misread the Term 'Irony' in the Writings of Søren Kierkegaard."

Vlastos directs his attention at the second objection, namely, that irony is the opposite of what is serious and sincere. Before we turn to a more detailed examination of Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium*, I want first to sketch some of the key features of these two approaches. Ignoring the order of the objections raised above, I want to start with Vlastos' conception of irony and then consider Kierkegaard's alternative account.

Vlastos urges his account of Socratic irony in view of what he takes to be some serious limitations of more traditional accounts. Among other things, he claims—on the one hand—that the traditional view “emasculates Socrates' profession of ignorance by reducing it to a pedagogical feint” (*SIMP*, 5). On such a view, Socrates really is not ignorant at all. He knows the answers to the questions he poses to his interlocutors and merely pretends that he does not so that his interlocutors themselves will be forced to search for these answers and so be benefited philosophically. Similarly, Vlastos claims that the traditional view simply ignores or downplays Socrates' claim that he is not a teacher. On such a view, Socrates clearly is a teacher, albeit, one with some unusual teaching methods. Socratic ignorance and disavowal of teaching begin to look merely like idiosyncrasies of Socrates, not deep aspects of what make him and his philosophy profoundly strange. On the other hand (and most troublesome to Vlastos)—by not taking these professions of Socrates seriously, the ground is prepared for the image of Socrates as a deceiver, as someone who “cheats” at dialectic, and who “by ironies of sophistry tricks sophists into truth” (*SIMP*, 42).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Vlastos clearly has Kierkegaard, among others, in mind here. Whether or not Socrates “cheats” (see Vlastos' paper, “Does Socrates Cheat?” in *SIMP*) will depend, of course, on what you take him to be up to. I cannot address this issue here. Kierkegaard certainly is not troubled by the idea of Socrates using sophisms to defeat the sophists, but this is partly because he does not think Socrates is after a positive account (contra Vlastos). At the same time, Kierkegaard certainly would not accept the characterization of Socrates as a liar. So the issue is complicated.

Since Vlastos vehemently denies that this last image squares at all with the Socrates to be found in the writings of Plato, he attempts to block this move by distinguishing two senses of irony: (1) the original, primary sense, in which irony is a term of abuse used “to denote sly, intentionally deceptive speech or conduct” including outright lying (e.g., “Demosthenes (*I Phil.* 7) uses it of citizens who prevaricate to evade irksome civic duty”) (*SIMP*, 25, 23). And (2) a secondary sense, in which irony is simply “mockery without the least intention of deceit” (e.g., at *Grg.* 489d-e, when Socrates says to Callicles, “Teach me more gently, admirable man, so that I won’t run away from your school,” and Callicles replies, “You are mocking me”—here, Vlastos claims, “mockery is being protested without the slightest imputation of deceit”: “Callicles is protesting Socrates’ casting himself as a pupil of his—a transparent irony, since Callicles no doubt feels that, on the contrary, it is Socrates who has been playing the schoolmaster right along”) (*SIMP*, 27, 25-26). Vlastos claims that this secondary sense of irony stands to its primary sense as the pretending children do stands to the pretending that a con man does. While “pretending” in the primary sense means “to allege falsely,” there exists

a secondary use of the word, tangential to the first—a subsidiary use which is altogether innocent of intentional deceit, predicated on that “willing suspension of disbelief” by which we enter the world of imaginative fiction in art or play. This is the sense of “pretending” we could invoke to elucidate ironical diction (*SIMP*, 27).

In the case of irony, Vlastos claims that its secondary sense is the one that characterizes Socrates (contra those who inevitably invite us to apply the first sense by their depiction of Socrates as a deceiver). In fact, he argues that the secondary sense of irony later becomes its primary sense due in large part to the historical impact of Socrates and the impression his very way of life makes on people:

He changes the word [...] by creating something new for it to mean: a new form of life realized in himself which was the very incarnation of *eironeia* in that second of its contemporary uses, [...] as free from shamming as are honest games, though, unlike games, **serious** in its mockery (*cum gravitate salsum*), dead **earnest** in its playfulness (*severe ludens*), a previously unknown, unimagined type of personality, so arresting to his contemporaries and so memorable for ever after, that the time would come, centuries after his death, when educated people would hardly be able to think of *ironia* without its bringing Socrates to mind (*SIMP*, 29, bold emphases mine).<sup>16</sup>

With the image of Socrates as a deceiver, he thinks, blocked, Vlastos then proceeds to argue that Socratic irony be understood more specifically as a complicated instance of irony in this second sense. Unlike “simple” examples, where “what is said just isn’t what is meant: taken in its ordinary, commonly understood, sense the statement is simply false,” Socratic irony is termed by Vlastos “complex irony”:

In “complex” irony 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 (*SIMP*, 31).

It is only by characterizing Socratic irony as complex irony, according to Vlastos, that we will be able to do justice to the paradoxes of Socrates which Vlastos originally had set out to retain in all their bizarreness and philosophical depth. He claims that the notion of complex irony, for example, gives us a means for retaining the richness of Socrates’ profession of ignorance and his disavowal of teaching:

When he professes to have no knowledge he both does and does not mean what he says. He wants it to assure his hearers that in the moral domain there is not a single proposition he claims to know with certainty. But in another sense of “knowledge,” where the word refers to justified true belief—justifiable through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument—there are many propositions he does claim to know. So too, I would argue, Socrates’ parallel disavowal of teaching should be understood as a complex irony. In the conventional sense, where to “teach” is simply to transfer knowledge from a teacher’s to a learner’s mind, Socrates means what he says: that sort of teaching he does not do. But in the sense which *he* would give to “teaching”—engaging would-be learners in

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<sup>16</sup> Note Vlastos’ contention that irony—as used by Socrates—not only is not obviously in opposition to seriousness and earnestness, but is characterized by these very qualities.

elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back—in that sense of “teaching” Socrates would want to say that he *is* a teacher, the only true teacher; his dialogue with his fellows is meant to have, and does have, the effect of evoking and assisting their own effort at moral self-improvement (*SIMP*, 32).

On Vlastos’ view, some of the bizarreness of Socrates lies in the fact that the meanings of his words have this complex structure. But while this approach does allow him to hold on to a degree of Socrates’ ability to be puzzling, I am not sure how satisfying an account this is of irony. As Vlastos would have it, Socrates wears everything on his sleeve—things are simply more complicated than some have allowed—and speaks in riddles primarily as a means of engaging his interlocutors.<sup>17</sup>

While Kierkegaard rejects—like Vlastos—the ideas that irony is never serious and that it is always in opposition with the truth, he also takes issue with the educative aspect of irony (which is endorsed by Vlastos provided that this is understood as a complex irony). Further, Kierkegaard challenges the idea that the significance of irony for Socrates lies in his use of ironic turns of phrase at particular moments (such as the exchange between Socrates and Callicles cited by Vlastos that I noted above).<sup>18</sup> While it is certainly the case that irony *can* serve educative purposes and can be said to compete with or be in opposition to what is true, these aspects of irony do not exhaust its significance or the roles that it can play in human discourse and life. To stress these aspects of irony is to assume that irony must be directed at another person (or group of

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<sup>17</sup> Nehamas, for one, also questions whether Vlastos’ approach, whatever its other merits, does hold on to Socrates’ strangeness or retain a genuine irony—See his “What Did Socrates Teach?,” esp. 294-297; “Voices of Silence,” esp. 178-183.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *CI*, 45: “[Socrates] really would not deserve the name ironist if his distinguishing trait were merely the brilliant knack he had for speaking ironically just as others spoke gibberish.”

persons)<sup>19</sup> and that it is something to locate solely in isolated stretches of a person's discourse (in contrast to those stretches of discourse that are non-ironic).<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard argues that irony need not be directed at others and need not be something limited in scope to isolated portions of what a person says. For Kierkegaard, to construe irony primarily in terms of its ability to assist another is to treat it solely as an instrument or means to some independent end. While he does not rule out that irony can have some of the effects that Vlastos and others draw attention to, he denies that this is its primary significance in the case of Socrates. Rather, according to Kierkegaard, irony has a far more all-encompassing sense, is something that characterizes the entire life of Socrates. For Kierkegaard, much of what is central about Socrates' irony is the manner in which irony can be said to concern Socrates in relationship to himself<sup>21</sup>—independent of his relationships with others—and how irony can be said to color or characterize Socrates' life as a whole and his arguments as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

But at this point you may begin to wonder just what Kierkegaard has in mind when he mentions irony. What are its signs? How does he know it's there when he says it

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<sup>19</sup> Hence the puzzlement someone might feel if she thought that irony was being attributed to a person in a case where there was no obvious second party to which it could be directed. The court case is supposed to provide us with an intermediate case where there is a party (namely, the jury) that irony might be directed at, but where the conditions of communication are taken to be non-conducive to the effective use of irony. If we remove the requirement that irony must serve as a means of communication/education directed at another person, then the possibility emerges that irony may on some occasions simply be an end in itself, exercised by a person herself or himself with no further aim and no one but herself/himself in view.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Kraut: "We *must* take Socrates at his word at least some of the time if we are to have *any basis* for finding irony at other points" (178, italics mine). This need not be the case if truth and irony do not obviously conflict. If everything a person says is true and there could also be irony in what she says, then one will not be able to appeal to truth or sincerity as an obvious means of picking out non-ironic utterances or attitudes.

<sup>21</sup> When Kierkegaard speaks of Socrates' "personality" he has in mind an individual's standing in a certain relation to herself. Not everyone automatically will have a personality on this account; this is something that one must cultivate and maintain.

<sup>22</sup> The question can then be raised whether a person's whole life being colored by irony is incompatible with, e.g., her/his telling the truth in court. Insofar as they are not obviously incompatible, the generality of Reeve and Brickhouse/Smith's denial concerning the role of irony in Socrates will fail to go through.

is and so on? These admittedly are crucial questions, which when left unanswered often serve as grounds for (too) quickly dismissing Kierkegaard's entire approach.<sup>23</sup> While I will not be able to adequately address this topic here, I do want to point to an analogy of his in order at least to bring into view the basic shape of his position. If irony is something that characterizes a life, then it is not obviously in conflict with any isolated portion of it; hence, Kierkegaard rejects the view that irony can be found only in special turns of phrase. But where then is the irony if even Socrates' most straightforward and sincere remarks need not be understood as in competition with the claim that Socrates is in essence an ironist? To shed light on this question, Kierkegaard compares the relationship that Socrates' words have to his irony to the relationship that individual lines in a painting of Napoleon's grave have to a hidden image of the general himself:

There is a work that represents Napoleon's grave. Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. Once the eye has seen him, it goes on seeing him with an almost alarming necessity (*CI*, 19).

Kierkegaard suggests that a similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of Socrates. To the unsophisticated observer—someone who lacks eyes and ears for irony—nearly everything he says and does may seem perfectly straightforward and have nothing to do with irony. Irony, on an unsophisticated observer's view, must wear its name on its sleeve, must stand before the observer as do the trees in the painting. But to the sophisticated observer, there is more to Socrates than what simply lies open to view:

One hears his words in the same way one sees the trees; his words mean what they say, just as the trees are trees. There is not one single syllable that gives a

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Reeve, 5n: "Kierkegaard (*Concept of Irony*) is a famous but idiosyncratic and unreliable discussion of Socratic irony."



hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is most important. Just as in nature we find sites so remarkably arranged that those who stand closest to the one who is speaking cannot hear him and only those standing at a specific spot, often at some distance, can hear, so also with Socrates' rejoinders, if we only bear in mind that at this point to hear is identical with understanding, and not to hear with misunderstanding (*CI*, 19).

The comparison with the hidden picture of Napoleon suggests that Socrates' irony is a further dimension to him, something one may not feel the force of at first, but to which one can learn to attend. In places Kierkegaard characterizes Socrates' irony as a spiritual dimension of him: "a spiritual condition that was infinitely bottomless, invisible, and indivisible" (*CI*, 19).<sup>24</sup>

One significant feature of such an account is that Kierkegaard has a great deal to say about the fact that Plato wrote dialogues, and offers us a rich and subtle account of what is philosophically important about the artistic means Plato uses to represent Socrates in these writings. In particular, Kierkegaard argues that to really understand Socrates, to be able to position oneself in the right place as an observer, requires that the artistic representation capture Socrates' genuine presence and appropriately relate him to his words (as discussed above) and also to his lived situation. Hence the philosophical non-

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<sup>24</sup> Obviously, to find such a view at all compelling would require that we follow in detail what Kierkegaard has to say about a given dialogue, reading and re-reading both Plato and Kierkegaard a great deal—and this may take time and a greater degree of initially unearned sympathy on the part of the reader than we are sometimes trained to think appropriate in analytic philosophy circles. Cf. Kierkegaard's own recognition that what he wants to claim about the pervasiveness of irony in, e.g., the *Apology* is difficult to bring into view:

When it comes to an account of the irony diffused in the *Apology*, to which I now turn [having already illustrated a number of more straightforward "ironic situations," which are easier to locate given their characteristic marks of irony], I find myself in a bit of difficulty. I could try to chase together a host from every corner, but, to say nothing of the fact that the lengthy argumentation necessary for each point would bore the reader, I also believe that *that whole section, instead of coming like a soft whisper, as is the nature of irony, would come whistling*. To have to demonstrate irony through additional research at every single point would, of course, rob it of the surprise, the striking—in short, would enervate it. Irony requires strong contrast and would utterly vanish in such boring company as argumentation (*CI*, 90, italics mine).

trivialness of a great deal of what initially can appear to be mere literary trimmings in Plato's dialogues. According to Kierkegaard, insofar as a dialogue fails to artistically capture the depth of Socrates' relationship to his words and his setting, that dialogue will simply fail to present to us anything to which we can attend.<sup>25</sup>

Keeping Kierkegaard's general outlook on Socratic irony in mind, we are now in a better position to appreciate how Kierkegaard responds to the bizarreness in Socrates of which both he and Vlastos are keen to provide an account. There are three things worth noting: (1) the central value of Socrates' personality in Kierkegaard's account; (2) Kierkegaard's understanding of Socratic ignorance; and (3) Kierkegaard's understanding of the relationship between Socrates' method of asking questions and his disavowal of teaching. Socrates' personality occupies a unique position in Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates. Unlike most accounts, including Vlastos', on Kierkegaard's approach to Socrates the end of his activity as a philosopher is his personality, is the spiritual condition that Kierkegaard claims a life of irony embodies: "the contemplative repose that only personality gives" (*CI*, 28).<sup>26</sup> In addition to this being Socrates' own aim, Kierkegaard claims that his personality also occupies a central place in

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<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard claims that one way of distinguishing "later" Platonic dialogues from those that embody the spirit of Socrates is whether or not Socrates has this dramatic/spiritual tie to other features of a given dialogue. He claims that in the later dialogues, "the umbilical cord that joins the speech to the speaker is cut": "Anyone who knows anything about these dialogues will surely sense the utterly external relation the person speaking has to the subject, so much so that the name Socrates has practically become a *nomen appellativum* [common name] that merely designates the one speaking, the one expounding" (*CI*, 54).

<sup>26</sup> Contrast Vlastos who readily agrees that there is something valuable and deep about Socrates' personality, while seeming to think that this has nothing per se to do with his philosophy: "That Socrates' strangeness is the key to his personality has been occasionally noticed in the scholarly literature [...]. The present book is written with the conviction that it is also the key to his philosophy" (*SIMP*, 2n). Whereas it appears intelligible to Vlastos to distinguish between Socrates' personality and his philosophy (one could then imagine various cases: strangeness does/does not matter to an individual's personality, to her/his philosophy), such a distinction has no genuine application to Socrates on Kierkegaard's reading of him.

understanding Socrates' philosophical significance for others. What sort of impression does such a personality make when it is encountered?:

What Plato saw in Socrates was [...] an immediate conveyor of the divine [...]. The essential impact of such an original personality upon the race and its relation to the race fulfill themselves partly in a communication of life and spirit (when Christ breathes upon the disciples and declares: Receive the Holy Spirit), partly in a release of the individual's locked-up powers (when Christ says to the paralytic: Stand up and walk) or, more correctly, it fulfills itself through both simultaneously (*CI*, 29, I have removed Kierkegaard's italics).

Kierkegaard terms the first form of impact "positive," the second one "negative." The positive side of the impression Socrates makes resides in the irony that lies in the background and which gives to his life a "fullness," something that can hold our attention once we begin to notice it. The negative side concerns the effect Socrates can have on someone who remains "diffused in himself" and hence lacking in personality: such a person obtains a new "resilience" while Socrates—in the role of midwife—"protectively and watchfully allow[s] the individual reinvigorated in this way to come to himself." Kierkegaard thinks encountering a personality like that of Socrates can be simultaneously so substantial as to be life-changing while it remains deeply inexplicable to the person so moved: "the relation to a personality such as that is for the second person not merely inciting but epoch-making, is a spring of eternal life unexplainable to the individual himself." What is key, then, on this reading of Socrates is what lies in the man himself and how this is expressed in his manner of living. Socrates can be ignorant and really not be a teacher while nevertheless remaining a presence that another can encounter and sometimes serving as the occasion for another person's acquisition of greater self-knowledge and a more integrated personality.

Since, according to Kierkegaard, what is fundamental about Socrates' irony is how it characterizes Socrates' life and the personality exhibited in such a life, he ultimately takes a very different position than Vlastos on how we are to understand Socrates' ignorance. Recall that for Vlastos this ignorance was a complex irony, where it was true in that Socrates lacks certainty about moral knowledge while it was false in that he has a number of elenctically tested convictions. For Kierkegaard, an approach like Vlastos' still attributes too much positive intellectual or cognitive significance to Socrates' position—places too much emphasis, that is, on intellectual *results* rather than on the freedom embodied in a personality like Socrates'.<sup>27</sup> It can begin to sound as though Socrates really did know a whole lot. Kierkegaard thinks this is to mislocate where the philosophical significance of Socrates' ignorance lies. His ignorance has nothing to do, for example, with day to day empirical knowledge (of which he has a great deal), but rather with his intellectual position in relation to metaphysical speculation. Instead of denying one positive sense of knowledge while asserting another, Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, adopts a strictly negative position to the world of speculation:

Ignorance is a true philosophical position and at the same time is also completely negative. In other words, Socrates' ignorance was by no means an empirical ignorance; on the contrary, he was a very well informed person, was well read in the poets and philosophers, had much experience in life, and consequently was not ignorant in the empirical sense. In the philosophic sense, however, he was ignorant. He was ignorant of the ground of all being, the eternal, the divine—that is, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was. He was conscious of it, and yet he was not conscious of it, inasmuch as the only thing he could say about

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<sup>27</sup> Hence Socratic ignorance for Kierkegaard goes further than it does for Vlastos; part of the irony lies in its being a state he self-consciously maintains:

[Socrates] delights in knowing that he knows nothing, and he finds himself boundlessly disencumbered by it, whereas the others [the sophists] are slaving themselves to death for pennies. Socrates never understands ignorance speculatively but finds it so comfortable, so portable. [...] Indeed, the happier he is over this nothing—*not as result but as boundless freedom*—the more profound his irony (*CI*, 94n, italics mine).

it was that he did not know anything about it.<sup>28</sup> But this says in other words the same thing that we previously designated as follows: Socrates had the idea as boundary (*CI*, 169).

To say that the idea is a “boundary” for Socrates is to metaphorically draw a line between his life and the realm of speculation. On Kierkegaard’s view, Socrates actively resists and repels positive, speculative endeavors: this is what it means to say that his ignorance is negative. This does not mean that he never engages in intellectual activity, only that his end is never to remain in abstraction and achieve positive results but always—once he demarcates the realm of ideas—to turn back and in upon himself.<sup>29</sup>

By now it should have begun to emerge just how strenuously Kierkegaard would reject the view that irony primarily serves an educative function or purpose. Since he thinks Socrates’ life itself is grounded in irony, the presence of Socratic irony—even in the courtroom—will not in essence be dependent on whether or not there are other individuals in a given situation who may be benefited by his irony. First and foremost, Socrates lives his irony, with his eye on himself: he “enclosed himself within himself, egotistically confined himself within himself” (*CI*, 168-69). But this does not mean that

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<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard claims that when, in the *Apology*, Socrates argues that death is not something to be feared (29a), he is not automatically doing us a favor. It is only insofar as a person can sustain herself/himself by the irony in such a view that s/he will find any relief in what Socrates says: “As [Socrates] emancipates people from the fear of death, in recompense he gives them the alarming idea of an unavoidable something about which nothing whatever is known, and, to find repose in that, one certainly must be habituated to being built up by the quietude inherent in nothing” (*CI*, 82).

<sup>29</sup> If someone insisted on identifying philosophy with speculative metaphysics, then s/he might feel compelled to deny that Socrates was a philosopher. He can begin to look like a proto-philosopher, someone who points the way to philosophy but who never quite gets there himself. Cf. *CI*, 217:

[Socrates] set the ship of speculation afloat. [...] He himself, however, does not go on board but only prepares the ship for embarkation. He himself still belongs to an older formation, and yet a new one begins with him.

In the *Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard does seem, in places, to think of Socrates in these terms, as a unique historical figure in the development of philosophy’s Hegelian dialectic. In his later writings, he distances himself from such a view. He comes to think that there is something deeply philosophical (or ethical in his terms) about Socrates’ conscious decision to forgo speculative metaphysics.

Socrates has no impact on others. However, unlike Vlastos, Kierkegaard again interprets this role in a largely negative sense. When Socrates claims he is not a teacher, Kierkegaard takes him to mean what he says. He is in rough agreement with Vlastos' picture of Socrates as a teacher who assists others to discover their own ignorance, while he parts ways with him when it comes to the idea that Socrates himself is genuinely seeking a positive account.<sup>30</sup> According to Kierkegaard, there are two distinct reasons why someone might engage in a method of questioning, one speculative, the other ironic:

[T]he intention in asking questions can be twofold. That is, one can ask with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness, and hence the more one asks, the deeper and more significant becomes the answer; or one can ask without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind. [...] The first is the *speculative* method; the second the *ironic*. Socrates in particular practiced the latter method (*CI*, 36).

If someone encounters Socrates and she thinks she is wise when she is not, then there is a good chance that his method may help her to realize this about herself (cf. *Ap.* 21c-d). Equally, when Socrates does battle with the sophists, they are not, in general, after the same things. The sophists are simply highly influential (and so dangerous) examples of people who think they know what they do not know and they seek influence and power in Athenian society. Socrates, alternatively, continues to play a negative role in these encounters as well:

When the sophists, in good company, had befogged themselves in their own eloquence, it was Socrates' joy to introduce, in the most polite and modest way of the world, a slight draft that in a short time expelled all these poetic vapors (*CI*, 36-37).

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<sup>30</sup> To substantiate this aspect of Kierkegaard's view of Socrates is beyond what I can address in this paper, though I do think some of Kierkegaard's readings of individual dialogues are some of the best we have.

Besides this negative, sometimes destructive, role of Socrates' irony, the only other thing you might gain from Socrates, on Kierkegaard's view, is an impression of his personality. This doesn't give you anything, however, since it is only insofar as you cultivate your own personality that you will have a personality. So Socrates really does not set about positively transmitting anything to others. If he is to be called a teacher, it is only in the negative sense in which his irony can have an impact on others.

With these admittedly underdeveloped sketches of Vlastos' and Kierkegaard's conceptions of irony in place, we are now in a better position to consider whether or not they can serve as valuable resources for us when we examine in more detail individual passages in Plato's dialogues. As part of his argument to connect Socrates with the second sense of irony (mockery without intent to deceive), Vlastos argues that Alcibiades' discussion of irony in Plato's *Symposium* is of central importance and, as a result, provides a good testing ground for competing accounts of Socratic irony. With this in mind, in the next section I provide an overview of some of the main moments in Alcibiades' speech before then turning to how Vlastos and Kierkegaard approach this text.

### III. Alcibiades' Speech (*Symposium*, 212c-223b)

In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony.<sup>31</sup>  
—*Symposium*, 216e

In the *Symposium* Alcibiades offers to “praise” Socrates instead of the god or spirit called “Love” (who has been the subject of the dialogue’s other speeches of praise). What then follows is one of the richest and most detailed portraits we have of Socrates, and one of the few places in Plato’s body of writing that explicitly addresses the question of Socrates’ irony.<sup>32</sup> But we cannot simply read off an interpretation from what Alcibiades reports here. How we understand what is said is complicated by the fact that Alcibiades is admittedly quite drunk and not necessarily the most reliable or philosophically astute person; at the same time, Alcibiades does promise to tell the truth and urges Socrates to interrupt and correct him if he says anything false:

Here’s what you can do: if I say anything that’s not true, you can just interrupt, if you want, and correct me; at worst, there’ll be mistakes in my speech, not lies.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Vlastos’ more literal translation: “He spends his whole life *eironeuomenos* and jesting with people” (*SIMP*, 33).

<sup>32</sup> See *Smp.* 216d-219e, especially 216d-217b and 218c-219a. Hereafter, references are to *Symposium* unless otherwise noted.



But you can't hold it against me if I don't get everything in the right order—I'll say things as they come to mind (214e-215a).<sup>33</sup>

As Socrates does not interrupt Alcibiades during the body of his speech, we are left to conclude that “at worst” there are “mistakes” in Alcibiades' speech. (This is strengthened by the fact that Socrates has already shown his willingness to interrupt Alcibiades—at 214d—when Alcibiades says something to which Socrates audibly objects.)

Key to Alcibiades' entire picture of Socrates is his comparison of him to a statue of Silenus and to the satyr Marsyas:

I'll try to praise Socrates, my friends, but I'll have to use an image. And though he may think I am trying to make fun of him, I assure you my image is no joke: it aims at the truth. Look at him! Isn't he just like a statue of Silenus? You know the kind of statue I mean; you'll find them in any shop in town. It's a Silenus sitting, his flute or his pipes in his hands, and it's hollow. It's split right down the

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ap.* 17c: “From me you will hear the whole truth, [...] spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind.” This apparent allusion to Socrates' defense in the *Apology* further complicates what status we are to give to Alcibiades' speech. In the *Symposium* Socrates goes out of his way to distinguish sharply his own contribution from the previous speeches, maintaining a distinction between good and bad oratory similar to what can be found in the *Gorgias* and the *Apology*:

[Agathon's] speech reminded me of Gorgias, so that I actually experienced what Homer describes: I was afraid that Agathon would end by sending the Gorgian head, awesome at speaking in a speech, against my speech, and this would turn me to stone by striking me dumb. Then I realized how ridiculous I'd been to agree to join with you in praising Love and to say that I was a master of the art of love, when I knew nothing whatever of this business, of how anything whatever ought to be praised. In my foolishness, I thought you should tell the truth about whatever you praise, that this should be your basis, and that from this a speaker should select the most beautiful truths and arrange them most suitably. [...] But now it appears that this is not what it is to praise anything whatever; rather, it is to apply to the object the grandest and the most beautiful qualities, whether he actually has them or not. And if they are false, that is no objection; for the proposal, apparently, was that everyone here make the rest of us think he is praising Love—and not that he actually praise him. I think that is why you stir up every word and apply it to Love; your description of him and his gifts is designed to make him look better and more beautiful than anything else—to ignorant listeners, plainly, for of course he wouldn't look that way to those who knew. And your praise did seem beautiful and respectful. [...] I'm not giving another eulogy using that method, not at all—I wouldn't be *able* to do it!—but, if you wish, I'd like to tell the truth my way. I want to avoid *any* comparison with your speeches, so as not to give you a reason to laugh at me (198c-199b, italics mine; cf. *Ap.* 17-18a; *Grg.* 503a-b).

Yet some of what Alcibiades says is usually taken to be quite confused. Because his speech follows Socrates' break with the methods of bad oratory and Alcibiades himself appears to echo Socrates' commitment to speaking the truth, I think we are invited by Plato to give his speech more weight than (at least) the speeches that precede Socrates. This means that we may want to take more seriously some of what Alcibiades says, both about Socrates and philosophy, than some commentators have been willing to admit. E.g., see the relevant passages in R. E. Allen's notes to his translation of Plato's *Symposium*.

middle, and inside it's full of tiny statues of the gods. Look again! Isn't he also just like the satyr Marsyas?

Nobody, not even you, Socrates, can deny that you *look* like them. But the resemblance goes beyond appearance (215a-b).

Alcibiades justifies these comparisons towards the end of his speech by claiming that Socrates has no human counterpart, that there is no human being who sheds any light on Socrates' bizarre and unique nature:

You could say many other marvelous things in praise of Socrates. Perhaps he shares some of his specific accomplishments with others. But, as a whole, he is unique; he is like no one else in the past and no one in the present—this is by far the most amazing thing about him. For we might be able to form an idea of what Achilles was like by comparing him to Brasidas or some other great warrior, or we might compare Pericles with Nestor or Antenor or one of the other great orators. There is a parallel for everyone—everyone else, that is. But this man here is so bizarre, his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you'll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who's even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs (221c-d).

It is worth noting that Alcibiades seems to make these two comparisons in order to emphasize two different aspects of Socrates. In the case of Marsyas, Socrates supposedly has an ability akin to Marsyas' ability to “possess” and “transport” anyone who listens to his melodies:<sup>34</sup>

Whether they are played by the greatest flautist or the meanest flute-girl, his melodies have in themselves the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries.<sup>35</sup> That's because his melodies are themselves divine (215c).

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<sup>34</sup> It is this aspect of Socrates that apparently guides a great deal of thinking about Socratic irony. And there is surely something right about attending to these features of Socrates, as Alcibiades' testimony suggests. But that this is a one-sided view of him becomes clearer as we turn to the significance of Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates to a Silenus statue.

<sup>35</sup> In the case of Socrates (perhaps somewhat unfairly to Xenophon), Plato and Xenophon might be said to correspond, respectively, to “the greatest flautist” and “the meanest flute-girl”: “Let anyone—man, woman, or child—listen to you [Socrates] *or even to a poor account of what you say*—and we all transported, completely possessed” (215d, italics mine).

The difference, however, is that while Marsyas needs “instruments to cast his spells,” Socrates does “exactly what [Marsyas] does, but with words alone” (215c-d). After making this qualification, Alcibiades then proceeds to describe in detail his own past encounters with the power of Socrates’ words. He claims that when he listens to Socrates’ voice, he feels compelled to question the significance of his life and feels, for him, the rare feeling of shame:

The moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself; my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me [cf. *Ion*, 533e ff.; *Cri.* 54d]—and, let me tell you, I am not alone. I have heard Pericles and many other great orators, and I have admired their speeches. But nothing like this ever happened to me: they never upset me so deeply that my very own soul started protesting that my life—*my* life!—was no better than the most miserable slave’s. [...] [H]e makes it seem that my life isn’t worth living! [...] He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention (215e-216a).

Socrates is the only man in the world who has made me feel shame. [...] That’s the effect of this satyr’s music—on me and many others (216b-c).

After this self-confession regarding the power that Socrates’ “music” has on him, Alcibiades promises to describe more generally just how “extraordinary” Socrates’ powers are: “Let me tell you about them, because, you can be sure of it, none of you really understands him. [...] I’m going to show you what he really is” (216c-d). It is at this point in his speech that Alcibiades returns to his comparison of Socrates with a Silenus statue. The contrast between the outer, hollow shell of the statue and what lies hidden within it is now developed and applied by Alcibiades to Socrates:

He’s crazy about beautiful boys; he constantly follows them around in a perpetual daze. Also, he likes to say he’s ignorant and knows nothing. Isn’t this just like Silenus? Of course it is! And *all this is just on the surface, like the outsides of those statues of Silenus*. I wonder, my fellow drinkers, if you have any idea *what a sober and temperate man he proves to be once you have looked inside*. Believe me, it

couldn't matter less to him whether a boy is beautiful. You can't imagine how little he cares whether a person is beautiful, or rich, or famous in any other way that most people admire. He considers all these possessions beneath contempt, and that's exactly how he considers all of us as well (216d-e, italics mine).

Here, Alcibiades claims that Socrates' well-known fascination with young, attractive boys and his infamous claims of ignorance merely represent the shell or mask of Socrates. In such a state, he can appear to be attracted to the very qualities most people are drawn to in others—their beauty, wealth, or fame. Yet, according to Alcibiades, Socrates genuinely does not care for these things, nor for that matter for the people he is “constantly follow[ing] around in a perpetual daze.”

But if this is true, what are we to make of the fact that Socrates is known to be such a dazed and incessant follower? It is here that Alcibiades appeals to Socrates' irony: “In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony” (216e). It is important to stress here that Alcibiades locates Socrates' irony in his public life: irony is said generally to characterize how he interacts with people in all but the most private moments.<sup>36</sup> It is only when a person “beholds” what Socrates is like when he is “really serious” that his sobriety and temperance become manifest:

I don't know if any of you have seen him when he's really serious. But once I caught him when he was open like Silenus' statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures he keeps hidden within: they were godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me (216e-217a).<sup>37</sup>

Alcibiades' claims about what Socrates is like when he is serious are presented to his audience as though they were the products of a rare and unusual discovery. Note that he says

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<sup>36</sup> This sense of public would presumably include how Socrates carries on in the marketplace as well as arguably how he behaves in court.

<sup>37</sup> There is something potentially suspect, however, about Alcibiades' talk of encountering Socrates “when he was open like Silenus' statues”—For more on this see my discussion of Kierkegaard below; also see Kierkegaard, *CI*, 49-51.

that it is only “once” that he “caught him when he was open like Silenus’ statues.” Recall also that he prefaces his further remarks about Socrates’ “extraordinary powers” by claiming that “none” of his audience “really understands” Socrates. Alcibiades’ supposed understanding of Socrates, then, is presented as privileged knowledge, something only a few individuals presently know and—further—something that only some of those present in his audience are entitled to know:<sup>38</sup>

You know what people say about snakebite—that you’ll only talk about it with your fellow victims: only they will understand the pain and forgive you for all the things it made you do. Well, something much more painful than a snake has bitten me in my most sensitive part—I mean my heart, or my soul, or whatever you want to call it, which has been struck and bitten by philosophy, whose grip on young and eager souls is much more vicious than a viper’s and makes them do the most amazing things. Now, all you people here, Phaedrus, Agathon, Eryximachus, Pausanias, Aristodemus, Aristophanes—I need not mention Socrates himself—and all the rest, have all shared in the madness, the Bacchic frenzy of philosophy [cf. *Phd.* 69d]. And that’s why you will hear the rest of my story; you will understand and forgive both what I did then and what I say now. As for the house slaves and for anyone else who is not an initiate, my story’s not for you: block your ears! (217e-218c)

Whatever our final judgment of Alcibiades’ account, it is worth keeping in mind his sense that so few have understood Socrates. Unless we are prepared to discount his approach as unnecessarily full of obfuscation, there will remain a significant gap between Alcibiades’ sense that much lies behind the “surface” of Socrates and those commentators who seem set

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<sup>38</sup> This curious feature of how Alcibiades describes things hints at a further feature of irony, namely, an esoteric aspect of irony where irony rests on the differences that characterize how two groups (“insiders” and “outsiders”) stand to a person or what s/he says: only the privileged group understands a person ironically while everyone outside this group takes her/him non-ironically. It is worth noting that this is surely one way in which a person might speak ironically in a courtroom without having any intention whatsoever of engaging his immediate audience. He may deem them non-members of his exclusive group (and such a group might even conceivably consist of just one member—a thought Kierkegaard develops); in Socrates’ case, I think a version of this aspect of irony can be said to be in play. However, in his case the exclusiveness in question has less to do with one’s social rank or public avowal of one’s commitment to philosophy or any other social means of separating off an exclusive group, and more to do with whether or not you allow yourself to be genuinely moved by the irony. Insofar as a member of the jury responds to irony of this sort, he becomes one of Socrates’ intended recipients. (Cf. Cavell on philosophy’s not being esoteric by way of intellectual difficulty or some such thing, but rather by whether or not an individual ceases her/his evasion of philosophy’s call.)

on offering us a de-ironized portrait of Socrates, one where what we find on the surface not only suffices but positively reveals all that makes him so morally exemplary.

To substantiate his claim that the surface/hidden structure of a Silenus statue ought to guide our understanding of Socrates, Alcibiades offers a more detailed description of the occasion during which he supposedly had a “glimpse” of Socrates’ true nature. Just as, according to him, most people do not understand Socrates, Alcibiades admits that initially he misunderstood the significance of his interactions with Socrates:

What I thought at the time was that what he really wanted was *me*, and that seemed to me the luckiest coincidence: all I had to do was to let him have his way with me, and he would teach me everything he knew—believe me, I had a lot of confidence in my looks (217a).

Upon finding himself alone with Socrates and thinking that Socrates was romantically interested in him, Alcibiades expects him to use the appropriate phrases of courtship—to say “whatever it is that lovers say when they find themselves alone”—but Socrates does not deliver. Instead, “Socrates had his usual sort of conversation with [him].” Inviting Socrates to exercise with him, Alcibiades is “sure that this would lead to something,” but admits to his audience, “that [he] got nowhere.” Finally, out of desperation, Alcibiades begins courting Socrates, behaving “as if [*he*] were [Socrates’] lover and [Socrates his] young prey!”

In this vein, Alcibiades invites Socrates to dinner and—by starting a philosophical conversation late in the evening—manages to get him to stay the night. It is then that he explicitly reveals to Socrates his hopes, with the expectation that these will coincide nicely with what he imagines are Socrates’ own desires:

The lights were out; the slaves had left; the time was right, I thought, to come to the point and tell him freely what I had in mind. [...] “I think,” I said, “you’re the only worthy lover I have ever had—and yet, look how shy you are with me! Well, here’s

how I look at it. It would be really stupid not to give you anything you want: you can have me, my belongings, anything my friends might have. Nothing is more important to me than becoming the best man I can be, and no one can help me more than you to reach that aim. With a man like you, in fact, I'd be much more ashamed of what wise people would say if I did *not* take you as my lover, than I would of what all the others, in their foolishness, would say if I did” (218c-d).<sup>39</sup>

But Socrates does not respond as Alcibiades expects. Instead, Alcibiades claims that

Socrates' answer exhibits the very irony that, according to Alcibiades, is so characteristic of

him:

He heard me out, and then he said in that absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his: “Dear Alcibiades, if you are right in what you say about me, you are already more accomplished than you think. If I really have in me the power to make you a better man, then you can see in me a beauty that is really beyond description and makes your own remarkable good looks pale in comparison. But, then, is this a fair exchange that you propose? You seem to me to want more than your proper share: you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, ‘gold in exchange for bronze.’<sup>40</sup> Still, my boy, you should think twice, because you could be wrong, and I may be of no use to you” (218c-219a).

Alcibiades, however, is not dismayed by these words and even feels encouraged when Socrates agrees that “in future, [they will] consider things together” and “always do what seems best to the two of [them].”<sup>41</sup> Whatever Socrates means by his agreement that the two of them consider things together, however, he does not seem to have in mind at all what Alcibiades expects:

His words made me think that my own had finally hit their mark, that he was smitten by my arrows. I didn't give him a chance to say another word. I stood up immediately and placed my mantle over the light cloak which, though it was the middle of winter, was his only clothing. I slipped underneath the cloak and put my arms around this man—this utterly unnatural, this truly extraordinary man—and spent the whole night next to him. [...] But in spite of all my efforts, this hopelessly arrogant, this unbelievably insolent man—he turned me down! [...] Be sure of it

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<sup>39</sup> Alcibiades' concern with what people “would say” about him recalls a similar concern of Crito (Cf. *Cri.* 44c; 53e).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Cri.* 45 ff. (also 51d). Alcibiades' willingness to offer everything he has is reminiscent of Crito's similar offer of everything he has supposedly in “exchange” for Socrates' freedom; but the genuine cost of this exchange going through would appear to be Socrates' integrity.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Cri.* 39e.

[...] my night with Socrates went no further than if I had spend it with my own father or older brother! (219b-d)

Alcibiades is not used to such rejection and is “deeply humiliated.” Yet, at the same time, he says that he “couldn’t help admiring [Socrates’] natural character, his moderation, his fortitude.” He feels pulled in different directions by Socrates (and still does, even while he now tells the tale) and genuinely expresses a sort of erotic misery:

Here was a man whose strength and wisdom went beyond my wildest dreams! How could I bring myself to hate him? I couldn’t bear to lose his friendship. But how could I possibly win him over? [...] [T]he only trap by means of which I had thought I might capture him had already proved a dismal failure. I had no idea what to do, no purpose in life; ah, no one else has ever known the real meaning of slavery! (219d-e)

If we recall how he contrasted Socrates’ ignorance and desire for boys—what a person takes away from a surface impression of Socrates—with “how sober and temperate” he proves to be “once you have looked inside” (216d), then it becomes apparent that Alcibiades appears to think that the “godlike” figures hidden within Socrates have largely to do with the nature of Socrates’ character. Yet when he offers to exchange his body, wealth, etc. for Socrates’ wisdom, Alcibiades seems to have in mind something else—something he imagines that Socrates keep hidden but could reveal to him, something more like a secret teaching. Despite the fact that he has focussed almost entirely in his speech on Socrates’ character, Alcibiades does seem to hold on to such an idea: for he claims that just as the best way to understand Socrates is to liken him to Silenus, “the same goes for his ideas and arguments”:

Even his ideas and arguments are just like those hollow statues of Silenus. If you were to listen to his arguments, at first they’d strike you as totally ridiculous; they’re clothed in words as coarse as the hides worn by the most vulgar satyrs. He’s always going on about pack asses, or blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners; he’s always making the same tired old points in the same tired old words. If you are foolish, or simply unfamiliar with him, you’d find it impossible not to laugh at his arguments.



But if you see them when they open up like the statues, if you go behind their surface, you'll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They're truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside. They're of great—no, of the greatest—importance for anyone who wants to become a truly good man (221d-222a).

Thus, according to Alcibiades, there exists a perfect parallel between the Silenus-like structure of Socrates the man and the Silenus-like structure of his arguments.<sup>42</sup> In both cases, as Alcibiades would have it, the surface and the interior are radically at odds with one another. And, as we have seen, Alcibiades explicitly connects the applicability of the Silenus simile to Socrates with his claim that Socrates leads a life of irony. Part of why Socrates can be so perplexing and frustrating—witness Alcibiades' own anguish—lies in the complicated structure of Socrates' overall character. It is just this bizarreness that ultimately contributes, according to Alcibiades, to Socrates' repeatedly deceiving and misleading those of whom like Alcibiades come into contact with him:

Well, this is my praise of Socrates, though I haven't spared him my reproach, either; I told you how horribly he treated me—and not only me but also Charmides, Euthydemus, and many others. He has deceived us all: he presents himself as your lover, and, before you know it, you're in love with him yourself! (222b)

As we will see in the next section, Vlastos and Kierkegaard draw very different lessons from the many things raised in this speech. What they do agree on, however, is that it remains a central text for anyone seeking an adequate account of Socratic irony.

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<sup>42</sup> Note that Vlastos seems to follow Alcibiades in asserting there to be such a parallel while Kierkegaard challenges the idea of there being two distinct orders here.

#### IV. Vlastos and Kierkegaard on Socrates' Life of Irony

That Socrates' strangeness is the key to his personality has been occasionally noticed. [...] The present book is written with the conviction that it is also the key to his philosophy.  
—*Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 2n

Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony.  
—*Concept of Irony*, 6

The image of Socrates as Silenus-like surely stands out as one of Plato's greatest poetic achievements, perhaps second only to his image in the *Theaetetus* of Socrates as philosophic midwife.<sup>43</sup> It is an image that seeks to come to terms with Socrates' bizarreness and which insists on his hidden moral depth and beauty.<sup>44</sup> But this is not an image that is welcomed by those who seek to de-ironize Socrates. The privacy and secretiveness, the suggestion that there is a fundamental lack of fit between Socrates' public presentation and what lies within him—these are features that Reeve and Brickhouse/Smith seek to disarm, either by denying their presence or by insisting that they are only superficial in relation to the substance of Socrates' philosophy and the nature of his courtroom defense.

Alternatively, Vlastos and Kierkegaard, each in his own way, try to take on this image of Socrates and to connect it with their respective accounts of Socratic irony. Vlastos is especially sensitive to the image since, on the face of it, it readily lends itself to those who would characterize Socrates as a deceiver. This comes to a head at 216e,

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<sup>43</sup> See Myles Burnyeat's "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 53-65.

<sup>44</sup> Nehamas claims that among Plato's dialogues it is especially in works like the *Meno*, *Gorgias*, and *Symposium* that Plato seeks to "endow Socrates with a depth which can explain his paradoxical life." It is his view that this is Plato's own attempt "to come to terms with Socrates' irony, to disarm it, and to claim Socrates as the first in a venerable tradition of moral teachers" ("What Did Socrates Teach?," 297; 295).

where Alcibiades claims of Socrates that “he spends his whole life *eironeuomenos* and jesting with people.” Vlastos notes that it is common for translators to render *eironeuomenos* here as “pretending,” leaving open whether this connotes deceptiveness or the innocent secondary sense of pretence often found in children. Vlastos argues that the larger context of the speech supports characterizing the passage in terms of his preferred, non-deceptive characterization of Socrates’ irony. In particular, he claims that when Alcibiades reports how Socrates replied to his proposal (218d), saying that Socrates replied “in that absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his,” the same ambiguity in meaning does not exist: “the context gives no foothold to the notion of pretence or deceit” (*SIMP*, 36).

On Vlastos’ account, the comparison of Socrates with a Silenus statue points only to someone whose life is carried on behind a mask, not to someone set on deceiving others:

This is the picture of a man who lives behind a mask—a mysterious, enigmatic figure, a man nobody knows. [...] To say that is not at all to imply that Socrates has been deceiving them: to be reserved and to be deceitful are not the same thing. All we can get from the simile is concealment, not deceit (*SIMP*, 37).

But what are the costs of accepting that Socrates engages even in concealment? While Vlastos’ account of complex irony goes some distance towards rebutting the idea that we must understand Socrates’ irony as something non-serious or deceitful, he still seems open to the worries raised about Socrates’ irony being largely educative. If it is part of his use of irony to conceal things, to “hold back” and to speak in complex ironies in order to spur on his interlocutors to greater self-discovery, then irony will not appear to be

suitable to the courtroom, and Vlastos will be forced to limit the role that irony plays in Socrates' life to but a portion of that life.<sup>45</sup>

In particular, Brickhouse and Smith's claim that irony is unsuited to the courtroom—because it can mislead (even if unintentionally)—since Socrates cannot follow up any possible misunderstandings by the jury with further questions squares fairly well with Vlastos' account of what actually underlies Alcibiades' miserable erotic condition. Alcibiades claims he is in this state because he has been deceived by Socrates (222b). Vlastos rejects this explanation since he denies that Socrates is a deceiver in any substantive sense. But, given his account of complex irony, Vlastos does admit that he must allow for the possibility of someone's being unintentionally deceived by Socrates, i.e., of a person like Alcibiades—given his own character flaws—to misinterpret Socrates' erotic intentions. But then this really, according to Vlastos, is a case not of Alcibiades being deceived by Socrates but by himself. While it may be true that the possibility for this self-deception is greatly increased by the manner in which Socrates interacts with him—never explicitly discouraging his false conception of their relationship, etc.—this does not make Socrates a deceiver, according to Vlastos, but merely someone who wants “Alcibiades to find out the truth for himself by himself” (*SIMP*, 42).

The fact remains, however, that Alcibiades claims that the effect Socrates has on him is not at all an uncommon one: “I told you how horribly he treated me—and not only me but also Charmides, Euthydemus, and many others. He has deceived us all” (222b; cf. 216c). When he compares his ailment to “snakebite” and says that he will only discuss

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<sup>45</sup> This might not be objectionable to Vlastos. I do not know what role, if any, he thinks irony plays in Socrates' defense.

these things with his “fellow victims,” those who “have shared in the madness, the Bacchic frenzy of philosophy,” his inclusion of Socrates in this list remains ambiguous: “I need not mention Socrates himself” (218a-b).<sup>46</sup> Alcibiades, in fact, invites his listeners to think of themselves as “jurors” (219c), here to listen to Alcibiades’ charges against Socrates and “to sit in judgment of Socrates’ amazing arrogance and pride.” So, at a minimum, the tendency to think of oneself as having been deceived by Socrates is not limited to Alcibiades. Nearly everyone who encounters Socrates has such experiences; this is a part of what it is to experience him in all his perplexing bizarreness.

Is it the case that Vlastos’ notion of complex irony, nevertheless, gives Socrates a justification for this pattern of erotic misery and torment? Nehamas, for one, has challenged this suggestion (“What Did Socrates Teach?,” 295). Vlastos justifies the possibility of this kind of self-deception on the ground that Socrates “does have [...] the effect of evoking and assisting [his interlocutors’] own effort at moral self-improvement” (*SIMP*, 32). But is this really the case? Isn’t one of the things that makes Socrates so puzzling and enigmatic (and may even have contributed to his being brought to trial) the parallel fact—along with his being called a deceiver—that people generally are *not* moved by Socrates’ arguments (cf. *Grg.* 513c) or obviously morally improved in his company?:

It is far from clear that Socrates’ dialogue with his fellows, as depicted in Plato’s early works, “does have” the beneficial effect Vlastos so confidently attributes to

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<sup>46</sup> According to Vlastos, *any* suggestion of Bacchic frenzy, madness, or passion is a deeply unSocratic view (but cf. *Phd.* 69d). On his view, Socratic *eros* “is even-keeled, light-hearted, jocular, cheerfully and obstinately sane” (*SIMP*, 39). He claims Kierkegaard, for example, misunderstands its nature when his “romantic fancy reads ‘passionate turmoil into it’” (*SIMP*, 40n). But Kierkegaard’s position is more nuanced than this. He can accept Vlastos’ basic picture if this is attributed to Socrates (someone who can sustain himself on irony), but Socrates is the only one who manages to realize a life which answers to this ideal. Everyone else who comes into contact with him (excepting, perhaps, Plato) has an experience similar to Alcibiades.

it. Protagoras, Gorgias, Polus, Callicles, Hippias, Euthydemus, and Dionysiodorus remain unmoved. So do Euthyphro, Ion, and Meno. “Moral improvement” simply misdescribes the direction toward which Critias’ and Charmides’ lives tend.[...] As to his influence on Alcibiades, we have, apart from the testimony of history, the confession Plato himself attributes to Alcibiades in the *Symposium*: “I know perfectly well that I can’t prove him wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways: I cave in to my desire to please the crowd” (216b). [...] The fact remains that Socrates’ direct, immediate effect on his contemporaries’ morality was minimal (Nehamas, “What Did Socrates Teach?,” 295-96).

Of course, it is open to Vlastos to insist that despite Socrates’ apparently low rate of success, he nevertheless was engaged in such an enterprise and that his activity remained through and through a noble one. To characterize Socrates’ irony as essentially educative but in practice a miserable failure, however, almost requires Vlastos to agree that perhaps there is something to the suspicions of those who brought him to trial.<sup>47</sup> While it may be the case that there is no intent on Socrates’ part to engage in wrong-doing—just as according to Vlastos Socrates does not intentionally deceive Alcibiades—it begins to become understandable why people would nevertheless not exactly welcome Socrates’ presence amongst them.

But we need not go this route if we can point to other reasons why Socrates ceaselessly and stubbornly turned and returned to irony throughout his life. As we have seen, on Kierkegaard’s view Socrates’ irony primarily has nothing to do with those who “enjoy spending considerable time in [his] company” (*Ap.* 33b). It is Socrates’ own life that is grounded in this activity of irony and it is thus in the first instance to himself that Socrates’ irony is directed, to “[his] own concerns” (*Ap.* 33a). If something like

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<sup>47</sup> And also recalls the tendency to be suspicious of irony in those cases where there is no obvious educative payoff. Just why does Socrates carry on in this way if those around him never amount to much? If his aim is moral reform, hadn’t he better jettison this clearly unreliable tool and seek out more appropriate and reputable means?

Kierkegaard's view can be maintained, what are we to make of Alcibiades' charges against Socrates? Further, if we reject those who stress the educative conception of irony (including Vlastos' account, which while more nuanced does not seem to differ in essence with those he accuses of "emasculating" the paradoxes), what are we to make of Socrates' bizarreness, how are we to account for his remaining for so many individuals deeply fascinating and captivating while also so puzzling and frustrating?

Kierkegaard takes the deceptive predicament that Alcibiades claims is so common among those who associate with Socrates to be good evidence for the pervasiveness of Socrates' irony:

That the love-relation that has come about between Socrates and Alcibiades was an intellectual relation scarcely needs mentioning. But if we ask what it was in Socrates that made such a relation not merely possible but inevitable (Alcibiades correctly observes that not only he but almost every one of Socrates' associates had this relation to him), I have no other answer than that it was Socrates' irony (*CI*, 48).

Unlike Vlastos, he rejects the view that the relationship Socrates has with his interlocutors is based on how he and a given individual stand in relation to some positive, metaphysical account. Vlastos claims the two of them are defined by their common search for such an account (*SIMP*, 37); simpler accounts of educative irony claim that Socrates is in the position of the knower, while his interlocutor is in the position of the receiver of knowledge. Kierkegaard denies that such a "third party"—the positive idea—plays any role in the relationship:

If [Alcibiades' and Socrates'] love-relation had involved a rich exchange of ideas, or a copious outpouring on the one side and a grateful receiving on the other, then they would, of course, have had the third in which they loved each other—namely, in the idea, and a relation such as that would never have given rise to such a passionate agitation (*CI*, 48).

But agitation is precisely the characteristic result of being in a relationship with Socrates. Alcibiades makes it clear that he is captivated by Socrates and finds it impossible to stay away from him—“like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die” (216a); at the same time, his “whole life has become one constant effort to escape from him” (216b). According to Kierkegaard, this simultaneous attraction and repulsion—“this passionate agitation”—is often just what characterizes someone’s infatuation with an ironist:

Precisely because it is the nature of irony never to unmask itself and also because a Protean change of masks is just as essential, the infatuated youth must inevitably experience torment.\* But just as there is something deterring about irony, it likewise has something extraordinarily seductive and fascinating. Its masquerading and mysteriousness, the telegraphic communication it prompts because an ironist always has to be understood at a distance, the infinite sympathy it presupposes, the fleeting but indescribable instant of understanding that is immediately superseded by the anxiety of misunderstanding—all this holds one prisoner in inextricable bonds. Inasmuch as the individual first feels liberated and broadened by the contact with the ironist when he opens himself up to this individual, the next moment he is in his power, and this is probably what Alcibiades means when he mentions how they have been deluded by Socrates in that he became the beloved instead of the lover (*CI*, 48-49).

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\* The ironist lifts the individual up and out of immediate existence. This is his liberating function, but thereafter he lets him float like Mohammed’s coffin, which, according to legend, floats between two magnets—the one attracting and the other repelling.

There is much to be said for such a picture, especially for its psychologically acute description of what it can be like to find yourself captivated by Socrates. Frequently there are moments where you can think you have finally grasped something deep and important in Socrates, only to have this certainty suddenly to fall away again into apprehension and uncertainty. It is hard to be sure what your relationship is to Socrates,



which is precisely what Kierkegaard takes to be a characteristic result of Socrates' irony.<sup>48</sup>

In Alcibiades' discussion of how Socrates resembles a Silenus statue, Kierkegaard claims to find further support for his account of Socratic irony and the central philosophical significance of Socrates' personality. After Alcibiades draws attention to what he calls the outer shell of Socrates—consisting in his false eroticism and ignorance—he contrasts with this what he says lies hidden within Socrates. Recall that he himself claims to have “once” caught Socrates “when he was open like Silenus' statues” and to have then “had a glimpse of the figures he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing” (216e-217a). Kierkegaard notes that on first hearing such a claim, “it is difficult to see what Alcibiades means, and it is not totally unreasonable to suppose that Alcibiades did not fully realize what he was saying about Socrates” (*CI*, 50). Clearly these “divine figures” are meant by Plato to recall for the reader the ideal Forms discussed by Diotima. But there is no good reason to suppose that they are what Alcibiades encounters. Kierkegaard suggests, in fact, that because Socrates' “proper sphere was discourse, dialogue” (which makes it “remarkable” to hear Alcibiades say that he “forgot” to mention how Socrates' ideas and arguments also resemble Sileni (cf. 221d)), Alcibiades' claim to have “beheld” these figures seems to go out of its way to emphasize that whatever he has in mind here, it is something other

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<sup>48</sup> Kierkegaard claims that it is Alcibiades' drunkenness, in fact, that enables him to speak with such clarity and with a degree of security about a subject that everyone else has stumbled over:

While the other speakers, like blindman's buffs, groped for the idea, the drunken Alcibiades grasps it with immediate certainty. Furthermore, it must be noted that Alcibiades' being intoxicated seems to suggest that only in an intensified immediacy is he secure in the love-relation that must have caused him in a sober state all the alarming and yet so sweet suspense of uncertainty (*CI*, 47).

than anything to do with the realm of positive, metaphysical ideas (*CI*, 50). Kierkegaard claims that Alcibiades' forgetfulness concerning Socratic discourse and his pride in having beheld the true Socrates strongly suggest that Alcibiades (and, by implication, Socrates' other interlocutors) is "primarily in love with Socrates' personality, his harmonious nature, which nevertheless fulfilled itself in a negative self-relation to the idea and an omphalopsychic staring at oneself."

But Alcibiades does claim that the Silenus simile also applies to Socrates' arguments: "if you see them when they open up like the statues, if you go behind their surface, you'll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They're [...] bursting with figures of virtue inside" (222a). And Vlastos readily follows him here. In fact, the suggestion that the simile only applies to Socrates' personality probably would strike most contemporary philosophers as ludicrous, and certainly would seem to them to drain the image of *any* philosophical importance. Kierkegaard's account of Socratic irony, however, tries to make room for the intelligibility of just such a view. Before we conclude that this part of Alcibiades' speech lacks "mistakes" (cf. 215a), it is worth underlining how he introduces the topic (just as he is finishing his speech): "Come to think of it, I should have mentioned this much earlier" (221d; cf. 215a: "You can't hold it against me if I don't get everything in the right order"). This suggests that either his speech did not depend on his mentioning it, or his speech is even more deeply mistaken than we might have thought. In any event, it seems clear to me that up to this point no weight has been placed by Alcibiades on his ability to extend this simile to Socrates' arguments. As Kierkegaard suggests, "Alcibiades was primarily in love with Socrates' personality, his harmonious nature."

One textual reason for questioning whether Alcibiades himself is even clear about what he might mean when he extends the simile to Socrates' arguments is the fact that he doesn't actually illustrate how the simile is to apply in the second case. He simply asserts that it does apply here as well, and offers a very compelling characterization of the "surface" of Socrates' arguments (221e ff.). But is there a corresponding "inside" to them as well? Perhaps, though this may not be something the understanding of which we are to attribute to Alcibiades. In Kierkegaard's view,

If [the positive ethical content of Socrates' arguments] had been the dominant feature or at least the rather conspicuous feature in Socrates' discourses, then there is no explanation for the source of all the passionate agitation, all the demonic in [Alcibiades'] love, since one would rather have expected that his association with Socrates would have been instrumental in developing in him the incorruptible manners and bearing of a serene spirit (*CI*, 51).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> In this way, Kierkegaard insists on the philosophical significance of this agitation, together with any serenity that someone like Vlastos might claim is characteristic of Socratic *eros*. It is interesting that the account offered by Diotima is something Alcibiades is not party to. Since most people agree that this is Plato's account—perhaps carried out in the spirit of the historical Socrates, but not something he ever argued or was committed to—we could take Plato to be suggesting that he alone was able to see what lies "behind" the surface of Socrates' arguments. That the dialogue ends with Alcibiades' account (and is something with which Socrates appears to be in basic agreement) may suggest that—excluding Plato—everyone else's understanding of Socrates—including the historical Socrates himself—is limited to discovering and so being moved by what lies inside Socrates the person, namely his personality, while never actually discovering what lies "inside" any of Socrates' arguments. Such a reading would fit what I take to be one of the main themes of Plato's legend of Socrates: that he was not understood by anyone in his age, and so not properly tested or examined either.

## V. Conclusion: Sketch of a Neo-Kierkegaardian Approach to Socrates

From me you will hear the *whole* truth [...].  
—*Apology* 17c, italics mine

I began this paper by noting the urge in a number of recent commentators to de-ironize Socrates—to deny to irony any significant role in our understanding of him and his philosophy. Both Vlastos and Kierkegaard resist this picture. In my view, Kierkegaard's account does a better job and gives us the materials for embarking on yet another attempt to wrestle with Socrates' bizarreness (Cf. *SIMP*, 1). This paper sets out some of the territory that such an attempt might try to cover. What I have not discussed much at all, though, is Kierkegaard's belief that Socrates occupied a unique historical position in relation to his age. While a discussion of this topic remains, for the most part, beyond the scope of this paper, it is important for coming to terms with the agitation that seems to characterize everyone's relation to Socrates' irony—except Socrates' own relation. Why is it that Socrates is such a serene spirit—as Vlastos nicely argues—while nearly everyone else who comes into contact with him goes away agitated? Kierkegaard's answer to this question is based on his understanding of Socrates' unique world historical position:

Early Greek culture had outlived itself, a new principle had to emerge, but before it could appear in its truth, all the prolific weeds of misunderstanding's pernicious anticipations had to be plowed under, destroyed down to the deepest roots. The new principle must contend; world history needs an *accoucheur* [obstetrician]. Socrates fills this place. [...] In the *Apology*, he has himself interpreted this with the correct irony when he says that he is like a gift of the gods, and more specifically defines himself as a gadfly, which the Greek state, like a great and noble but lazy horse, needed. [...] In Socrates, one process ends and with him a new one begins. He is the last classical figure, but he consumes this sterling quality and natural fullness of his in the divine service by which he destroys classicism. But his own classicism makes it possible for him to sustain the irony (*CI*, 211-212; trans. modified).

The freedom he personally enjoyed in ironic satisfaction the others could not enjoy, and thus it developed in them a longing and a yearning. Therefore, while his own position rounds itself off in itself, this position when absorbed into the consciousness of others becomes only the condition for a new position. The reason Socrates could be satisfied in this ignorance was that he had no deeper speculative craving. Instead of speculatively setting this negativity to rest, he set it far more to rest in the eternal unrest in which he repeated the same process with each single individual. In all this, however, that which makes him into a personality is precisely irony (*CI*, 176).

For Plato, too, Socrates occupies a unique position in relation to his age. One way of understanding a great portion of the Platonic corpus is to view it as a dramatization of the many ways in which Socrates and his age do not come into fundamental contact with one another (which is surely a sign of the presence of irony), even while institutions and various individuals make repeated attempts to genuinely put Socrates on trial. It is worth keeping in mind, for example, that throughout Alcibiades' speech, Alcibiades repeatedly refers to his audience as a "jury," saying that they are "here to sit in judgment of Socrates' amazing arrogance and pride" (219c). A great deal of light is shed on Plato's account of the Socratic legend if we attend to this theme in his interactions with the various characters in the different dialogues. In some cases we hear the prosecution, in others Socrates' defense of himself, or we hear parts of both. For example, in the *Apology* Socrates defends himself in a trial by the state; in the *Crito* he is tried by a friend and offers a defense; in the *Symposium*, he is tried by a lover—Diotima's speech might be understood as a partial defense together with Alcibiades' own account of who Socrates is; in the *Phaedo* he is tried by philosophers and offers a defense (cf. *Phd.* 63b-69e); and in the *Gorgias* he is first tried by the sophists and then finally even by himself. Yet do the attacks and defenses make genuine contact with each other? If Socrates genuinely lives a life of irony, then the answer may be no. Socrates may be a radically isolated figure—

standing entirely on his own with no one in his age capable of understanding him or truly testing him.<sup>50</sup> And it is Kierkegaard's account of Socratic irony that gives us some of the materials we need to substantiate such a reading of Socrates.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> One of the merits of such an approach to Socrates lies in its ability to explain the significance of Socrates' monologue at the end of the *Gorgias*. On this approach, Socrates' monologue underlines the fact that no one in Socrates' time other than Socrates himself (and, by implication, Plato) genuinely understood him or was capable of truly testing him. After having vanquished the sophists and revealing to us that he stands apart from the state and his friends and lovers, Socrates is left only with himself. But this is not a dark result; this is what follows from Socrates' being *atopos*. My understanding of these passages in the *Gorgias* owes a lot to discussions I have had with Doug Patterson. While we are in agreement that this is a very significant moment within the Platonic corpus, I am not sure that we agree at all about just what this moment signifies or what follows from it with regard to Socrates' philosophical significance.

<sup>51</sup> My thanks to the Kierkegaard and Plato reading group (Alice Crary and Katarina Gakiopoulou) and to the more general philosophical influence of Jim Conant. I have also benefited from conversations with Bridget Clarke, Heda Segvic, Nick Church, and Doug Patterson.

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