
II. ASPIRATION CORNER

Socrates and Tragedy in respect to irony

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to provide a genealogical account of philosophical irony. To do that we point to possible connections between the first philosophical usage of irony in Socrates and tragic irony as exemplified in dramatic poetry. In doing so, we examine these practices as performances and we point to a possible prototypical irony based on the cult of Dionysus. We also consider Nietzsche's critique of Socrates concerning Greek tragedy, but we argue that instead of taking Socrates as the destroyer of tragedy we might view him as the philosopher that tried to salvage an ironic and more traditional view of life, in a time of a rapid advancement of reason.

Keywords: Philosophical irony, Socrates, Nietzsche, Tragedy, Dionysus

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to provide a way of thinking Socratic irony in its contemporary context, namely that of tragedy, and to examine the relationship, if any, between Socratic and tragic irony. Our claim is that such a connection is existent and indeed points to another notion of tragic irony, one that we could call *ur-ironie* or prototypical irony, that can be found in the Dionysian rituals and the myths of the God; this irony was represented as tragic irony by the tragedians and, in an epoch when reason appeared to make bold claims as an exegetical power, Socrates represented the same irony through his everyday philosophical, oral encounters in the streets of Athens. In this respect the article presents a genealogy of philosophical irony that ultimately rests in a prototypical irony of religious, Dionysian myth.

The genealogical method which we will employ in our survey of the philosophical concept of irony has an obvious diachronical part, since we need to move through time, speaking about potential predecessors of the philosophical version of irony and carve out a plausible historical explanation of the concept which will also highlight its philoso-

phical importance. But it also has, in contrast to the commonsensical view of genealogy as a historical exercise¹, a synchronic part: a part that will highlight the reasons the concept was employed at the time and the fashion in which it was employed. Nevertheless, in the present article we will exclusively focus on the diachronical part.

In discussing the philosophical use of irony one cannot argue against Socrates and his method as the obvious starting point. All the ancient sources, both Greek and Latin, agree on this point² and we shall also be taking Socrates as the initiator of the use of irony in philosophy. But who is Socrates? There is a classic problem about the historical figure of Socrates, who did not leave us any written work and can only be disentangled with difficulty, if at all, from the writers that made him into a literary persona, above all Plato. Recent scholarship tends to distinguish between platonic dialogues of the earlier, middle and later period, with the first ones to be taken as exemplifying Socrates' original ideas while the two latter periods are using Socrates as a mouthpiece for Plato's own ideas.³

Our method has nothing to offer to this longstanding debate about historical Socrates and perhaps has few things to gain as well, so we will generally follow Nehamas' view that "Socrates' ironic gaze is turned

¹ Genealogy is taken in its Foucauldian and Nietzschean formulation as being opposed to origin and rather tracing the various ramifications and even non-events in the history of a concept. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History". In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

² In general, it is considered that we have four reliable ancient sources about Socrates as a historical figure, namely Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle and Aristophanes (W.K.C. Guthrie, *Socrates*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp 13-39). Vlastos (Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Nehamas (Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) also refer to Cicero and Quintillian as two Latin authors that have ascribed the notion of "ironia" to the traditional western perception of Socrates.

³ Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher*, pp. 46-47. For the opposite view see Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The philosophical use of a literary form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

toward [...] his interpreters as well⁴ and will generally take the interpretations offered of his irony as milestones for this metaphilosophical concept. But in this article we will try to look to the times before Socrates and will try to find affinities of his philosophical irony with other types of irony that might have existed before him. It is our hypothesis that such a device existed before in other forms of verbal and even non-verbal manifestations, from the cult of Dionysus through ancient drama and even to philosophers such as Heraclitus, to be unnoticed by Socrates who used it in his dialogic exchanges with others and who gave irony a distinctive philosophical flavor. Taking the threefold of tragedy, Socratic oral discussion, and platonic dialogue as performative acts, we will try to show that irony is exemplified in all three due to their construction and ultimately to their genealogy.

2. Irony of Socrates and Tragedy

We will start the discussion of the threefold of tragedy, Socratic oral discussions and platonic dialogues with the obvious remark that in all three we are interested in verbal irony and not the situational kind. That is, the irony is conveyed through mostly verbal means⁵. So in all three cases a hearer, or even an audience⁶, is needed: an audience that can understand, or be subjected to, irony. To clarify, what we call here a Socratic oral discussion is not the same as the literary genre of Socratic conversations (Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι) that Aristotle speaks about in his *Poetics*⁷. There he attests that there was a literary genre of this name that was brought together with tragedy and other literary forms, such as epic poetry, due to the fact that they all perform mimesis through language. But what we are interested in here is the oral substratum of all these Socratic conversations and also of the platonic dialogues. I think that we can safely assume that Socrates did hold oral discussions and that Plato, Xenophon and others, whose works are not saved at all or are just frag-

⁴ Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, p. 98.

⁵ Although, and especially in the oral discussions Socrates held, irony can also be manifested with extralinguistic means as intonation, as is maintained by Grice.

⁶ Audience derives from the latin verb *Audire* = to listen, so it is not only to be understood as is commonly held today as a non-participatory body of persons.

⁷ W.K.C. Guthrie, *Socrates*, pp. 11-12.

mentary, used that material to advance both Socratic and private ends.

The common feature of all three parts of our threefold, then, is the existence of an audience, even if it is only an audience of one⁸. But irony can work even in this kind of setting since the interlocutor can be a friend and disciple of Socrates as in the *Phaedrus*, so he can, most of the time, perceive his teachers ironic tone, or a sophist like Hippias. Nevertheless all these cases came down to us through Plato. Nehamas has brilliantly shown how the Socratic irony of these dialogues can be used from Plato himself as an irony toward his own readers. Using as his example *Euthyphro*, another dialogue with only two interlocutors, he shows how the ironic stance of Socrates has not only Euthyphro as an aim and his hasty departure from the scene, but also the readers that too hastily read the dialogue and return back to their unexamined life⁹.

We shall not examine Plato and written irony here though¹⁰, so let us see how the audience functions in tragedy regarding tragic irony. Myth was the common ground of tragedies and, although there was also some degree of innovation, at the level of the fate of the tragic hero the audience already knew the ending¹¹. This knowledge provides the soil out of which irony can spring, because as the plot of the play advances, the hero, ignorant of the truth that both god and audience share, states further his own version of the unfolding events and so becomes more and more susceptible of committing hubris. It is interesting to note that the awakening of the participants in a tragedy to a certain truth of the matter at hand is partial: the audience knows beforehand (and the God in praise of whom the tragedy is performed is also part of the audience, the

⁸ In *Phaedrus*, for example, it is more than certain that the two interlocutors are alone, since they are in the countryside, away from the agora of Athens, where usually Socrates was to be found.

⁹ Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁰ The written form of irony is a special case that actually differentiates it from the other two, the Socratic dialogues and tragedy, due to its use of writing, although the typification of irony is preserved.

¹¹ Peter Burian, "Myth into muthos: the shaping of tragic plot". In *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), p. 186.

supreme theatres¹²) that which the chorus usually understands after and finally the other characters and the tragic hero. Again this is a schema that functions at the level of fate and can have variations within the specific plot, since the poets had the opportunity to differentiate and innovate. But for our current purposes the function of knowledge with respect to irony suffices.

Furthermore, there is still another factor of Greek tragedy that allows for another level of irony. This has to do with the satirical plays and although we are lacking the vast majority of these (the only full satirical play that has survived is *Cyclops* by Euripides) we do know that they were presented alongside the tragedies of a poet and that they had a fixed chorus of satyrs, which links them closer to Dionysus and his rituals since satyrs were members of the God's entourage. The satirical plays used the same myth as the tragedies and the audience knew that they had to anticipate another take on the events that were to be presented to them¹³. So how is irony exemplified through the satirical play? According to one theory:

Tragedy poses fundamental questions about the relations between mortals and gods, or it reflects on such serious issues as sacrifice, war, marriage and law. Satyric drama, by contrast, plays with culture first by distancing it and then reconstructing it through its antitypes, the satyrs. It does not seek to settle a controversy, nor to bring man face to face with his fate, or the gods. It plays in a different key, with the displacement, distortion and reversal of what constitutes the world and the culture of men; it reintroduces distance and reinserts Dionysos in the center of the Theatre¹⁴.

This passage by Lissaraggue (1990) is very important, since it suggests that satirical drama was the last reversal of the knowledge that the audience possessed, or thought that they possessed, about the events depicted before: a reversal that has to do with bringing back god into the

¹² P.E. Easterling, "A Show for Dionysus". In *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), p. 51, wherein it is stated that this role of the God suggests a certain degree of interactiveness between players and audience.

¹³ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

reigning position, so that he is the one that has the last say as far as it goes with knowledge. This is an interesting point of convergence with Socrates who thought that the Delphic maxim “Know thyself” points to knowledge of someone’s self-limitations¹⁵.

One of Socrates’ most well-known tenets is his disavowal of knowledge for himself, one position that Vlastos treats as a complex irony from his part. He cites the ‘Apology’, in particular the lines of 21B4-5; D5-6: “I am aware of being wise in nothing, great or small ... as in fact I have no knowledge, neither do I think I have any”¹⁶. Having pointed to at least 9 passages in the platonic dialogues where Socrates claims that he has some kind of knowledge and having dismissed the possibility that the tension between these and the disavowal of knowledge can be defused by assuming different kinds of knowledge in each case¹⁷, Vlastos refers to an even earlier passage of the Apology where Socrates claims knowledge is “human wisdom” and concludes that: “Socrates is avowing that “*human* wisdom”, which, he believes, may be claimed by a man determined to stay inside the limits of the “mortal thoughts” (θνητά φρονεῖν) which befit the human condition”¹⁸. This way of treating knowledge has striking similarities with the way knowledge is treated in Greek tragedy as we saw above. Moreover, Vlastos himself points out in the footnote that the formulation of “human wisdom” (κατ’ἄνθρωπον) that Socrates uses in the Apology is the same with the one Sophocles uses in Ajax¹⁹.

But Vlastos does not go all the way in making the analogy between tragedy and the Socratic disavowal of knowledge. On the contrary, he uses it to argue that the knowledge that Socrates has in mind and disavows is a kind of epistemic certainty that his elenctic method does not allow him to grasp²⁰. As for the domain of knowledge Socrates does claim to have a hold on, Vlastos says that it is only moral knowledge, and within this domain he has knowledge as a result of his elenchus,

¹⁵ Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, p. 107.

¹⁶ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 237.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 239.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 239. fn. 15

²⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

which means that the products of this method are always susceptible to falsity. He contrasts the ethical domain of Socrates with the ideas of the natural philosophers and the sophists that exceed human wisdom. Nehamas, on the other hand, argues that such a contrast is not convincing because philosophical knowledge of the kind Vlastos talks about did not exist during Socrates' time, but was a later development of Plato and Aristotle²¹. In contrast, Nehamas claims that Socrates checks his knowledge of virtue against the certain knowledge of the artisans and he finds himself lacking in the kind of certainty which would allow him to convey it to others. For Nehamas, Socrates was engaged in a lifelong elenchus concerning ἀρετῇ (virtue) and he was treated by Plato as the only person that, although lacking an epistemic certainty about virtue, nevertheless acted most virtually in all circumstances²².

Both thinkers, Vlastos and Nehamas, have contributed greatly to the fact that irony has again become central in studies of Socrates in recent years. Yet they both used irony to present a picture of Socrates either as a moral philosopher or as an artist of living. Although both of these interpretations contain many grains of truth, we need to examine Socratic irony in respect to its preceding dramatic form as exemplified in tragedy and Dionysiac cult and rituals. We first need to claim that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and his method of elenchus are both indispensable parts of irony: the disavowal is the fundamental thesis that allows irony to exist in the first place, not least because it prompts Socrates' interlocutors to present their own views and beliefs on a certain matter, and to construct their own system of belief that the Socratic elenchus will scrutinize and eventually take down. And, as Thrasymachus complains in the Republic²³, he would not give answers of his own but rather leave the elenchus unconcluded and leaving virtue undefined. Elenchus is an open-ended "truth seeking device which cannot yield certainty"²⁴ constantly pushing for new reconstructions of arguments and definitions. Of course, we would not want necessarily to argue that Socrates was putting god back at the center of human wisdom, nor that he was pointing to a realm of meta-

²¹ Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, p. 74.

²² Ibid., p. 85

²³ Quoted in Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.35, No. 138 (Jan. 1958), 4.

²⁴ Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher*, p. 114.

physical certainties that human intellect was not able to reach. But the possibility that Socrates' philosophical use of irony was influenced by his perception of his contemporary theatrical performances of tragedy is too strong not to be taken into consideration.

There are many other clues that point to the possibility that Socratic irony might have been influenced by or retained some of the hue of tragedy. Socrates was known to be friends with many tragedians for one: the famous dialogue 'Symposium' takes place in Agathon's house, who is a friend of Socrates and also a tragic poet, to celebrate his victory in Lenaia of 416 BC. In that same dialogue Agathon, reacting to an ironic statement of Socrates, states that Dionysus himself will be called upon to be the judge of the two men's wisdom (Symp.175e). We are also informed that in the play 'Frogs' by Aristophanes Dionysus was also the judge of the wisdom of two tragedians, namely Aeschylus and Euripides²⁵. If we give too much importance to the fact that it appears in Aristophanes and take it as an amusing remark on the part of the Agathon, we might miss the point that a tragic poet and a philosopher, the particular philosopher I argue, since following Nehamas, there was not an established philosophical knowledge at the time so philosophizing was even a more personal enterprise, are going to be judged by the God of wine and tragedy. There is also an epigram saved in the Palatine anthology that puts together the names of Sophocles, Euripides and Socrates in terms of wisdom, although again that might be reminiscent of the virtue these famous men are taken to have in the time of the anthology²⁶. Finally, the symposium offers one of the most enduring pictures about Socrates, one that comes from Alcibiades, who likens him with the statue of Silenus²⁷ (Symp.215b). The analogy here is primarily used to point to the fact that Socrates always conceals something different from his external appearance, but it also takes a more literal interpretation concerning Socrates' physical appearance. But Silenus was a chief satyr and belonged to the entourage of Dionysus and this connotation

²⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Ioannis Sykoutris (Athens: Estia publications, 2000), p. 19. fn.7.

²⁶ Although for Nietzsche this putting of the name together is enough evidence for the kinship between Euripides and Socrates. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Socrates and Greek Tragedy*, trans. Dimitris Ifantis (Athens: Roes 2018), p. 78.

²⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, p. 199.

should not be missed. It certainly is not missed when P.E. Easterling uses the figure of Silenus and his wisdom, which comes from the archaic era, to give an overall interpretation of the Dionysiac tragic thinking of constant change: the best thing is not to be born and the second best to go back where you came from as soon as possible²⁸.

3. Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates in respect to tragedy

At first glance, the above conclusion has an aura of the denial of life, and perhaps this is what prompted Nietzsche to think of Socrates as one of the major figures that contributed in the demise of the age of tragedy and the rise of the spirit of rationalism²⁹. In his small book entitled 'Socrates and the Greek Tragedy' (1871), which later was incorporated in his seminal book 'The Birth of Tragedy and the Spirit of Music'. Nietzsche blames both Euripides and Socrates for the death of Greek tragedy, because ultimately they were alien to the spirit of Dionysus which is the real spirit of tragedy. Why is Nietzsche's view of Socrates so different in respect to tragedy to the one sketched above?

One answer lies for sure in the fact that Nietzsche was more concerned in providing a theory of tragedy and its spirit, in the famous sense of the confluence of the Dionysian and the Apollonian spirits. In this sense he finds that Socrates and his poetical alter-ego, Euripides, were far to the one side of the two extremes, namely the Apollonian element. The principle of Socratic aestheticism (see above n.29) is what guides Euripides to become a tragic dialectician, and to make the dialogical scenes the center of his plays, taking the mind of his audience away from the musical parts of the chorus that are exemplifying par excellence the Dionysian spirit. This change of attention makes the pessimistic life view, the main characteristic of the tragic age of the Greeks, fades before the rational, optimistic age of Socrates. Nietzsche claims

²⁸ P.E. Easterling, "A Show for Dionysus". In *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), pp. 52-53

²⁹ Nietzsche states the principle of Socratic Aestheticism, "Everything needs to be rational to be beautiful" as a parallel to his doctrine that the knowledgeable is the virtuous. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Socrates and Greek Tragedy*, trans. Dimitris Ifantis (Athens: Roes 2018), pp. 68.

that "...for the first time with Socrates appears this profound chimera, the unshaken faith that thinking, having causality as its guide, can penetrate in the deepest abyss of Being, that thinking not only is in a position to know Being, but also to correct it",³⁰

It is evident that Nietzsche's view, although powerful and plausible, exacerbates the connection between Socrates and Euripides and makes use of a specific image of Socrates which overlooks other aspects of him: a position towards him that is not exclusively Nietzschean. The exacerbation is well documented by Christian Wildberg (2006), where he presents various facts and evidence that point to the fact that, although the two contemporary Athenians must have known each other and had perhaps even been influenced by each other, Euripides was by no means a mouthpiece of Socratic philosophy. He states that there are instances that Euripides' plays are actually stating an opposite position from the Socratic one which maintained that people do harm only unknowingly³¹. But according to Wildberg the absence of core Socratic beliefs, such as the care for one's soul³², is more substantial proof about the independence of Euripidean tragedies from Socratic thinking, at least to the extent Nietzsche argues for.

However, also in the text concerning Socrates and tragedy, we can witness the complex relationship between the ancient philosopher and Nietzsche. This complexity is addressed by many authors and it is not always straightforwardly negative as in the specified text. On the contrary, Nietzsche acknowledges many other characteristics of Socrates, including his supreme irony and also "demonic, mad ("Socrates mainomenos"), Dionysian, music making"³³. Porter (2006) also makes the claim that Nietzsche's conception of Socrates as an anti-Dionysian element is undermined by his own claim that both Dionysicism and Socra-

³⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

³¹ References are made to the monologues of Media, in the homonymous play, and Phaedra, in *Hippolytus*. Christian Wildberg, "Socrates and Euripides". In *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (London: Blackwell, 2006), p. 28-30.

³² Ibid., p. 30.

³³ James I Porter, "Nietzsche and the 'Problem of Socrates'". In *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (London: Blackwell, 2006), p. 412.

tism are rooted in "...a prototypical Greek idealism"³⁴. There is a famous note on Socrates from Nietzsche that reveals both the complexity of the former and the grasp of that complexity by the latter:

I believe that the magic of Socrates was this: that he had one soul, and behind that another, and behind that another. Xenophon lay down to sleep in the foremost one, Plato in the second, and then again in the third, only here Plato went to bed with his own, second soul. Plato is himself somebody with many recesses and foregrounds³⁵.

We can be certain that Nietzsche understood that complexity but also interpreted Socrates in ways that were more fitting to his own philosophical views, treating him perhaps as a 'semiotic' in the same way as Plato did³⁶.

There is a further point of congruence between the views of Nietzsche and Socrates which has to do with self-limiting reason. According to Günter Figal, Nietzsche finds in art generally and tragedy in particular a self-limiting kind of reason, because of the continuous interplay of Being and Becoming³⁷. In Nietzsche's thinking, art and the aesthetic are taken to be essential for life and lead to the anesthetization of life. Figal, though, claims that not everything needs to be under the heading of art, especially philosophical reason as self-limited reason can understand itself as a kind of presentation of life which always presents with it the other with which it is ultimately and necessarily connected: just as Being is thus connected with Becoming and the one cannot even be present without the other. For Figal, that philosophical reason that understands the conditions for its own existence can be called hermeneutic reason. It is thus interesting that the interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian elements, which is the basis of Nietzsche's model for analyzing tragedy, can be extended beyond art to the sphere of reason or thinking. This might also justify the move of Socrates to

³⁴ Ibid., p. 428.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 414.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 412.

³⁷ Günter Figal, "Aesthetically limited reason: on Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy". In *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Bestigui and Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 136-147.

point to a self-limited reason in order, through irony, to find the justifications and the conditions for its existence in a time that reason was taken to be all powerful, as is also the case in the modern era.

4. Conclusion

The connection between Socrates and tragedy is present and is one that we can perhaps document no further than our sources allow. The possibility that this connection can help us build a genealogy for irony is something that we tried to establish in this text. We maintain that the characteristic of irony which allows someone to build her own structure, be it as a theory or as a lifeform, is manifest both in tragedy and in Socratic thinking, as it is known to us from ancient sources and primarily from Plato. We would also like to maintain that Nietzsche's insistence on the relationship between Euripides and Socrates is intuitively strong and correct to some extent, but focuses on the wrong side of the equation: instead of pointing to the rationalism and dialectics that appeared in Euripides' tragedies to a fuller extent, we should focus on the more primordial feature of irony that Socrates derived from traditional tragedy and tried to save within his philosophy in an age of progressively ubiquitous rationalism and dominance of sophistic enlightenment ideas. We maintain that this synchronic part of the genealogy of Socratic irony complements the diachronical part sketched in this article and, taken together, they both can underline the pure philosophical significance of irony that is with us to this day.