
III. ASPIRATION CORNER

Irony, Fragmentation and Urbanity*

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Abstract: The ties between the concept of irony on the one hand and urbanity will be explored in this study. Philosophically, irony has emerged with Socrates and his teaching in the city of Athens, in its agora. The urban setting and its relevance in the development of philosophical irony is further hinted at, if someone takes into consideration Cicero's term for it as 'dissimulatio urbana'; although the use of the adjective urban here means mostly refined and is contrasted with the more clumsy and coarse sense of humor of the rural people, it can be maintained that urban environment contributed to the nature of this kind of dissimulation. The ancient city itself, as a context of Socratic irony, is also a place of fragmentation in two principal ways. Firstly in the sense of the various experts, be it technicians or sophists, who boastfully suggest their own versions of virtue – while Socrates is portrayed (by Plato mostly) as trying to find a unified definition of virtue, but doesn't seem to succeed in this endeavor. Secondly in terms of politics – a term itself derived from polis (city) – which appear to be in a fragmented form, not only because of the existing political fractions of the oligarchic and democratic party, but also since everyone is able to address the assembly and articulate his positions. Irony is the Socratic way of dealing with these fragmentations without making them disappear under a unitary metaphysical view, as is the case of Plato and his academy. Therefore it will be shown that Socratic irony is a phenomenon that sprang within the city limits and the urbanite way of living and tries to accommodate the fragmentations that this way of life provides for human beings without reducing them to the famous platonic onto-theological way of think-

* A version of this paper was presented at the International Conference "Thinking the City through Fragmentation and Reconfiguration: Aesthetic and Conceptual Challenges" 1-3 June 2022, Lisbon, Institute of Philosophy, Nova University of Lisbon.

ing. Finally, the consequences that this kinship has for modern cities, philosophical irony and fragmentation will be discussed as a conclusion.

1. Introduction

Irony is usually taken to be a mode of speaking, a trope of writing; when taken in a more theoretical context can also be considered to be an articulation of a way of doing philosophy, a way of living. The first person to inaugurate the philosophical aspect of irony, which we will discuss here, is generally believed to be Socrates (c 470-399 BC). There are of course many issues in surveying the thought of Socrates, even more when someone claims to attribute a philosophical importance to a characteristic that was exercised mainly as a means of expression. But nevertheless, the image of Socrates as an ironist has again gained prominence primarily in the works of Vlastos (1991) and Nehamas (1998). We accept the characterization of the historical Socrates as an ironist and we will try, in the present paper, to explore the urban context as a possible factor in establishing this way of expressing and subsequently thinking. We will argue that the historical Socrates, since he was confronted in the agora of his beloved city of Athens with a multitude of opinions and proclamations of teaching virtue, he developed his ironical skills in a way that allowed him to accommodate this fragmented philosophical landscape without succumbing to the need to provide a reconfigured or systematic way of thinking. Instead his most famous pupil, Plato, sought to provide a much more systematic way of thinking, through his *Academia* mostly, thus interpreting his teacher's stance as one that pointed to a certain metaphysical system. Plato's hostility to that fragmented way of the Athenian intellectual- and not only- life has prompted him to provide a different framework of a city and governance, articulated more famously in the *Republic* and the picture of the philosopher-king. More often this dichotomy is articulated in political terms between democracy and oligarchy or open society and autarchism. But the ironic way of approaching these matters is more profound and is not reduced in any political dichotomy of the sort (although it might be partly reflected on them). This means that for example Plato is not taken here to misinterpret Socrates, but rather as providing a viable interpretation of his philosophy, especially since his teacher was an open-ended thinker.

It seems that the distinction between a historical and a fictitious Socrates is an important one to make, because the former has philoso-

phical characteristics that the later one lacks and in some cases even contradicts. Following Kahn (1996), we can distinguish between a maximal and a minimal view concerning historical Socrates¹. The maximal view, taken by Vlastos, has it that the historical Socrates is portrayed in the early and some of the middle platonic dialogues² up to the introduction of the theory of recollection in *Meno*. In these dialogues Plato is taken to represent through his fictitious Socrates the philosophy of the historical one, whereas from the *Meno* onwards Plato's fictitious Socrates is used as a mouthpiece for the former's theoretical position. The minimal view, articulated by Kahn, takes as a portrayal of the actual Socrates only Plato's *Apology*, because in his view "...the *Apology* can be properly regarded as a quasi-historical document, like Thucydides' version of Pericles' Funeral Oration"³. I intend to follow mostly Kahn's view here and take the *Apology* as a primary source for the reconstruction of my view of the Socratic irony, in the absence of any direct tradition by Socrates himself.

Following the Foucauldian definition of genealogy as the opposite of the search for origins, we are not presenting here a possible birth of irony from the urban setting, but rather we are making the claim that the urban setting frequented by Socrates might have a more profound impact on his conception and use of irony in the philosophical context. We will start by examining the definition of ironia in Cicero, which is the first hint of a relationship between irony and urbanity. Then we will turn our attention to irony and urban fragmentation in Athens of the Socratic period. And finally, through the romantic use of fragments and irony, we will try to establish a lineage that could view philosophical irony as an urban characteristic in the modern period.

2. Irony and Urbanitas in Cicero

The first and only explicit connection between irony and urbanity is to

¹ Both views share the primacy of Plato as a philosophical source for the historical Socrates over Xenophon and Aristotle.

² See the division of the dialogues in Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46-47.

³ Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The philosophical use of a literary form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 88.

be found in the work *De Oratore* of Cicero (106-43 BC). This definition of irony is closely followed by Quintilian (c35-c100 AD). The work *De oratore* is a dialogue that concerns the nature of rhetoric and the definition of irony is provided as humorous rhetorical trope. The definition and the full excerpt are as follows:

*“Irony (dissimulatio urbana) too gives pleasure, when your words differ from your thoughts, not in the way of which I spoke earlier, when you assert exactly the contradictory, as Crassus did to Lamia, but when the whole tenor of your speech shows you to be solemnly jesting, what you think differing continuously from what you say... Fannius in his 'Chronicles' records that Africanus (the one named Aemilianus) was outstanding in this kind of thing, and describes him by the Greek word “dissembler” (εἰρωνία), but, upon the evidence of those who know these subjects better than I do, my opinion is that Socrates far surpassed all others for accomplished within this strain of irony or assumed simplicity. This is a choice variety of humor and blended with austerity, and suited to public speaking as well as to the conversation of gentlemen”.*⁴

Let us first start with the reception of the above definition of irony from two scholars that, in their relevant discussion, shaped Socratic studies in the late 20th century. We start with Gregory Vlastos and proceed with the reaction of Alexander Nehamas to the former’s treatment of the definition of irony, before turning to our own account. Gregory Vlastos in his groundbreaking treatment of Socratic irony follows the aforementioned two Roman authors to argue for a concept of irony that is different from the classical Greek meaning of the word εἰρωνεία, which is taken to mean dissembling and it is “...commonly used to denote sly, intentionally deceptive speech or conduct...”⁵. He finds in the work of Cicero first and later Quintilian the prevalence of the positive undertone *dissimulatio* on the negative aspect of dissemblance, and states that this change in meaning is due to Socrates as a prime example of irony. Vlastos writes “Laundered and deodorised, it now betokens the height of urbanity, elegance and good taste: T5 Cicero, *De oratore* 2,67:

⁴ Cicero, *De Oratore (On the Orator)*, translated by E.W. Sutton (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical library, 1967), 2,269, 271.

⁵ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25.

Urbana etiam dissimulatio est, cum alia dicuntur ac sentias...Socratem opinor in hac ironia dissimulantiaque longe lepore et humanitate omnibus praestitisse. Genus est perelegans and cum gravitate salsum..."⁶. Quintilian writing some two centuries after Cicero follows him and affirms that positive character of latin ironia contrary to the classical Greek εἰρωνεία, adding that irony more than a trope can characterize the totality of a person's life (*vita universa*)⁷. Vlastos, focusing on the word *dissimulatio* of the above definition, goes on to search from this point on for the ironist Socrates who enabled that transformation by creating "...a new form of life realised in himself..."⁸ and provides many examples for his playful irony, which culminate in the notion of complex irony. So for him a dissimulation, a complex irony, of this sort is contrasted with simple irony and defined as follows: "In simple irony what is said just isn't what is meant: taken in its ordinary, commonly understood, sense the statement is simply false. 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"⁹. He identifies four such ironies that can be found in the earlier dialogues of the platonic corpus and they refer to his simultaneous disavowal and avowal of knowledge, of being a teacher of virtue, of doing politics and of his erotic stance towards Alcibiades¹⁰. In all the above cases Vlastos provides with textual evidence where Socrates either verbally or in opposition of words and deeds provides for the others a paradox.

Nehamas finds that the device of complex irony is too analytical and provides a false sense of clarity into Socratic irony. He claims that the distinctive element in Socratic – and perhaps all real forms of – irony is that it is a puzzle from anyone except the ironist: in the particular case of Socrates he constitutes a paradox even for Plato, who tried through his dialogues to respond to the fact "...that he (Socrates) is aware that he lacks what he believes the art of living requires but is still their best practitio-

⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁷ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 55, n. 37.

⁸ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), 29.

⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 237.

ner”¹¹. This opaqueness, this silence of Socrates can be also found on the different - than Vlastos’ - treatment Nehamas offers to the definitions of Cicero and Quintilian, with which we are mainly concerned here. Nehamas rightly observes that in the original Ciceronian definition it is more than certain that irony is taken to mean exactly the contrary of what the ironist is saying. Even more surprisingly Cicero says that irony is not to be confused with the act when you say the exact opposite of what you mean and provides the example of Crassus and Lamia. For Nehamas the real clue of the definition is to be found if we retain the simplicity of the Latin term ‘alius’, to mean just ‘other’ and not ‘quite other’ as Vlastos does and therefore allocates the meaning of contrary¹². More than that he is pointing to the fact that Cicero says a little bit further in the definition that what you think is different from what you say, and the whole tenor of your speech points to the fact that you are jesting. He concludes saying that speaking differently is not the same as saying the opposite and that it “...is not deceit, but neither is it revelation”¹³, thus highlighting his claim about the opaqueness of Socratic irony. Nehamas, starting from this point of criticism against Vlastos’, view rejects the latter’s notion of complex ironies, because they are based on the dichotomy between true and false. For Nehamas, Socratic irony is “Intermediate between lying and truthfulness, it shares features with both: like truthfulness, concealment does not distort the truth; like lying it does not reveal it. Once we have rejected the view that irony consists simply in saying the contrary of what you mean, concealment cannot, even when the irony is detected, lead us to the ironist’s real meaning”¹⁴.

Both philosophers agree though in their basic claim that Socratic irony does not necessarily – in the degree of necessity found in the treatment of the Greek εἰρωνεία at least – entail deceit and wrongdoing (although Nehamas is softer on this point). But their main difference lies in the importance they both attribute to Socratic irony as a way of life (per Vlastos) or an art of living (per Nehamas). The distinction Nehamas does between two strands of philosophy, the theoretical and the practi-

¹¹ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 86.

¹² Ibid., 55.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

cal, helps explain the different approaches. According to Nehamas at least, Vlastos begins with the theoretical endeavour to make Socratic irony more transparent and to place it closer to theorising. He tries to make sense of Socrates's paradox and he implements his device of complex ironies to achieve that. Nehamas on the other hand, places the weight of his analysis on the practical side of philosophy and therefore thinks that opacity and silence on the part of Socrates is essential to make sense of irony as a cornerstone of the Socratic paradox of living. According to Bernstein, both of these approaches are compatible and even complementary on their goal to make sense of Socrates, but their different emphasis on the analytical and the practical criterion is an important one¹⁵. Although I am in favour of that view and the importance of these two thinkers is truly enormous in treating Socratic irony, I would like in what follows to propose a genealogical approach that might highlight the Socratic paradox and is related with urbanity.

Both these thinkers do not pay enough attention to the word "urbana", but instead focus mainly on the word "dissimulatio". The adjective of course is accountable for the positive sense of the noun in this case, but I will try to suggest that it might be more that the mere concept of refinement that is usually attached to it. In fact the noun phrase "dissimulatio urbana" is usually translated as irony. That would suggest that the ciceronian adjective "urbanus", taken in this context to mean mostly refined, is inseparable from the noun to deliver the desired meaning "irony". But the translation as refinement is not completely satisfactory. To be refined implies for someone else to be coarse, and that is how it is usually taken to be, the humour of the persons of the city was more refined, more nuanced than the jokes of the people living in the rural areas. And to suggest that irony is a specific trope of urban dissimulation, leaves things to be explored.

Let us first detect the various meanings "urbanitas" has in the work of Cicero, who is perhaps the first to coin and use the abstract noun, followed by Quintilian¹⁶. For Cicero according to Ramage there are three

¹⁵ Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life*. (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).

¹⁶ Edwin S. Ramage, "Urbanitas: Cicero and Quintilian, a Contrast in Attitudes." *The American Journal of Philology*, 84, no. 4, (1963), 390–414, <https://doi.org/10.2307/293235>. Accessed 7 May 2022.

ideas related to urbanity: firstly “...it is a general urban refinement”¹⁷, which contradicts usually with the city as a physical space and denotes the way of the city. Secondly urbanitas is taken to be “...a careful, refined wit...”¹⁸ contrasted with a general humour or a lower type of humour that Cicero despised. Thirdly “urbanitas” is connected with a certain way of speaking that was exhibited by the people of the city and cannot be completely accounted for even from Cicero himself, but seems to have to do with “...a certain tone of voice and a careful urban pronunciation”¹⁹. These characteristics of the sophisticated notion of urbanitas during Cicero’s time need to be further supplemented by two other elements.

The first of these is the opposition between city dwellers and rustics. That opposition was a fact before Cicero’s time and as we will see it is a fact even for Athens of the time of Socrates. Cicero is explicit on its existence and he contributes to another distinction between the real urbanites and the pretentious “perurbani”²⁰, who are inferior to the rustics. That opposition is relevant to our discussion of urbanity because it will allow us to detect the reasons for the urban refinement. The second is the nature of this urbanity and how it can be acquired by the persons exhibiting it. Cicero is explicit that the characteristic of urbanity is not premised upon any kind of education instead “...would presumably consider life in Rome and association with refined Romans as more contributing factors”²¹. Of course urbanity is related to a certain degree of education and cultivation, but it is not exhausted by them. The case of “perurbani”, or hyper-urbanites, is characteristic, since this type of person takes cultivation too far and losses the true urbanite feeling. In the time of Quintilian though refined wit becomes more clear and tangible, thus enabling him to offer not just a definition but also a method by which it can be inscribed in the speech and comportment of a

¹⁷ Edwin S. Ramage, “Early Roman Urbanity.” *The American Journal of Philology*, 81, no. 1(1960), 65–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/291760>. Accessed 7 May 2022.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Edwin S. Ramage, “Urbanitas: Cicero and Quintilian, a Contrast in Attitudes.” *The American Journal of Philology*, 84, no. 4 (196), 390–414, <https://doi.org/10.2307/293235>. Accessed 7 May 2022.

contemporary Roman. We should of course note, that although the primary reason for this difference between the two authors is the progressive stability of the concept of urbanitas as per Ramage (1963), it is nevertheless important to state the position from which the two Romans are writing from. Cicero is a native of the city of Rome, representing the optimates party and relating with the maintenance of urbanitas in Rome – which he saw under erosion from rustic ways- with the preservation of the Republic. Cicero was a staunch supporter of the senate and the republic and he fought against its dissolution and fall into the Roman Empire, a fight that cost him literally his head. On the other hand Quintilian was born outside of Rome, in Spain, and he is writing well into the age of the Roman Empire. It would seem more natural for Cicero to defend a more elusive sense of urbanitas, restricted primarily to Roman citizens and especially to the optimates.

One also needs to be reminded that Cicero, as a representative of the classic Roman Culture of his time, was always keen on stating the affinities between Rome and classical Athens. Indeed the relationship between Rome and classical Greece was a complex one and probably was a source of deliberation for the Romans as we can be evidenced by their claim to be descendants of the Trojan Aeneas in the Augustine poem of Virgil's *Aeneiad*. Cicero is making constant effort to link Rome and Roman urbanity in particular with Athens and its classical period, which played the role of the School of all Greeks, as Stated in Pericle's funeral oration. But as Ramage (1960) states, although there is a parallel feeling of Greek 'urbanitas' in Pericle's funeral oration and also parallels with the Greek word ἀστεῖος it would nevertheless sprang in Rome independently of any Greek influence. Nevertheless, one should have this point of Cicero's linkage of Athens to Rome in mind.

Turning now to Socrates and trying to see to what exactly amounts this urbanity, this refinement that shaped his wit and helped it take the form of Socratic irony that became emblematic for its carrier and also through him acquired a deeper philosophical meaning. It is a well-known fact that Socrates travelled only rarely out of Athens, to perform his military duty in Potidaea, in Amphipoli and in Delium, as he himself inform us in the *Apology*²². Unlike the Sophists that were traveling throughout

²² All references to the *Apology* are from Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, translation by Harold North Fowler (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 2005).

Greece to teach, Socrates remained all of his life in Athens and refused to be exiled even when he was convicted of disrespecting the Gods and corrupting the youth. Of course it can be argued that there was no need for an Athenian to travel abroad to get educated since Athens was the school of all Greece at the time. But nevertheless, the city played an important role in Socrates' overall formation. The irony through the city then arises in two occasions: in the Socratic search of virtue that is channeled towards its citizens; and in the complex attitude of Socrates towards the politics of his city. In both these cases Socrates was confronted by a fragmentary view of virtue, which, although he tried to overcome, he nevertheless never provided himself a closed and rigid definition of.

Let us first turn to the search for virtue and the knowledge of virtue. Now the concept of virtue is not taken here to merely imply ethical virtue, but rather and following Nehamas it is taken in a broader sense to mean "...the feature that accounts for something's being justifiably notable"²³ and notes the inevitable social dimension of the Greek word for virtue, ἀρετή. Socrates says in his apology that after receiving the news from the Delphic oracle that he was the wisest of all men started to inquire if there can be found anybody else that would prove wiser than him and, if not, at least to understand to what this wisdom consist of. So he goes first to the public men both of high and lower repute and finds out that they do not possess the excellence in public virtue, the wisdom, which the others thought of them to have, instead the reputation proved to be a wrong guide. Then he goes to the poets that excelled in their craft and he finds that also they are not entitled to be called wise, because they cannot give an account of their poems and concludes that it was not wisdom that helped them compose their poems, but nature and divine inspiration.

Finally he turns to the artisans. This class is more important for our argument because it is the most populous and the most characteristic of the city and the urban way of living. Although they are not the ones to exemplify the best specimen of the refinement that Cicero had in mind, this indispensably urban class must be where that same refinement was carved out against. Socrates says that he went to the hand-workers (χειροτέχνας) and he does at first find a sort of wisdom that he lacks, in contrast to the

²³ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 78.

first two classes. According to Nehamas, it is exactly that kind of knowledge of virtue that the artisans possess, a technical knowledge of virtue, that Socrates would like to have and that would enable him to transfer virtue to others, but he knows that he is lacking it, therefore being more wise than all of the ones that claim that they have it and are able to teach it to others. The same virtue or craftsmanship is said to be possessed by the poets as well; the problem with both artisans and poets is that, because of possessing technical knowledge of their art, they think that they can speak wisely, in possession of the relevant knowledge, for the other, the most important matters. For Nehamas these ‘most important matters’ was actually the good life, the art of living.

One more class of professional teachers of virtue, whom Socrates frequented in the streets of Athens but are implied but not being explicitly mentioned as a class in the *Apology* were the Sophists. Plato’s many early dialogues are discussions between the philosopher and some sophist; one can think of *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Meno*. It can be said that all four of them are concerned with issues that arose in the *Apology*, Hippias with an early form of Socratic intellectualism that is exemplified by his thesis that no one does wrong voluntarily, *Protagoras* and *Meno* with the teachability of virtue and *Gorgias* with the distinction between the philosopher and the rhetorician. Of course the main differences between Socrates and the Sophists are not just in the content they ascribed to virtue, but also in their practices. Especially the issue of having a fee for teaching virtue is important, because it rests upon a number of premises: that virtue is the most important topic there is, that its teaching can be achieved, that the teacher in question has the method of doing it and that there is a way to measure its success. Furthermore all the above require a form of boasting from the part of the sophist that touted them, and that also helps explain Socrates’ ironic stance as opposite to that arrogance. Socrates was putting all these premises in to questioning with his practice of elenchus.

We can say that Socrates, when turned to his fellow citizens to prove the Delphic oracle was confronted with a fragmented picture as to what was wisdom and to what virtue consisted of. This fragmented picture is best exemplified by the artisans, who through their fragmentary technical knowledge of their art were claiming the whole of the human life, or the whole of the political realm. Inevitably such claims to the whole came under intense scrutiny by Socrates.

Before we turn to the more overtly political fragmentation of the politi-

cal sphere, let us see if a unified Socratic response to this fragmentation is warranted. In the *Apology* Socrates articulates some positive moral and philosophical principles that can be argued are held by the historical person. According to the minimal view of Kahn, Socrates claims that philosophy is the search of wisdom, and he himself is a constant seeker of wisdom and not a teacher of it since he does not possess any; he claims that he does have "...practical good sense (phronesis) and moral excellence (arête)"²⁴; that the most important thing is not money and power but care for the soul, which is attained through just acts; that a life worth living is the examined life, the Socratic elenchus being the main tool for this examination and is always portrayed by Socrates as having negative results, not positive. Of course these characteristics are the prevalent in the *Apology* and, setting aside a possible allusion to the famous Socratic intellectualism and the unity of virtue (that is roughly that all virtue is basically wisdom and therefore a rational and intellectual capacity that can be in principle taught) a picture of Socrates as a seeker and ironist emerges. That picture was, according to Khan and Nehamas, interpreted by Plato in a way that would pave the way to the thorough metaphysical system of Forms, better elaborated in the *Republic*.

I now turn to the second domain of discussion where Socrates faced a fragmented landscape, which he tried to accommodate in his thinking not by providing a system of governance but through irony. The political landscape that was more present during Socrates' lifetime was the one of the Athenian Democracy. His views for the democratic regime were not favourable, yet he seems to be a model citizen that participated in his civil duties and in the battles, where he was commanded, and he rejected the oligarchic regime of the thirty tyrants, as equally. His stance towards the political realm is a form of complex irony for Vlastos, because Socrates claims in the *Gorgias* that his is the "...one of the few Athenians, not to say the only one, to engage in the true political art, and of the men today I am the only one to do politics (Gorgias 521 D)"²⁵, when just before he had denied doing politics. The same denial can be found in the *Apology* but there he distinguishes between the private and the public sphere. The passage is as follows: "A man who

²⁴ Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: the Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90.

²⁵ Quoted in Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 240.

really fights for the right (τοῦ δίκαιου), if he is to preserve his life even for a little while, must be a private citizen, not a public man”²⁶. It is usually taken to be critical of the changing attitudes of the multitude in a democracy, but this reading is not warranted, since it is conceivable that a public man in an oligarchic regime might equally be in danger of his life. What is meant here is that justice and the perpetual seek for it cannot be a public matter, but rather it must be a private affair, away from any restrictions of the public sphere.

Plato of course interpreted his teacher in a different way, a way that was overtly critical for the democratic regime of Athens and pointed to a positive conception of justice. According to Boris Groys, Plato was the first to claim a totality for his political ideas and “...defines the philosopher, in contrast to the sophist, as someone who does not use language to represent, legitimate and defend private and partial interests, but instead conceives of society as a whole”²⁷. This totality is to be defended by the philosopher king and the citizens should restrict themselves to their place, as the totalitarian regime of the *Republic* states. This is the way that justice will be preserved in the ideal city, because justice is defined as “to do one’s business and not to be a busybody”²⁸, and hence the citizens should attend to their own affairs (τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν) and not to interfere in the affairs of others (μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν) and to be quiet (ἡσυχία ἄγων). As Frederick G. Whelan suggests, all this traits belonged to the persons that wanted to have a rural life, opposed to the urban life of Athens and its democracy²⁹. We could say that Plato wanted to reconfigure the fragmented political landscape and urban lifestyle of Athens to more just order, following his metaphysical views.

Both Socrates and Plato were confronted with this meddlesome-

²⁶ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, translation by Harold North Fowler, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 2005), 1.

²⁷ Boris Groys, *The Communist postscript*, translated by Thomas H. Ford (London: Verso Books, 2009), 1.

²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, translated and edited by K. Georgoulis (Athens: Sideris Publications, 1939), 433A, 123.

²⁹ Frederick G. Whelan, “Socrates and the ‘Meddlesomeness’ of the Athenians.” *History of Political Thought*, 4, no. 1 (1983), 1–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26212364>. Accessed 12 May 2022.

ness (πολυπραγμανεῖν) that was characteristic of Athenian politics in two principal ways according to Whelan: in the Athenian imperialism that culminated with the Peloponnesian war (431-404 BC) and with the phenomenon of litigation that constituted a massive phenomenon of the 5th century Athens. Socrates was a participant in his city's wars, which for him were not deemed to be unjust. He nevertheless criticizes in the platonic dialogues the heads of the Athenian imperialist democracy, such as Themistocles and Pericles, and in the *Apology* the public men are the first to be submitted to his elenchus. But as Whelan says in Plato's work there is not an explicit condemnation of imperialism, because his primary interest is justice within the city.

Litigiousness on the other hand was a trait of Athenian meddlesomeness that was largely confined within the city walls. Through that act of meddling in the affairs of others in judicial courts, Athenian democracy was advanced because of payment to jurors that went to the extreme of creating a class of citizens dependent on that pay, advancement of young orators with political ambitions who exercised their art in courts and made a name of themselves and finally a distinctive trait of class welfare, because it was usually the rich Athenians that were dragged in court by the sycophants, citizens that had the habit of prosecuting others in the courts usually with false allegations in order to gain some material reward. The most vivid portrayal of the situation in the Athenian courts are the comedies of Aristophanes, where we can find as a usual victim of litigiousness the rustic ἀπράγμων, the person that attended his own affairs and did not meddle in the business of others. The division between city and country is again evident here. Socrates was of course very critical of this particular habit of his fellow citizens. He references his inexperience in courts in the *Apology* and, according to Whelan, he resents it because in courts popular opinion and not justice is prevalent and because rhetorical skills are more important there than true philosophy.

Whelan, after surveying these two characteristics of the Athenian democracy and contrasting them with Plato's definition of justice in the *Republic*, comes to an interesting conclusion. He states that Socrates in the *Apology*³⁰ presents himself as a restless seeker of justice that will never stop to examine himself and others in search of wisdom. How the use of the verb, πολυπραγμανῶ, in particular can coincide with his treat-

³⁰ “Περιῶν καὶ πολυπραγμανῶ” are the two words he uses.

ment of “πολυπραγμοσύνη” as the main characteristic of injustice? Whelan himself provides an answer to this new Socratic paradox, stating that “Socrates’s pursuit of philosophy, and his special conception of the philosophical life, set him apart from all the political parties and several passages in the Apology in particular compel us to look more deeply into the unique position he occupies”³¹. Writing before Vlastos gave to the Socratic irony the philosophical depth that it actually possesses, he urged his readers not to take Socrates’ claim of being a meddler as ‘ironic’, but at face value since “His philosophy as well as his own spirit of initiative was thus a characteristic product of Athenian life, as he acknowledges in declining the opportunity of exile, although his activism manifests itself in a different fashion from that of the other Athenians”³². But, if we take the definition of Justice in the Republic as a Platonic interpretation of Socrates’s practical wisdom concerning justice and if we postulate that Socrates himself did not possess and was not interested in possessing a positive definition of justice, then we can understand irony as being his way of coping with the fractured intellects of Athens without offering himself a closed fracture in the place of the always eluding whole.

3. A metaphilosophical argument

This conception of irony will become more evident, if we take its philosophical aspects as actually informing different philosophies in different times and thus - although it is not strictly theoretical- attains a metaphilosophical dimension. Certainly in the last quarter of the 20th century there were many such attempts in the work of De Man, Nehamas etc. The philosopher that was responsible for the revival of the concept of irony in modern time philosophy (modern is taken to be philosophy after Descartes) was Friedrich Schlegel, a prominent figure of early German romanticism, who also developed a very interesting way of getting together the Absolute, fragments and irony.

The absolute is taken to be “...the unconditioned totality of all conditions. While the absolute itself is conditioned by nothing, it conditions all

³¹ Frederick G Whelan, “Socrates and the ‘Meddlesomeness’ of the Athenians.” *History of Political Thought*, 4, no. 1 (1983), 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26212364>. Accessed 12 May 2022.

³² *Ibid.*, 28.

the finite and physical manifestations of the world”³³. Influenced by Spinoza’s substance and more directly by Kant’s metaphysics, the idea of the Absolute was received by both the early romantics and the German idealists; the reception, thought, differed greatly in one important sense. The Idealists took the absolute to be graspable in principle by the human intellect whereas the romantics argued that it was elusive and opaque to the human mind. This view turns Schlegel who “...endorses uncertainty, because the Absolute (that which is without limits) will never be grasped by finite human knowers (limited beings)”³⁴. Still Schlegel and the Romantics are drawn to the absolute and therefore always strive to approach it. But since this approach is not possible by the intellect, Schlegel turns to irony and the fragments to approach the Absolute in his desired way, in the way that would not falsely think that it knows the Absolute, that it can exhaust its possibilities by knowing.

The fragment for Schlegel exhibits three very important elements that serve to illustrate the connection between the fragment and the whole, the finite being and the infinite absolute. First, stylistically the fragment is thus structured as to give the impression of a forced detachment from a supposed whole that once used to be a part off. Rush (2016) contrasts this characteristic of the fragment to the aphorism to make it clearer; whereas the aphorisms are “...typically self-contained, polished, and rounded thoughts presented in a condensed form”³⁵, which give an instant pleasure to the reader, the fragments defer that pleasure to the infinite and invite different perspectives and contexts to be constantly implemented upon them. Secondly the fragment is always liable and open to further interpretation. This characteristic is jointed with the idea of ‘symphilosophien’, the romantic notion that philosophy is a social practice, meant to be done not in solitude but in a constant dialogue with a circle of friends. The third element is the fact that the fragment needs to

³³ Keren Gorodeisky, "19th Century Romantic Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta(ed.) URL=<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/aesthetics-19th-romantic/>>.

³⁴ Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the emergence of romantic philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 146.

³⁵ Fred Rush, *Irony & Idealism: Re-Reading Schlegel, Hegel & Kierkegaard* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 81.

be open-ended to reflect the ironic tension of affirmation and distance that exist between the subject and the absolute. Schlegel views that by composing a system of fragments he can surpass the deadliness and obsolescence of complete philosophical systems while on the same time he can be taken as an entry point of thought to any system that would try to approximate the absolute conceptually.

The points of contact between Socrates and Schlegel in terms of metaphilosophical irony are explicit. Schlegel was influenced by the definition of irony provided by Quintilian, who advanced the view of irony as a way of living, with the primary example of Socrates³⁶. Schlegel's view of philosophy as a communal process is also mirrored in the way Socrates understood his philosophy as a way – perhaps the principal and only way – to discuss with his fellow citizens and try to make them examine their beliefs and care for their souls. Schlegel developed a literary system of fragments to mirror the primary ironical attitude towards the absolute, that of affirmation and distance. He was convinced that the absolute could not be grasped and exhausted by intellectual means although we are destined to always try to thus understand it. It is argued that “With all due historical distinctions, both Socrates and Schlegel are subjects who tend and “strive” towards truth, essence and the Absolute, even if they are (ironically) aware of the constitutive exceeding of this Absolute with respect to the means of language and reason”³⁷.

4. Conclusion

It was the intention of this paper to show that Socrates was confronted with a fragmented Athenian society and that his famous irony was a means to cope with this fragmentation without reducing it to a closed philosophical system, but to retain the tension inherent in the examined life between the striving towards the truth and the un-reachability of it.

Starting with the definition of Cicero for irony as “dissimulatio urbana” and the impact that definition had for modern theorists of irony, we showed that both Vlastos and Nehamas, did not pay much attention

³⁶ Ibid., 65-66 n.92.

³⁷ Giacomelli, Alberto, “Review of “Karolin Mirzahkan, An Ironic Approach to the Absolute: Schlegel's Poetic Mysticism, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, xix + 120 pp. ISBN978-1-4985-7891-2”, *Symphilosophie* n.3 (2021), 387-388.

to the adjective *urbanus*, but rather hastily dismissed it as meaning refined. Surveying the meaning of *urbanitas* for Cicero, we showed that he took the characteristic of an urban way of living as inherent and distinct from a strict sense of education but still with a vague overtone, thus leaving open the exact nature of this refinement. For Socrates the search for wisdom and virtue is taking place on the background of the Athenian agora, with the public men, the poets, the hand-workers and the Sophists as the subjects of his inquiry, as he explicitly states in his *Apology*. Through Plato's dialogues we mainly have his most philosophically interesting exchanges with the Sophists, the ones that maintained the art of teaching for themselves. But there is no reason not to take Socrates' own account into consideration and not to assume that his own irony was a way of coping with this multitude. Furthermore, irony was also a way for Socrates to participate in his own way to the fractured political life of his time, without claiming a unified, total political system, as did Plato in the *Republic*. This characteristic of irony as a way of both keeping the distance and the affirmation of the Absolute, or in other terms as a way of productive negativity, can be also found in the treatment of literary fragments of Schlegel.

For all of the above reasons it can be maintained that Socrates's irony was a way of him responding to the fragmented urban life without projecting his own examined life as an object of teaching with claims to the whole.