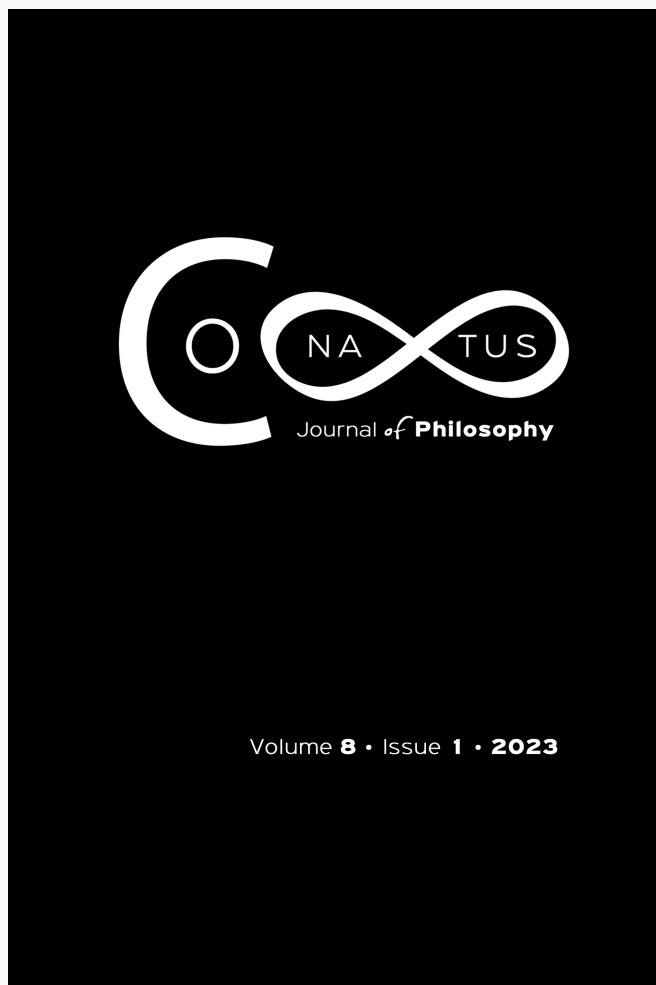


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 8, No 1 (2023)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



### Lear on Irony and Socratic Method

*Dylan Futter*

doi: [10.12681/cjp.31045](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.31045)

Copyright © 2023, Dylan Futter



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Futter, D. (2023). Lear on Irony and Socratic Method. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8(1), 111–126.  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.31045>

# Lear on Irony and Socratic Method

**Dylan Futter**

*University of Witwatersrand, South Africa*

*E-mail address:* [dylan.futter@wits.ac.za](mailto:dylan.futter@wits.ac.za)

*ORCID iD:* <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1863-6838>

## Abstract

*In “The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis,” Jonathan Lear argues that Socrates’ conversations seek to draw out an irony that exists within human virtue. In this commentary, I suggest that Lear should identify irony with aporia to align his interpretation with Plato’s texts and capture the epistemic dimension of Socrates’ method. The Socratic dialogue is a form of inquiry that encourages the interlocutor to carry on the inquiry. The irony of aporia is that the interlocutor grasps his life’s principle by recognising that he does not know what it is.*

**Keywords:** *Socratic method; elenchus; Jonathan Lear; irony*

## I. Introduction

In “The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis,” Jonathan Lear offers an alternative to the standard view of Socrates’ method as cross-examination or *elenchus*.<sup>1</sup> Developing an argument that is, he says, “roundabout and unusual,”<sup>2</sup> he proceeds in three stages: first, he presents an account of irony as the dislocating apprehension that the reality of virtue must transcend its pretence; secondly, he shows how irony, so understood, can change the structure of a soul; and

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lear, “The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis,” in *A Companion to Socrates*, eds. Sarah Ahbel-Rappe, and Rachana Kamtekar, 442-462 (London, and New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 443. It is tempting to say that the indirectness of his argument forces the reader to draw out the irony for him- or herself.

thirdly, he brings these points together to argue that Socrates' true method, which lies below the surface of *elenchus*, is to draw out the irony inherent in human virtue.

Lear's interpretation is difficult and profound, but can Socrates' notorious "logic chopping" really be understood in this way? I believe that it can be if Lear identifies irony with aporia. By so doing, he would align his interpretation with Plato's texts and capture the epistemic dimension of Socrates' method. The Socratic dialogue is a form of inquiry that encourages the interlocutor to carry on the inquiry. The irony of aporia is that the interlocutor grasps his life's principle by recognising that he does not know what it is.

## II. The standard view of Socratic method

Lear begins from the premise that Socrates tried to "improve the lives of those he talked to, through his peculiar form of conversation."<sup>3</sup> His method is designed to "motivate a person to care for his soul and to help him to take steps to improve it."<sup>4</sup> But how does Socrates realise these ends? What is his method? The standard answer is the *elenchus* – an adversarial style of argument that uncovers inconsistency in the interlocutor's beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Lear objects to the standard view on the grounds that soul care demands attention to, not just belief content, but psychic structure.<sup>6</sup> He explains his point by imagining somebody who is left cold in a scientific revolution. Although the content of her beliefs changes, she believes in the same way as she did before – her understanding is disconnected from her emotional life. But then she enters into "a peculiar conversation" and the world opens up as beautiful and strange.<sup>7</sup> She now believes the same things, but in a different way. The structure of her soul is changed even as the content of her thought remains the same.

If therapy demands attention to soul structure, then the *elenchus* will not be a very therapeutic affair – for it operates exclusively at

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. On the standard view of Socrates' method, see Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus: Method is All," in *Socratic Studies*, ed. M. F. Burnyeat, 1-29 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Lear, "The Socratic Method," 444.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the level of content.<sup>8</sup> But how then should we understand Socrates' method? Or was he just naïve? As befits an ironist, Lear approaches these questions indirectly by drawing on Kierkegaard and psychoanalytic practice. He develops an argument in two stages: in the first, he argues that irony can change the structure of a soul; and in the second, that Socrates' true method lies beneath the formal workings of *elenchus* and consists of irony.

### III. Irony

On Lear's account, irony comes to light against a backdrop of pretence and aspiration. By pretence, he means claiming to be a human being of some sort.<sup>9</sup> For example, in our lives we put ourselves forward as mothers, fathers, teachers, friends, and so on.<sup>10</sup> And when we put ourselves forward in this way, "we do so in terms of established social understandings and practices."<sup>11</sup> These understandings and practices express what society thinks one must do and be to be human in some specific form.

According to Lear, pretence falls short of aspiration.<sup>12</sup> By this he does not mean that we often fail to live up to accepted norms, though this is, of course, quite true.<sup>13</sup> Instead his point is that the accepted social understandings and practices themselves fall short of what they aspire to be. For example, in putting oneself forward as a friend, one expresses a desire to be a friend. And there are various socially recognised ways in which this might be shown. Yet one can do any or all of these things and fail to be a true friend.<sup>14</sup> As Lear explains:

[The] pretense seems at once to capture and miss the aspiration.<sup>15</sup> [In] putting myself forward as a [friend] – or, whatever the relevant practical identity – I simultaneously instantiate a determinate way of embodying the identity

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 449. See also Jonathan Lear, *The Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA., and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>10</sup> I paraphrase and adapt Lear, "The Socratic Method," 449.

<sup>11</sup> Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Lear, "The Socratic Method," 449.

<sup>13</sup> See Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> I here adapt some of Lear's examples. See Ibid., 14-16.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11.

and fall dramatically short of the very ideals that I have, until now, assumed to constitute the identity.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting that this feature of “pretence transcending aspiration” is not contingent but necessary, inherent in the nature of things.<sup>17</sup>

The gap between pretence and aspiration is manifest in an ironic question: *among all As, is there an A?*<sup>18</sup> For example: *among all teachers, is there a teacher?* Though this question has the form of tautology,

[we] intuitively detect that a genuine question is being asked about how well or badly our current social understanding of [teaching or, say,] doctoring – the pretence – fits with our aspirations of what is truly involved in<sup>19</sup>

doing this work. So, the first occurrence of the term “teacher” in the ironic question refers to a pretence, for example, those who are registered with a relevant teaching board and follow its codes and guidelines. The second occurrence expresses an ideal that the teaching board aspires to in its procedures, but which it cannot ever satisfy. Thus, we can ask: among all teachers, is there a teacher, that is, someone who can *truly* help others to learn?

Irony comes into being on account of the necessary gap between pretence and aspiration – it is, one might say, the dislocating apprehension that a good to which one aspires transcends the account of it that is embodied in one’s pretence. In irony, one recognises that one’s understanding of what it is to be, say, a Christian, a teacher, or a friend, falls radically short of the thing itself. Lear describes this as erotic uncanniness – the agent is committed to the ideal but loses her grasp on what it would mean to live up to it.<sup>20</sup> And insofar as this ideal is constitutive of her practical identity, she loses her grip on herself and what she is about.

Consider how this might work in the example of friendship. Suppose that B, who is a friend to A, lives out a certain social understanding of what this means. Yet one day he is struck by the thought that he is nevertheless failing to be a friend. In this moment, he hears the call of

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 449. See also Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 450-451.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>20</sup> Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 20.

a purer kind of love. What would it mean to allow A to touch his soul and to genuinely commune with her in turn? B puts himself forward as a friend but has now lost his grip on what friendship is. This is, for Lear, an experience of irony.

#### IV. Irony and Therapeutic Action

According to Lear, direct speech cannot be therapeutic because a neurotic will interpret it in terms of prevailing structures of soul – that is, in terms of structures that therapy must seek to disrupt. For example, we might imagine somebody who feels that she does not measure up in life feeling that she is not measuring up in therapy.<sup>21</sup> If the analyst tells her that she is doing well, she may feel unworthy – no doubt she will fail to live up to expectations, for this is what she always does.

How can this problem to be handled or mitigated? From a psychoanalytic point of view, neurotic conflict cuts off the parts of the soul from each other so that real communication between them is impossible.<sup>22</sup> And each of these parts can be understood in terms of the gap between aspiration and pretence.<sup>23</sup> Therapeutic work must therefore bring these parts into communicative relations with one another.<sup>24</sup> And this can be, Lear believes, accomplished by irony.

Lear gives an example to support his claim.<sup>25</sup> Mr. A. was a single, middle-aged man, “successful in his professional occupation;” he entered analysis because he was concerned about “aggressive impulses and angry feelings,” especially towards those in authority.<sup>26</sup> These feelings “became prominent” in developing a “transference” relationship with the analyst. This means, roughly, that the aggressive dispositions for which he sought help manifested in and disrupted the therapeutic relationship.

On Lear’s telling, matters came to a head in the “termination phase” of the relationship. Mr. A. developed a lingering cough – a neurotic symptom, in the analyst’s view. He was angry at the therapist for not

---

<sup>21</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 452. See also Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (London: H. Karnac Books, 2003), 49-50.

<sup>22</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 452.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence N. Levenson, “Superego Defense Analysis in the Termination Phase,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 46, no. 3 (1998): 847-866. For further discussion, see Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 121-133.

<sup>26</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 453.

curing him, for not making him the man that he wanted to be. But he was also angry at himself for being angry. He felt that he ought to be grateful for the help he had received. And he could not bring these opposing feelings into contact with one another: “[n]eurotic conflict of this sort makes thoughtful evaluation impossible.<sup>27</sup> The aspiring and pretending parts of the soul can’t communicate. They conflict in ways that have bizarre manifestations.”<sup>28</sup>

At one point in the termination phase, A. became incensed and went to the bathroom in a coughing fit. When he returned, he was puzzled by his response, for his therapist had *done nothing but been there*. To this, the analyst responded: “maybe that’s why.”<sup>29</sup> In this remark and its interpretation, we see irony doing its work. Notice that the analyst does not tell A. what to think, for this would simply reinscribe neurotic structures. If he spoke directly and said, “your problem is such and such,” then

Mr. A.’s compliant self would have accepted the “insight” with gratitude.<sup>30</sup> The analyst’s “interpretation” would [...] be used as one part of the neurotic conflict, rather than as anything that might resolve it.<sup>31</sup>

At a verbal level, words that seem to speak of innocence (“you haven’t done anything but been here”) also express a complaint. And Mr. A.’s problem is that he can’t “hear both voices at the same time.”<sup>32</sup> When the analyst echoes A.’s words, he invites him to use them as a “bridge” to connect dissonant points of view. Like somebody who changes aspect to look at Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit image, he should use the words to which the analyst has ironically drawn attention to “go back and forth” between his sense of gratitude and his “genuine feelings of disappointment and anger.”<sup>33</sup> Irony brings the warring parts of the soul into communication with one another. It dissolves neurotic structures by forming an ability to hold together conflicting attitudes in one mind.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

## V. Socrates' method as irony

What does any of this have to do with the Socratic method? Not very much, on the surface. To see Lear's point, we must zoom out a bit; we must abstract from the level of argument to take a broader perspective on Socrates' business.

On Lear's telling, Socrates "investigates what it is to be human" by considering various ways in which people try to live up to ideals.<sup>34</sup> These ideals include the virtues, professional roles, and other social formations such as cities, each of which is concerned with the good of human beings.<sup>35</sup> There are, in this regard, Socratic versions of the ironic question, *among all As, is there an A?* For example,

1. Among all doctors, is there a doctor?
2. Among all rhetoricians, is there a rhetorician?
3. Among all wise people, is anyone wise?

As we have seen, the first use of the term in the question designates the pretence, the social manifestation, whereas the second gives the aspiration. The discrepancy between pretence and aspiration comes to light in the fact that the question is meaningful despite its tautological structure. For example, question 3 can be heard as "among all rhetoricians, is there a *true* rhetorician?"

Plato's answer to these questions is, for Lear, embodied in the figure of Socrates. He is a true doctor, since he is concerned with the health of the soul; he is a wise person, since he knows that he does not know; he is a true rhetor, since he leads people to truth, and so on.<sup>36</sup> Socrates' knowledge of how to live is a matter of knowing how to be sensitive to the way that a human life fails to be what it pretends to be, and thus, fails to be what it is. Socrates recognises that he cannot *be* good but must always *become* it; this constitutes his peculiar human virtue.

Lear's account also enables us to make sense of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. Socrates knows that he does not have an adequate understanding of the virtues. So, he puts himself forward as one who does not know, that is, as a man who is not in a position to put himself

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.



forward. “*He is all aspiration and no pretence.*”<sup>37</sup> Ironically, there is nothing ironic about the way that Socrates lives.<sup>38</sup> Unlike everybody else, he is not a victim of the irony of taking pretence to express the reality of virtue. By living with the irony, he manages it.

With these points in mind, Lear argues that the *elenchus* is merely a surface. Socrates’ real method comes to light in what he does with his cross examination, how he uses it to draw out irony. Irony is the means by which he seeks to improve the structure of the interlocutor’s soul.<sup>39</sup> It follows that Socrates is not concerned with specific beliefs about virtue but with how these fit together into a pretence that constitutes an agent’s practical identity. He seeks to draw out “an *aspiration* buried in [interlocutors’] understanding of the relevant virtue they pretend to know.”<sup>40</sup> In this, he tries to get them to apprehend the discrepancy between the nature of virtue and what they claim to be. “Socrates actual use of *elenchus* can be understood as a species of irony” for it draws out the irony at the centre of the interlocutor’s practical identity.<sup>41</sup>

Lear applies this account to a famous episode in the *Republic*. Socrates uses his *elenchus* to force Thrasymachus “to acknowledge that justice has aspirations which transcend his official account.”<sup>42</sup> At this level, irony occurs in the “macrocosm of public debate:”<sup>43</sup> The sophist is ashamed because he recognises that others perceive his failure to make good on his claim to know. But there is also, for Lear, a more important irony here, and one that works itself out in Thrasymachus’ soul. The man of pretence, in a pejorative sense, a “thumotic” personality whose reason is subordinate to honour, comes to see that his claim “to knowledge has fallen short of his own aspiration to truth.”<sup>44</sup> Lear discerns in his famous blush a moment of therapeutic irony: “the aspiring and pretending parts of Thrasymachus’ soul [are] brought into a different relation with each other.”<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 459. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* For Thrasymachus’ blush, see Plato, *Republic*, 350c-d.

## VI. Does Lear's account apply to Plato's dialogues?

For Lear, Socrates uses his method to disrupt psychic structure and change it for the better. Though Lear does not make this explicit, improvement is presumably a matter of cultivating virtue. The interlocutor would be benefitted by Socratic discourses if they helped him to develop virtue of soul.

One of Lear's guiding insights concerns the role of the transference in dialogue. As I noted above, the transference of unconscious feelings onto the analyst inhibits the client's ability to raise certain questions about herself. Applying this point to Socrates' conversations, we can say that the interlocutors' lack of virtue prevents them from properly inquiring into virtue. Is there any evidence for this claim in the dialogues themselves? I believe that there is.

Socrates discusses virtue or particular virtues with different kinds of interlocutors. And their deficiencies in the virtue in question do prevent them from discussing it in an appropriate way. Those who lack perseverance cannot learn that courage requires perseverance if it does; their lack of perseverance impedes their search.<sup>46</sup> Those who are not open to the divine principle are unable to learn piety if it requires such openness; their lack of openness manifests in the inquiry, preventing them from recognising that piety requires openness.<sup>47</sup> We can put this point as a paradox: the interlocutor must already be virtuous to an extent if he is to learn what virtue is.<sup>48</sup> He must not be lacking in precisely those features that would, if he possessed them, constitute the virtue in question or his ability to learn it.

Lear is in my view right to say that Socrates is concerned with psychic structure and the way that it might be improved by discourse. He does not need the *Republic's* theory of the tri-partite soul to make this point,<sup>49</sup> since it is already encoded in the action of the dialogue – and specifically, in the way that the interlocutor's moral weaknesses manifest themselves in discussion.<sup>50</sup> Because the interlocutor's lack of virtue inhibits his ability to learn virtue, Socrates must try to disrupt these bad qualities. For this reason, he cannot focus on belief alone –

<sup>46</sup> See the drama of Plato's *Laches*.

<sup>47</sup> See the drama of Plato's *Euthyphro*.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Plato, *Meno*, 81b ff.

<sup>49</sup> See Lear, "The Socratic Method," 446.

<sup>50</sup> Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 18.

he must work on the structure of the interlocutor's soul.

Now, as we have seen, therapeutic speech cannot work directly. If neurosis is corrosively present in the forms of interpretation that the patient uses to understand herself and what she must do to be better, then ordinary ways of communicating will not work. Therapeutic conversation must employ indirect means. And this is where the significance of irony comes into view – that is, as a form of talk designed to disrupt thought patterns that impede self-understanding. But how, if at all, does this point carry over to the Socratic dialogue?

Lear distinguishes between the “what” and the “how” of the Socratic method.<sup>51</sup> The “what” is the form of the *elenchus*, which is, he thinks, what it is said to be in the scholarship.<sup>52</sup> However, in his view, the propositional attitudes which such a method seeks to elicit should not be interpreted atomistically – they are parts of a more general disposition to life or “pretence.” The Socratic method is concerned not so much with the content of the claims that Euthyphro, or anyone else, is inclined to make about virtue, but with what the making of such claims reveals about how one thinks and lives.

According to Lear, the “how” of Socrates' method is its use. In this regard, he claims that Socrates uses the *elenchus* to draw out irony, that is, to bring people to the awareness that they aspire to more than they pretend. If his method worked as intended, then the interlocutor would apprehend a contradiction in his practical identity: he would recognise that he is not what he claims to be. The experience of this contradiction is, as I understand the point, the experience of irony.

Lear gives only one example of this occurring in a Platonic dialogue – Socrates' refutation of Thrasymachus. Yet this episode does not map onto the example of Mr. A., who comes to “see” himself in and by means of an ironic question. The analyst's ironic reflection of A's words back to him is therapeutically significant, on Lear's telling, because it enables him to incorporate contrary perspectives into a unitary view of self. Nothing of this sort occurs in Socrates' encounter with Thrasymachus; no specific statement or question, it is clear, works as a bridge to a more unified self-understanding.

The closest analogue in Plato's writings for the sort of irony recognised by Mr. A. is Socrates' interpretation of the Delphic oracle.<sup>53</sup> As is well known, Socrates initially thought the Pythia's statement that *he was wisest* to be false, since he was in no way wise. But later he

<sup>51</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 457.

<sup>52</sup> See Vlastos, “The Socratic Elenchus.”

<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 21a-23b.

apprehends its truth – the recognition that one is not wise is itself a kind of wisdom. Inquiry thus brings two different understandings of wisdom and of self into contact with one another. In Lear’s terms, Socrates comes to see the wisdom in recognising that the human aspiration to wisdom must outstrip its pretence.

In his *Tanner Lectures*, Lear describes the irony of “being struck by teaching in a way that disrupts [one’s] normal self-understanding;”<sup>54</sup> this is, he says, more “like vertigo than a process of stepping back to reflect.”<sup>55</sup> From what I can see, there is no suggestion that this experience must be produced by some specific statement. For this reason, we should probably not put too much weight on the aetiology of Mr’s A.’s irony. In fact, Lear says explicitly that irony does not require words to mean different things; what is key is that they “be used as a point of attachment between different parts of the soul.”<sup>56</sup> The question remains, however, as to whether anything in Plato’s dialogues, beyond the possible example of Thrasymachus, answers to his account of ironic experience.

Though Lear does not to my knowledge make this claim overtly, irony, as he describes it, resembles the *aporia* that is a predictable effect of Socratic discourse. In the first place, *aporia* is the experience of oneself as falling short in relation to an ideal. Thus, Euthyphro is frustrated because he cannot keep his speeches straight;<sup>57</sup> Laches feels angry with himself because he cannot say what he thinks that he knows;<sup>58</sup> and Meno is disconcerted because he is dumbstruck, unable to speak a knowledge that he has stated well on other occasions.<sup>59</sup> In these cases, the interlocutor’s *aporia* manifests in the recognition of a discrepancy between a pretence to knowledge and an underlying aspiration.

Though there is clearly a similarity between irony, on Lear’s account, and *aporia*, there is also a difference. The experience of *aporia* is rationalised by two different ideals. The first is a conception of virtue – Laches, for example, lives out a general’s understanding of courage in which he holds the line, wards off the enemy, and so on. The second is an understanding of what it would mean to *know* virtue or some specific virtue. Euthyphro, Laches, and Meno think that they have failed to live up to an ideal of knowledge because they fail

<sup>54</sup> Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Lear, “The Socratic Method,” 455.

<sup>57</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 11b-e.

<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Laches*, 194a-b.

<sup>59</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80a-b.

to answer Socrates' questions. They feel that they should be able to account for what they claim to know and think of themselves as falling short when they cannot. Given this distinction, we must ask whether the interlocutor in *aporia* feels that he cannot make good on his claim to be a knower or whether he becomes disoriented in relation to a substantive ideal such as courage. Whether these are in fact separable points is something I will return to shortly; the conceptual separation or attempt at such will, I believe, lead to deeper insight.

As I said earlier, Lear describes irony as a dislocating apprehension in which the agent becomes perplexed about what it might mean to live up to an ideal. She remains committed to being a Christian or a teacher, say, but loses her grip on how she might adequately express this good in her being and in her life.<sup>60</sup> This is the phenomenon that Lear refers to as erotic uncanniness: the agent cares for and is motivated to pursue a form of virtue that starts to seem strange and unfamiliar. She longs to move toward it but is not sure how to go on. Lear does not in this context discuss the demands of knowledge as distinguished from the demands of the substantive ideal in question.

The experience of *aporia* as presented in the Socratic dialogues resembles irony in that the interlocutor comes to be disorientated. He lives a life that consists of activities that, he thinks, express some specific excellence. But now the grounds for the intelligibility of the life that he leads seems to be eroded and called into question. The things he was wont to say to account for himself appear to him to fall short. Virtue in its true form now seems elusive and separate from its ordinary manifestations. Both irony and *aporia* are thus "dislocating" in a way that distinguishes them from ordinary practical reflection – stepping back to consider whether one is living up to a fixed conception of what excellence consists in and requires.

Yet there is this difference: on Plato's representation, when the interlocutor is reduced to *aporia* he does not question what it would mean to live up to an ideal of virtue. He feels that he certainly does know what virtue is but that he has not managed to give a sufficient account of it. The experience of *aporia* is then distinguished from irony in two ways. First, in irony, the agent's prior understanding of an ideal is displaced ("what has any of this got to do with teaching?"), whereas in *aporia*, this is not the case – if anything, the interlocutor's sense

---

<sup>60</sup> In Lear's examples, the agent feels that he has lost his grip on a given activity or role even as he lives up to the conventional understanding of it. "I am listening to my priest, and this is precisely my problem." See Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 14-19.

of himself as knowing some specific virtue is intensified.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, in irony, the interlocutor's understanding of what it would mean to know a virtue is not brought into focus, whereas *aporia* depends fundamentally on this experience.

I infer that, for Socrates, a conception of oneself as living up to a substantive virtue or excellence rests on a conception of oneself as knower. This makes good sense, since people put themselves forward as knowers whenever they act.<sup>62</sup> For example, by going to war, an exhibition of arms, or even to the *agora*, Laches in effect claims to know how to live courageously; and similarly for the religious person who attends Sunday mass. In reducing the interlocutor to *aporia*, Socrates uses his sense of himself as living up to a substantive ideal of virtue to, as it were, concretise his understanding of *what it would mean to know this ideal*. This is, as he comes to think on account of Socrates' leading questions, a matter of accounting for the unity that runs through the plurality of virtuous thoughts, deeds, and institutions.<sup>63</sup>

Should we infer that *aporia* is not a kind of irony or, rather, that Lear's account of irony misses an epistemic dimension of the experience that Plato wishes to highlight? To my mind the latter is the right inference, for two reasons: first, the experience of *aporia* resembles the experience of irony in significant ways; and, secondly, given the dearth of ironic experiences in the Platonic dialogues other than *aporia*, and given the close connection between *aporia* and Socrates' method, there is little else that might justify the application of his account.

Of course, if Lear makes this move, then his interpretation of irony is incomplete. On his view, as we have noticed, the ironic experience leaves the agent at a loss in regard to how she should go on. She is committed to the ideal but no longer knows what is involved in living up to it. In Plato's dialogues, by contrast, the interlocutor in *aporia* is not lost in regard to the substantive ideal to which he is committed, and *does know how to go on*: he must pursue knowledge of virtue.<sup>64</sup> By attending to irony's epistemic dimension, we make Lear's account fit the texts and account for the protreptic aspect of Socrates' discourse. It is always clear that the interlocutor should carry on in the inquiry. The irony at the heart of *aporia* is this – one grasps one's life's principle by recognising that one does not know what it is.

<sup>61</sup> See Plato, *Laches*, 194a-b.

<sup>62</sup> Lear makes a similar claim about the agent's "non observational first-person authority" concerning what he or she is doing. This is explicitly a reference to Elizabeth Anscombe's account of intention and practical knowing. See Lear, *The Case for Irony*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Plato, *Euthyphro*, 5c-d, and Plato, *Laches*, 191c-e.

<sup>64</sup> See Plato, *Euthyphro*, 15c-e, and Plato, *Laches*, 194a.

## VII. The “What” and the “How” of Socrates’ method

Lear does not question the standard view that Socrates’ method is a form of cross-examination. He merely argues that we must pay attention to how he *uses* discourse of this sort. But, as he himself observes, cross-examination leaves many interlocutors angry and unmoved. The idea that Socrates would in general defeat his therapeutic goal by applying an inappropriate method seems to me implausible. I suggest that while Socrates does use a kind of inconsistency for therapeutic ends, his method is not *elenchus* even on the surface.

As I have noted, Lear accepts that Socrates seeks to reduce his interlocutor to inconsistency. If this end is to be compatible with therapy, then, since irony is therapeutic disruption, there must be a sense in which contradiction can be ironic. Lear’s discussion of Mr. A. suggests that contradiction can reveal different “voices” or “perspectives” within the soul. When A. recognises that the sentence “all you’ve done is sit there” expresses opposite sentiments, he “hears” the voices of both complaint and gratitude. The recognition of irony is a drawing together of contradictory elements and the forming of a point of contact between different “voices” in the soul.

In the preceding section, I argued that the experience of aporetic irony is not quite of this sort. It involves the dislocating sense that one’s understanding of virtue falls short of what one knows that it should be. In the aporetic moment, the interlocutor takes up two different and conflicting “perspectives.” On the one hand, there is the hubbub of ordinary virtuous action that constitutes his understanding of how to live; on the other, there is a higher knowledge, not fully grasped, which would account for the goodness of all of these actions. In ironic experience, the interlocutor looks down from the vantage of knowledge upon ordinary virtuous acts; his viewpoint has been elevated to the level of the universal. He thus recognises in the moment of irony a contradiction between two different perspectives on virtue that are both felt to be his own.<sup>65</sup> This experience involves, as it were, communication between two centres of agency within the soul.

If this is correct, then the form of the Socratic method cannot be *elenchus*. Socrates wants his interlocutor to experience his own understanding of virtue as falling short of the demands of knowledge and to identify himself with these higher demands. Cross-examination could not produce this effect since it would leave conflicting propositions

---

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Plato, *Laches*, 194a-b.



at the same level: it would not create any depth. A therapeutic contradiction relevant to Socrates' method must differentiate between levels of self.

We can find a harmony between the “what” and the “how” of the Socratic method by paying attention to the way that Socrates handles insufficient accounts of virtue. As is well known, he attributes knowledge to his interlocutor; he invites him to articulate it by giving a *logos*. In response to the interlocutor's answers, Socrates introduces principles of definition to lead him to the judgement that these answers are unsatisfactory. And, from this he infers that the interlocutor has not stated what he knows – for this reason, he must seek to give a better account.<sup>66</sup>

This model of the Socratic method is supported by many of Plato's texts.<sup>67</sup> In the present context, the main point is that it enables us to see how the form of Socrates' method might be fitted to its use. The form of Socrates' method is not *elenchus* but *exegesis* – the “drawing out” of knowledge that interlocutor is assumed to have already.<sup>68</sup> The method does not seek to reduce the interlocutor to inconsistency at the level of propositions. It aims rather to get him to see that he lives by opinions that fall short of his knowledge. In this ironic moment, the interlocutor's conception of virtue is recognised as insufficient from a higher perspective that is also somehow his own.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for feedback on an earlier draft of this paper and to Despina Vertzagia and George Peter Bifis, who provided helpful assistance during the editorial process. My research is supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

## References

Futter, Dylan B. “Socrates' Search for Laches' Knowledge of Courage.” *Dialogue* 56, no. 4 (2017): 775-798.

Klein, Jacob. *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*. Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Plato, *Euthyphro*, 15c-d.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, my article, “Socrates' Search for Laches' Knowledge of Courage,” *Dialogue* 56, no. 4 (2017): 775-798.

<sup>68</sup> This idea will seem familiar to readers of Plato and so, in fact, it is. See, for example, the myth of recollection in *Meno* and the notion of spiritual pregnancy in *Theaetetus*.



Lear, Jonathan. "The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis." In *A Companion to Socrates*, edited by Sarah Ahbel-Rappe, and Rachana Kamtekar, 442-462. London, and New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Lear, Jonathan. *The Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Lear, Jonathan. *Therapeutic Action. An Earnest Plea for Irony*. London: H. Karnac Books, 2003.

Levenson, Lawrence N. "Superego Defense Analysis in the Termination Phase." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 46, no. 3 (1998): 847-866.

Plato. "Apology." In *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 1. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901.

Plato. "Ethyphro." In *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 1. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901.

Plato. "Laches." In *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 3. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901.

Plato. "Meno." In *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 3. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901.

Plato. "Republic." In *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 4. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901.

Plato. "Theaetetus." In *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 1. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901.

Vlastos, Gregory. "The Socratic Elenchus: Method is All." In *Socratic Studies*, edited by M. F. Burnyeat, 1-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.