

# A Companion to Socrates

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# The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis

JONATHAN LEAR

I can't as yet know myself as the inscription at Delphi enjoins; and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. So, saying goodbye to all that . . . I direct my inquiries to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up than the monster Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature.<sup>1</sup>

—Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*

In its origin, function and relation to sexual love, the "Eros" of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup>

—Freud

## 1.

Can conversation make a fundamental difference to how people live? Socrates is thought to have been trying to improve the lives of those he talked to, through his peculiar form of conversation. As he said in his own defense, "I go around doing nothing but persuading young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul."<sup>3</sup> But his aim was not merely to convince someone of this as though it were the conclusion of an argument. That would be compatible with indolence – a person might believe that it is better to care for his soul than his body or wealth, but leave it at that. It is also compatible with a person becoming passionately concerned with his soul, but going off in cockeyed directions. Socrates' conversation was meant to motivate a person to care about his soul, and to help him take steps to improve it. That is, Socratic conversation had a therapeutic intent.

But when one asks what method Socrates used, the answer that typically comes to mind – the famous method of cross-examination, the elenchus – seems unsatisfying. First, if one looks at the dialogues in which the elenchus is used, there is no evidence that any of the interlocutors are improved by the conversation. Indeed, they often seem irritated, fed up, anxious to leave. Second, the Socrates of the *Republic* seems to give us an account of why elenchus on its own won't work. There he famously divides

the soul into three parts – appetite, spirit, and reason. And he argues that personalities can be formed by any one of the parts gaining dominance over the other two. So, an honor-loving person is one in which spirit rules. This is a person who organizes his life to gain recognition and admiration. His reason is subjugated to the task of figuring out how to get it; and his appetites are prevented from getting in the way. It would seem that such a person will not be improved by a straightforward cross-examination. For if a proud man is shown in a public space to have contradictory beliefs – and just at the moment when he is showing off – it is most likely he will feel embarrassed and angry. And, in any case, once one has a theory of psychic structure, the primary issue can no longer be changing a person's beliefs; it must be a matter of changing the structure of his soul. It is not clear how the elenchus could do that. And it is a notable feature of the Platonic dialogues that when Socrates discusses psychic structure – notably in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* – the elenchus disappears.

But what then is Socrates' method? One typical answer is to insist that the Socratic method just is the elenchus. Then when Socrates departs from the elenchus in the Platonic dialogues – so this answer goes – it is not really Socrates speaking, but Plato. This answer is, I think, unsatisfying: both because it fails to think deeply enough about what elenchus is and because it thereby fails to see a unity in Socrates' method that transcends the issue of whether he is or is not using elenchus. I can give my answer in a nutshell, but I warn you that in that nutshell the answer will most likely be misunderstood. Socratic method is irony. But to see why this answer is correct we need to abandon much of what we mean in general by irony; and much of what we have assumed Socratic irony to be.

My method of argument will be roundabout and unusual. In the bulk of this essay, I shall look carefully at how psychoanalysis works. Psychoanalysis commends itself to our attention because it takes seriously the idea that the soul has structure. Indeed, it is a peculiar form of conversation that aims to bring about a structural change in the soul. How could any conversation do that? Philosophers have long been interested in psychoanalysis – and they have long been interested in its similarities to Socratic method – but they have tended to focus on psychoanalytic theory – what one can get out of reading Freud – and have ignored how that theory is instantiated in psychoanalytic practice. If we look to that, I think we can find a Socratic practice that might otherwise escape our notice. And we can discover in convincing detail how psychoanalytic conversation might genuinely promote structural change. Having done that, I shall return to the Platonic dialogues and show that there is a Socratic method that includes elenchus but transcends it. That method is irony.

## 2.

If we want to understand the Socratic method in psychoanalysis, the method of cross-examination, the elenchus, is the wrong place to look. In a paradigm case of elenchus, an interlocutor will put forward a belief about what, say, piety is. Socrates will then elicit other beliefs, draw inferences that the interlocutor agrees to, and finally bring out a contradiction.<sup>4</sup> If the interlocutor wants to avoid contradiction, he must change some of his beliefs. But psychoanalysis is not particularly concerned with changing

anyone's beliefs about anything. In the course of a therapy, analysts may change their beliefs in all sorts of ways; but analysis does not aim for this as an outcome. Psychoanalysis is a peculiar conversation that aims to change, not a person's beliefs, but the structure and function of her soul. Moreover, it aims to do so by means that are transparent, fair and noncoercive. It promotes the development of a certain kind of psychic freedom. But what does this mean?

To understand the distinctive contribution psychoanalytic therapy can make, we need to understand the difference between changes the psyche undergoes as part of its normal functioning and changes in the way the psyche itself functions. When people's psyches are functioning normally, they typically change their beliefs and emotions on the basis of their experiences. Sometimes those experiences may bring about massive changes. You might say something that hurts my feelings terribly, and changes the way I lead my life. Someone else might say something that causes massive changes in beliefs. Imagine that you are living through a scientific revolution: you are in a classroom and Galileo (or Newton or Darwin or Einstein) is your teacher. It may well be that by the end of the semester basically everything you ever believed about the world has changed. And it may well be that these changes in cognitive state are accompanied by thrilling emotional changes: the marvel of it all. Still, this is just what the psyche does. So too with the simpler case of changes in one's beliefs in response to an acknowledged contradiction. That kind of change is just what a normally functioning psyche will do. The psyche is in the business of metabolizing experience: changing cognitive and emotional states in response to experience.

But what might it be to change the forms of metabolization themselves? Imagine a fellow student in your Galileo class who began the semester with the same beliefs about the natural world as you had and, as the semester proceeded, he changed his beliefs just as you did. But for him, it was all flat, dull, *lifeless*. It is as though he were looking at life through plate glass. One might speculate whether he was depressed; but what certainly seems true is that his capacity to process beliefs is cut off from his capacity to react emotionally to his experiences. Now imagine that he enters a peculiar conversation whose outcome is that a new vibrancy enters his life. He believes the same things, but he believes them differently: there is a newfound sense of wonder that humans could have thought this, amazement that the world could be *here* rather than *there* – a sense of joy and dread that it is no longer clear what "*here*" could mean.<sup>5</sup> This does seem to be a change in how his psyche functions. His emotional life now seems connected to his cognitive life. This is an example of the kind of a difference psychoanalysis can make.

### 3.

Freud developed psychoanalysis to alleviate a particular form of human suffering which he called neurosis. If we look just below the surface of human life, we will see that people regularly sabotage their own attempts at happiness or freedom – often in ways that they do not understand. A person may know she should break up with her boyfriend, but she can't quite do it. She cares for him, but not *that* much; she doesn't think they have *that* much in common; but she will marry him rather than break up.

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She may have no idea why – just a sense that she *can't* break up. A student may actually want to do his homework and yet somehow he can't quite get around to it. He puts it off and puts it off; and by the time he finally does get around to it, it is a mad rush where he does much less well than he would otherwise have done. It makes him unhappy and exhausts him. Yet it is somehow also OK with him: it is the way he lives. Another might find himself blurring things out in class that sound stupid – almost as if he were out to humiliate himself. Another might find herself drinking too much, even though she told herself she wouldn't, and then doing things she regrets. Some people are lonely and would like so much to talk to others, but they just can't. Others talk so much the intimacy they crave becomes impossible. There are some who are successful in their professional lives, but get no pleasure out of it; and others who look as though they are in a happy marriage, but feel empty inside. The list is endless. Some cases are complex; others are bizarre. But in each case the people are disrupting themselves – and in a strange way they are *motivated* to do so – even though there is no straightforward sense in which they want to make themselves unhappy.

Freud explained neurosis in terms of psychological conflict, but his account of the conflict shifted over time. At the beginning of his career, he thought the conflict was basically between a person's wishes, beliefs, emotions and judgments. So, for instance, a person's erotic wishes may come into conflict with her sense of what is proper. Erotic wish is simply repressed. It disappears from the person's conscious awareness, but not from her mind. It lives on in the unconscious, pressuring the person in weird and incomprehensible ways.<sup>6</sup> This is a conflict between items that are in the mind.

But in his maturity, Freud came to think that the psyche could come into conflict with itself. The psyche was not a mere container of conflicting atoms, but had a structure of its own. Like Plato, Freud divided the mind into three parts. Freud's division into parts is significantly different from Plato's, but the principles by which the division is made are remarkably similar.<sup>7</sup> Both are concerned with a peculiarly human vulnerability: to be subject to conflicts between fundamentally different types of desires, aspirations or inhibitions. Freud famously partitioned the psyche into an id, ego, and superego.<sup>8</sup> The id is a reservoir of wishes and fantasies, largely unconscious; it bears a striking similarity to what Plato called appetite. The ego is largely concerned with reality and functioning in the world. Our conscious sense of who we are, our capacity for monitoring our own beliefs and emotions, our sense of what the world is like – all of these are ego-functions. The superego is a repository of our ideals and hopes – and it can also exercise a cruel, punishing function when we don't live up to them.<sup>9</sup>

Freud now thought that neurotic suffering was an expression of a *structural* conflict inside the mind. So, for instance, if someone had a punishing superego, the superego would be set over against the ego, judging it remorselessly. This structural conflict might manifest itself in all sorts of ways. Most obviously, I might hear myself saying, "Jonathan you idiot! Why can't you just . . . ?" Here I am addressing myself in the second person – I am virtually treating myself as though I were someone else – and from this distanced position I unleash a barrage of criticism – onto myself! This is one instance of what it is to take up a superego position.<sup>10</sup> Other examples are less obvious. A person may just feel depressed. (But when the depression is analyzed, it turns out that the person is depressed because she feels nothing she could do would ever

measure up.) Another person may have an amorphous sense of guilt. (When analyzed it turns out there is a harsh voice saying everything is his fault.) Another person may continually write and then rip up copies of his screenplay. Another person may suffer writer's block and not be able to write a single word. Another person may be wildly critical of others – but in therapy it emerges that he is deflecting outwards criticisms he really holds against himself. And so on.

But if neurosis is an expression of a structural conflict inside the psyche, a cure must involve a structural change. It is difficult to see how any conversation could bring that about. Certainly, a standard Socratic cross-examination won't work: for while facing a contradiction in one's beliefs might cause some discomfort in the interlocutor, neurotic structures are too stubbornly stable to be undone so easily. Even Plato seems to have recognized that. For, in the *Republic*, not only does Socrates develop a tripartite division of the soul, he gives a sophisticated account of how particular forms of human suffering are the outcomes of structural conflict between the different parts. He doesn't use the word "neurosis," but he does have an account of neurotic conflict. So, for example, the oligarchic personality will tend to hold down his appetites by brute force – and this will have all sorts of unfortunate consequences, both in his own soul and in his family environment.<sup>11</sup> It is a striking fact that by the time the Socrates of the *Republic* spells out his theory of psychic structure, he is not using the elenchus. And though the limitation of elenchus is not explicitly discussed, it is dramatized. Socrates engages in a famous examination of Thrasymachus in *Republic* I; but at the beginning of Book II Glaucon asks him, politely but firmly, whether, in addition to his virtuoso performance, he would actually like to convince anyone.<sup>12</sup> For the next nine books, the investigation into the nature of justice, soul and polis proceeds in the absence of elenchic argument. It remains a fascinating question what Socratic method could be once the soul is discovered to be structured. I shall return to this question at the end of the paper.

#### 4.

We are looking for the Socratic spirit alive in psychoanalytic practice. How it got there is not our business. The point is not that Freud was a Plato scholar and self-consciously introduced a Socratic method; nor that psychoanalysis has been shaped by any explicit interpretation of Socrates. (In my experience, when Socrates is invoked to explain a practice, he is regularly misapplied. Is there anything more un-Socratic than the so-called "Socratic method" in law schools?) Socrates is, of course, part of the air we breathe in Western culture; and there is no doubt that Freud breathed deeply. Thus there may well be circuitous and complex influences that proceed from Socratic psychoanalytic practice. To trace them would be the job of an intellectual historian. For the purposes of this paper, I am just as happy with the thought that psychoanalysts, like Socrates, came up against something very remarkable about the human soul and responded to it in similar ways. The important causal influence is not of Socrates upon Freud, but of the human soul upon both Socrates and psychoanalysts. Moreover, I am concerned with capturing the Socratic spirit in *contemporary* psychoanalytic practice – when that practice is well done. I am not concerned here with Freud's actual practice

– which could be intrusive, cajoling, even bullying. There were occasions where Freud cross-examined his patients as though he was a prosecuting attorney trying to wrest a confession out of a hostile witness.<sup>13</sup> Whether there is anything "Socratic" about such awful therapeutic technique is not the subject of this inquiry.

If we wish to find Socrates alive in psychoanalytic practice, the place to look is in the use of irony to address the question of how to live. This claim requires two important qualifications: one about what it is to "address the question," the other about what is meant by irony.

It is not any question we are dealing with, Socrates tells us, but *how should one live?*<sup>14</sup> But there is a serious *practical* question of how one might succeed in raising this question. If, for example, one examines Socrates' conversation with Phaedrus, it is not clear that anything in the conversation has made any difference to Phaedrus. The entire dialogue is given over to the question of how to live – whether it is better to be loved by a lover than a nonlover, what is the power and proper use of speech and writing, what is it about the nature of our souls that pulls us away from living well – and yet, looking at Phaedrus, it is arguable that he never seriously faces the question. Phaedrus is someone who, as Socrates puts it, *feasts* on speeches.<sup>15</sup> He is smitten with the sounds and sights of speech – so much so that there is little evidence that the truth or falsity of what is being said matters to him. He takes a kind of sensuous delight in speech: consuming it with appetitive hunger. It is hard to see, then, how anything Socrates says could get to Phaedrus in the right sort of way. For Phaedrus is metabolizing speech in the wrong sort of way. Socrates might try to show Phaedrus that Lysias' speech praising the nonlover is in fact misleading and dangerous – but for Phaedrus this is one more delicious speech which he can bring back to Lysias in the hopes of eliciting from him yet another marvelous speech to consume.<sup>16</sup> What a banquet! They may talk about how one should live, but in an important sense the conversation has not yet begun – and it is precisely the "conversation about how to live" that is getting in the way.

In psychoanalysis, similar problems arise all the time. When analysts start to talk explicitly about how to live, they are often using their capacity for intellectual thought to maintain a distance from what is really on their minds. When they talk about some psychological trait they have – "I have this obsessive need to . . ." – it is usually in the service of staying with pat formulations, and thereby avoiding any genuine insight into what they are like. It may even be that the content of what they are saying is true; the problem is that it does not connect to their lives in a living sort of a way. Psychoanalysts call these *resistances* to genuine analysis. In short, "raising the question of how to live" can be a way of avoiding the question of how to live. It is a serious technical question in psychoanalysis how to allow the question of how to live emerge in ways that genuinely engage the soul. From the dramatization of a number of the dialogues, it looks like this was a serious issue for Plato too. For example, if one looks for signs of progress or development in the reactions of the interlocutors in *Phaedrus*, *Euthyphro*, and *Symposium* it is not clear that anyone has developed as a result of the conversation. And Socrates' famous worry that writing philosophy down may be a form of forgetting it rather than remembering it, among other things, a worry that the use of stock phrases can mislead people into thinking they are doing philosophy when in fact they are engaged in an empty exercise.

Now if irony were only what it is commonly taken to be in contemporary culture, it would be no more than another resistance to analysis. There might be a technical question about how to deal with such questionable "humor" in an analytic context, but irony would not be any more significant than that. So, for example, in "Irony in psychoanalysis" the psychoanalyst-author gives this example:

Analyst: I have your bill ready.  
Patient: Fantastic!

This, of course, is an example of irony as we popularly know it. The author comments:

My remark, "I have your bill ready," was literal and straightforward, allowing of no other meaning. My patient's reply, "Fantastic!" was clearly ironic, and would be so understood by any person familiar with analysis. The speaker did not imply that he was thrilled at being presented with a bill – quite the contrary: he intended that I should understand him in a sense opposite to the literal expression.<sup>17</sup>

From a psychoanalytic point of view, what is strange about this account is the claim that the analyst's remark "was literal and straightforward, allowing of no other meaning." For it is virtually constitutive of psychoanalysis that no statement is so literal and straightforward that it allows of no other meaning. Indeed, it is my hunch that, even when he wrote this, the author didn't really believe it. Rather, he was in the grip of a popular theory about irony, in which the ironic person achieves his effect by saying the opposite of what he means.<sup>18</sup> And he is certainly supported by many authorities, including for example the *Oxford English Dictionary* which defines irony as "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite as that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to express condemnation or contempt."<sup>19</sup> And, of course, if this is what a billion English speakers mean by irony, then this is what "irony" means.

Still, perhaps the dictionary only gives us, as it were, the ego of the concept. Perhaps there is a deeper meaning, a deeper use, of the concept of irony that escapes everyday awareness. I think there is; and I think this deeper use is significant for understanding how psychoanalysis works: and I think one can find this deeper use of irony in Socrates' practice. But to discover this deeper use, we need to abandon the assumption that we already know what irony is: namely, a somewhat sarcastic saying the opposite of what one means. Obviously, the issue of Socratic irony is, and will remain, a debatable topic – and it is not the purpose of this article to work through that debate.<sup>20</sup> Rather, I simply want to pick out one strain of what Socratic irony might be and show how fruitful it is to understanding how psychoanalysis works.

But to do that, I have to go against an interpretive assumption that has governed much of the debate about Socratic irony. In a number of passages, Socrates' interlocutors – notably Thrasymachus, Alcibiades and Callicles – accuse Socrates of being ironic.<sup>21</sup> They are frustrated by him – even fed up – and they do seem to mean that he is shamming, saying the opposite of what he really means. (The Greek words *eirōneia*, *eirōn*, and *eirōneuomai* did suggest an attempt to deceive.) But Thrasymachus, Callicles and Alcibiades all have distorted characters – twisted out of shape by narcissistic (*thumos*-driven) longing for recognition, honor, or seduction. Obviously, there is a

question whether their pride has distorted their perceptions of Socrates. Perhaps he is not shamming as they – in their frustration and wounded pride – imply. But, less obviously, there is a deeper question whether, for all their distorted perceptions, they are also speaking beyond themselves: uttering a truth that they themselves do not understand. Let "irony" serve as an enigmatic name that picks out Socrates' distinctive activity – however that is properly to be understood. Then Socrates is being "ironic" even though his accusers are confused about what his irony consists in.

## 5.

My understanding of Socratic irony is indebted to Søren Kierkegaard. Consider this entry from his diary:

What did Socrates' irony actually consist of? Could it be certain terms and turns of speech or such? No, these are mere trifles; maybe virtuosity in speaking ironically. Such things do not constitute a Socrates. No, his entire life was irony and consists of this: while the whole contemporary population . . . were absolutely sure that they were human beings and knew what it meant to be a human being, Socrates probed in depth (ironically) and busied himself with the problem: *what does it mean to be a human being?* By doing so he really expressed that all the bustle of these thousands was an illusion . . . Socrates doubted that a person was a human being at birth; it doesn't come so easy, and neither does the knowledge of what it means to be a human being.<sup>22</sup>

For Kierkegaard, Socratic irony is not a turn of phrase but a way of life. It is made possible by a peculiar gap between pretense and aspiration that is embedded in our lives. In this example, human life is not merely participation in a biological species, but involves some understanding of what it is to be human. Thus the whole contemporary population can be sure they are human. In their lives, their professions, their social roles they put themselves forward *as* human. Call this the *pretense* of the concept in the literal, nonpejorative sense of "the putting forth of a claim."<sup>23</sup> There need be no hypocrisy involved. The members of the contemporary population in the very living of their lives *put forward a claim* that this is what is involved in living a human life. But the concept also has an aspiration that typically transcends the social practice. We glimpse this when we ask, of a particular act, was that a *humane* thing to do? The question is not about whether the act was perpetrated by a member of the human species. Or if, at university, we consider the division of the *humanities*; by and large the division teaches remarkable aspects of the human spirit. (It leaves the study of our everyday, mediocre habits to the social sciences!)

Socrates investigates what it is to be human by considering various ways humans try to live up to something. So, he considers the virtues or human excellences and asks, What is it to be pious? What is it to be courageous? What is it to be just? He also considers various professions – the human effort to profess oneself to be something. What is it to be a politician? What is it to be a sophist (one who knows)? What is it to be a rhetorician? What is it to be a doctor? He also asks about social formations: What is it to be a city?

In each case, Socrates is able to isolate an aspiration that escapes the practices which express the current social understanding of the category. So, for instance, if doctors are those who promote health in their patients, the current social group that puts themselves forward as doctors are, Socrates argues, failing to do this. Instead, they provide drugs that may alleviate pain, but allow people to maintain their dis-solute lives. In the name of promoting health, they in fact promote the diseased status quo. They need not be doing this hypocritically or cynically. They may sincerely be trying to promote health. The *pretense* of medicine is simply the socially accepted practices in which people put forward the claim that they promote health, that they legitimately occupy their position, that, in short, they are doctors. But once the claim is made, there is room for the (ironic) question:

Among all the doctors, is there a doctor?

And it is a stunning fact about us that we can immediately sense that there is a real question here. It is as though our ears are attuned to something which transcends our current social understanding. If, by contrast, we should ask,

Among all the ducks, is there a duck?

we have no idea what this purported question could mean.<sup>24</sup> But in the former case, we intuitively detect that a genuine question is being asked about how well or badly our current social understanding of doctoring – the pretense – fits with our aspirations of what is truly involved in doctoring.

This kind of question provides a test for Socratic irony – at least, the type of irony that is most relevant to Socrates. Consider these questions, and what I take to be Plato's answers:

- Among all the sophists, is there a sophist (one who knows)? –Yes, there is one: Socrates – for he is the one who knows that he doesn't know.
- Among all the rhetoricians, is there a rhetorician? –Yes, there is one: Socrates – for he is the one who is trying to lead the souls of those with whom he speaks towards what is true.
- Among all the politicians is there a politician? –Yes there is one: Socrates – for he is the one using the political art to try to shape Athens into a true polis.
- Among all the citizens of Athens is there a citizen? –Well, there was one: he was put to death by a majority vote.

Note that there are two features of this Socratic irony which go against the grain of the popular understanding of what irony is. First, in asking these questions one can mean exactly what one is saying, not the opposite. Second, being ironic in this sense is compatible with being earnest at the same time. In asking, for example,

Among all the politicians in America, is there a politician?

we may be asking the most serious question imaginable about the future well-being of the country. As one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms put it,

From the fact that irony is present it does not follow that earnestness is excluded. That is something only assistant professors assume.<sup>25</sup>

## 6.

With this understanding of Socratic irony in hand, we can now see two distinct but related ways it is present in psychoanalysis. One is more general, the other more technical. I shall deal with them in that order.

Freud once wrote that the aim of psychoanalysis is to help people to love and to work. Some critics interpret this as meaning that the aim of psychoanalysis is to help people put up with their flawed marriages and boring jobs. Call it adjustment!<sup>26</sup> But a deeper reading is possible: in their attempts to work out a life for themselves, people experience a profound need for intimacy and for creativity. The forms of these aspirations will vary enormously: they need not be grand or conform to any established ideal. Typically people will formulate very specific problems for themselves, but if one listens long enough, one can often hear a large-scale ironic question:

- As a friend, am I a friend?
- As a lover, am I a lover?
- As a beloved, do I allow myself to be loved?
- In my life, am I living?

And so on. These are all questions of how pretense and aspiration fit together. Often people will have an inchoate sense that in their efforts to put themselves forward in a certain way, they somehow sabotage their own aspirations. To take a paradigm example, a person might come for psychoanalytic therapy after the second or third break-up of a serious relationship. She may experience the break-up as something that happened to her, but has a vague intuition that perhaps she is somehow implicated in ways she doesn't understand. Above all, she is sick of it, sick of herself. And she wants to know in a pressing, urgent way: is this her fate? Is this as far as it is ever going to go for her in terms of human intimacy? Or might it just be possible, between now and death, to have a more meaningful human relationship?

Sometimes the analysis's official problem – the symptom – will look bizarre. And it will certainly seem as though it has nothing to do with these large-scale ironic problems. I had a patient who sought analysis because he could not urinate or defecate in a public toilet. If anyone came into the bathroom his sphincter muscles would clamp shut. And he became so upset by this that, even when no one was present, his muscles would remain rigid. What could this have to do with high-minded questions about intimacy and creativity? As it turns out, a lot. A symptom is never an isolated atom, even though it often presents itself as one. In this case, the patient organized his life around the symptom. For example, he organized his diet – lots of coffee at night – so that he would be sure to feel the urge to urinate and defecate while at home. He would not eat or drink anything during the day for fear that he would feel the need to go to the bathroom. Of course, he stayed away from the place others had lunch for he didn't want them to notice anything was odd. He had to turn down all lunch invitations. But



then he also started to turn down dinner invitations – what if he had to go to the bathroom. And he turned down requests from his boss to travel. And he then he stopped traveling altogether. The fact that airplanes and trains have single-person toilets no longer seemed to register with him. It all became impossible. The analysis did uncover specific links to bathrooms, to being overheard, to urinating and defecating – but it also uncovered how, unbeknownst to himself, this patient also used this symptom to isolate himself from his friends and colleagues. Living with the symptom became his life. And it was held in place by tremendous anxiety triggered by his aspirations for friendship, love, and creative expression in the workplace. His personal version of the question – What is it to be a friend? – was “answered” with an urgent need to urinate followed by a muscle-bound sense that urinating was forbidden, impossible.

While this case may at first look strange, when we consider more general difficulties – like nervous tummies, irritable bowels, impulsive eating and bingeing, anxiety attacks, etc. – we can see that the overall structure is not that uncommon.

## 7.

Freud came to think that neurotic suffering was the outcome of conflict between different parts of the soul. On this view, problems we see on the surface of life – for example, repeated difficulty in writing papers for class – will be a manifestation of intrapsychic conflict between warring parts of the soul. In this case, there might be a nit-picking “parental” superego that “says” that *nothing* the person does could ever measure up. Or there might be an ego that is fearful of its own ambition and aggression: writing a paper means progressing in the generational process, becoming an adult, *taking over* from the parents and assigning them to old age.<sup>27</sup> Instead of being able to negotiate these conflicting feelings, the parts of the soul are set over against each other in a kind of intrapsychic civil war. The outcome is writer’s block and suffering in school – though the student has no idea why.

If a conversation were to make a significant difference it would have to bring about a structural change in the psyche. It is not enough simply to talk about one’s fears of success, one’s feelings that one never measures up, and so on: for while the conversation may be of some value in expanding one’s psychological awareness, it will most likely get caught up in the very problem it is trying to solve. The person will begin to feel that he isn’t quite measuring up *in the therapy*; that his insights really aren’t that good, that he can’t really take a step forward, that all this talking isn’t really doing much good in terms of writing papers – and this must be his fault! If he genuinely has a fear of success, he may be able to talk about it – but that needn’t stop him from sabotaging the therapy for fear of success.<sup>28</sup> Neurotic structures are wily – and they are extraordinarily durable. So how could any conversation bring about a structural change? Somehow the conversation would have to undo a neurotic structure and bring about healthy relations between what had hitherto been warring parts.

It is here that Socratic irony plays a crucial role. For it is possible to think of each of the parts of the soul in terms of aspiration and pretense. The id is a primitive and archaic source of wishes and appetites – but in its own way it is also a voice of aspiration. Think of Cookie Monster, on the US children’s program *Sesame Street*: “Me Want

Cookie!” In effect, the id is “saying” things like “Me want Mommy!” It is left vague whether the aim is to *have* Mommy or to *be* Mommy – or, in having Mommy to be her. The point is that these wishful, appetitive impulses are not simply desires for a distinct object: they express aspirations in their own id-like way.<sup>29</sup> It goes to the heart of the psychoanalytic conception of eros that – from the most elemental bodily appetites to the highest ideals – humans are aspiring animals.

The superego is much more obviously a voice of aspiration. It expresses a person’s ideals and ambitions. And it also has a cruel punishing voice for any failure to live up to them. The cruel superego is – in its own superego-like way – a voice of aspiration.

And, of course, the ego is the voice of pretense. Stretched between wishful impulses one side and criticizing voices on the other, I *put myself forward*: as Jonathan Lear, a teacher, professor, someone who has trained as a philosopher and psychoanalyst, someone capable of writing this essay, and so on. To repeat: the voice of pretense need not be hypocritical. Of course, it may be.

Once we conceptualize the parts of the soul this way, we can see that in neurotic conflict there will necessarily be a gap between aspiration and pretense. It is constitutive of neurotic conflict that the parts are cut off from each other, and that real communication between them is impossible. The aim of psychoanalysis is to overcome this structural impasse. One way to think of the therapeutic process is in terms of *bringing out the irony*. For it is precisely by making the gap between aspiration and pretense explicit that one starts to draw the different parts of the soul into communicative relations.

Let me give a brief example. At the time he sought analysis, Mr. A was single, middle-aged, and successful in his professional occupation. But in spite of his outward professional success, inwardly he felt anxious and inhibited. He saw himself as “wearing a nice mask to hide the real, ugly, nasty me.”<sup>30</sup> He was anxious about aggressive impulses and angry feelings, particularly towards those in positions of authority. This became prominent in his relations with his analyst – in what analysts call the *transference*.<sup>31</sup> He experienced his analyst as a controlling authority who inhibited him and kept him in line.

Overall, Mr. A had a successful analysis – he was able to open up in all sorts of ways to others and to himself – and there is much to be said about how these changes came about. But I want to focus on one moment towards the end of the analysis, in the so-called termination phase. In the fourth year of his treatment, Mr. A began to talk about bringing the analysis to a close, but he used noticeably aggressive language. He talked of “quitting” the analysis; he began to “warn” his analyst about it; and he insisted this was his decision, not the analyst’s, because he didn’t want to take the decision “lying down.” He felt joy when he finally proposed that they end the analysis, but then quickly felt hurt, angry, and abandoned when the analyst agreed to his proposal. It was as though their roles had switched: Mr. A experienced the doctor as the aggressive one who was rejecting him.

Mr. A then switched to gratitude. He began to speak of all the gains he had made in the analysis. He was much happier than he had been, he felt freer and more relaxed. He had been able to make life-changes that gave him real pleasure: he was now happily married, together they were buying a house, his wife was pregnant and they were both looking forward to having a baby. And he said that these external changes were

manifestations of significant internal changes. He was now a more confident person, and he felt that he could thus take on commitments with others in a more trusting and genuinely intimate way. He expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the analyst. And Mr. A's remarks did fit the analyst's sense that Mr. A had indeed used the analysis to make some far-reaching changes. "On the surface, at least, it seemed that this taking stock of what had been accomplished in his analysis was part of a 'rebuilding' or synthesizing process appropriate to termination."<sup>12</sup>

And yet, Mr. A also had a lingering cough, it began as part of infectious illness, but it never quite went away. And it seemed that Mr. A would start coughing more vigorously in the analytic session at times when he was talking about hostile feelings. Might the cough be a symptom? And might it be expressing some neurotic conflict that was being covered over by all the sincerely meant testimonials? Mr. A was, by now, an old hand at analysis, and he began to wonder about the meaning of his own cough. However, he didn't recognize the connection between his cough and his angry feelings "until an extended fit of coughing occurred when he suddenly became very angry with me, saying 'Do I want to tell you to fuck off!'"

He then began coughing uncontrollably for several minutes, finally leaving the office for a minute to go to the bathroom for a drink of water. Returning to the couch, he asked, "Why would I want to tell you to fuck off? You haven't done anything but been here."

I said, "Maybe that's why."

"Yes, you're the doctor," he replied. "Why haven't you cured me? I've been waiting for you to fix me."

This was the moment when Mr. A experienced the full intensity of his hostility toward me in the waning months of the analysis.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, this is no more than a snapshot of a brief moment in a long and complex analysis. But if we look carefully, there is a lot we can learn from it. Let us first consider the intrapsychic configuration that led up to this outburst. In terms of aspirations, there are id-like wishes for a magical cure: somehow the analysis was supposed to turn him into a completely different person — wonderfully handsome and powerful, effortlessly successful. *Superman!* As the analysis is coming to an end, there is a dawning sense that these infantile wishes will never be gratified. And so there arise angry id-like feelings of disappointment. These too express a voice of aspiration in that they are directly linked to the wishes. Then there is a punishing superego which issues an aspiration-filled command: *You shall not be angry! If you get angry, you are a bad person and will be punished! You ungrateful wretch!* What emerges between these conflicting forces is the pretense: Mr. A, who puts himself forward as, say, "a mild mannered reporter," who nevertheless feels he is somehow living behind a mask. This is the ego. And yet, the pretense doesn't quite work: Mr. A finds himself blurring out angry thoughts, acting impulsively in spastic angry outbursts. This is what brought him into analysis: an inchoate sense that his pretense was breaking down.

What is striking about neurotic conflict is that it makes thoughtful evaluation all but impossible. Mr. A is disappointed he has not received a magical cure; and he is angry at his analyst for not giving him one. But he would also be embarrassed to recognize those wishes. And he is also afraid of his own anger — indeed, he is angry at himself about his own anger. On top of that, he is genuinely grateful to his analyst for

all the help he has received. He has grown in many ways and he is proud of that. Nevertheless, instead of being able to take up all these conflicting and ambivalent feelings and think about what he wants do with them all, he develops a cough. The cough becomes a kind of nucleus of the conflict — expressing his angry feelings while also keeping them under cover. This is what makes Mr. A's conflict neurotic: the aspiring and pretending parts of the soul cannot find any genuine way to communicate; and lacking this, they conflict in ways that have bizarre and often unwelcome manifestations.

What is striking — and beautiful — about the analyst's response is that he confines himself to bringing out the irony. He does not offer Mr. A any content; no fact is presented for Mr. A to accept. If the analyst had said something like, "Your problem is that you are suffering from a conflict between your wish to blah blah blah and your ambition to blah blah blah," Mr. A's compliant self would have accepted the "insight" with gratitude. He might then tell others of his "inner needs" — and what he is saying might be true. But it would have made no real difference to the underlying structural conflict. Rather, the pretending part of Mr. A's soul — the ego — would have taken it up as part its role of "self-understanding." The analyst's "interpretation" would then be used as one part of the neurotic conflict, rather than as anything that might resolve it. Instead, the analyst invites the analysis back to his own just-spoken words.

"You haven't done anything but been here."

This is the sincere, heartfelt voice of pretense. Mr. A is expressing genuine puzzlement over his angry outburst. The analyst invites Mr. A to see that the very same words might also express a complaint: "I've been coming four days a week for four years, and what have you done? You've just sat there! And now I have to leave, and I have all these unsatisfied wishes, and what have you done? Nothing! You've just been here. That's it!" This is the voice of complaint — which is the voice of aspiration denied.

It is constitutive of neurotic conflict that Mr. A cannot hear both voices at the same time. This is because, in neurosis, the id, ego, and superego are all split off from each other. In the ego-position, Mr. A is all sincerity and puzzlement: he feels genuine gratitude and cannot understand his angry outburst. So as he says, "You haven't done anything but been here," he can only hear the voice of pretense. His angry feelings are right there in the room — he has just had a furious outburst — yet they are weirdly cut off from his feelings of gratitude and puzzlement. In the moment of speech, gratitude and puzzlement is *all* Mr. A feels.

The analyst's remark — "Maybe that's why" — brings Mr. A back to his own words — and thus back to the feelings of gratitude and puzzlement he has just been experiencing — and invites him to listen to another voice that may also be getting expressed in the here and now. What is important about this example is not simply that the same words can be used to express the voices of pretense and aspiration; it is, rather, that these words can be used as a *point of attachment* between different parts of the soul. That is, Mr. A can now use his own words to go back and forth between his genuine feelings of gratitude and his equally genuine feelings of disappointment and anger. This is just what he could not do when he was in a state of neurotic conflict. In effect, the analyst's remark invites Mr. A to use his own words to perform a bridging function

between the aspiring and pretending parts of his soul. He can now actually consider his conflicting feelings, and think about how he feels overall. He may learn simply to live with conflicting feelings. There may be no overall resolution. Still, this is a better way to deal with one's wishes and feelings than having a persistent cough, spastic outbursts, and mad dashes to the toilet.

It is important that by "maybe" the analyst means *maybe*. The analyst, like Socrates, genuinely does not know. Instead of offering an answer, the analyst extends an invitation to the analysand to *bring out the irony for himself*. Ultimately, bringing out the irony is the analysand's task, not the analyst's. And the invitation might not have worked – for various reasons. It might be that the analysand's hunch was wrong; it might be that the analysand was still in such neurotic conflict that he could not tolerate hearing any other voices than the one he was putting forward. One should keep in mind that this vignette occurs towards the end of a successful analysis, so Mr. A was ready to make connections that would likely have been impossible for him earlier on. Although in the moment of utterance, he could only hear his voice of pretense, as soon as the invitation is extended, he is ready to make the connection:

"Yes you're the doctor . . . Why haven't you cured me? I've been waiting for you to fix me."

It is by making a thousand such connections that bridges of communication are established between the aspiring and pretending parts of the soul. And it is these bridges that both constitute and facilitate structural change. Irony – used gently, carefully, but firmly – is essential to this therapeutic process. And it is in the use of irony that we shall find the Socratic method alive and well in the practice of psychoanalysis.<sup>34</sup>

## 8.

Throughout this essay I have used the expression "Socratic method" ironically. For there is a widespread assumption that the Socratic method just is the method of cross-examination, the elenchus. Let us call this the *pretense* of the Socratic method. That is, it is what scholars have put forward as a claim about what constitutes Socrates' method. It is well known that in the various Platonic dialogues the figure of Socrates espouses differing beliefs and uses different methods of inquiry. So much so, that it has led one distinguished ancient philosopher to claim that in the Platonic dialogues there are two Socrates:

I have been speaking of a "Socrates" in Plato. There are two of them. In different segments of Plato's corpus two philosophers bear that name. The individual remains the same. But in different sets of dialogues he pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting in the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic. They are so diverse in content and method that they contrast as sharply with one another as with any third philosophy you care to mention, beginning with Aristotle's.<sup>35</sup>

It is then assumed that the dialogues which employ the elenchus are "earlier" and that they provide insight into the historical Socrates. The dialogues that forego elenchus

and use demonstrative argument to put forward these about the nature of the soul and world are said to come later; and in them "Socrates" is just a spokesman for Plato. "The metamorphosis of Plato's teacher into Plato's mouthpiece is complete."<sup>36</sup>

This is not the place to offer a detailed critique of this picture, though it is worth noting in passing how tightly woven its interpretive principles are: Socrates is revealed by his method, which is the elenchus, which provides a basis for dating the dialogues into earlier and later (on the grounds that the younger Plato would be more loyally reflecting his teacher). Every inference here is open to challenge. But, for the purposes of this essay, I simply want to put forward a different interpretive principle: if we take Socratic method to be irony, and if we understand irony broadly – not in terms of saying the opposite of what one means or shamming – but as bringing out the gap between aspiration and pretense, then we can see a unity of method that spans the supposed division of the two Socrates. The aim is not to recover the historical Socrates, but to find a larger unity among specific differences.

First, Socrates' paradigmatic *use* of elenchus can be seen as a type of irony. Here I am not particularly concerned with the formal marks and features of elenchus, but with the distinctive ways Socrates deploys it. Socrates' major interlocutors have it in common that they *put themselves forward* as having knowledge of what they are talking about. Euthyphro, for example, takes himself to be an expert on piety.<sup>37</sup> Laches, as a successful general, takes himself to have some insight into what courage is. Protagoras puts himself forward as someone who can teach virtue, and thus who knows that virtue is teachable. Thrasymachus puts himself forward as someone who knows what justice really is. Socrates' interlocutors are paradigmatically men of pretense. And so, when Socrates deploys elenchus *on them*, he not only elicits contradictory beliefs – as befits the formal structure of elenchus – he also elicits from them an aspiration buried in their own understanding of the relevant virtue which outstrips their pretense to know. There is something about piety or courage or justice that transcends the claim put forward by the interlocutor. Thus Socrates' actual use of elenchus can be seen as a species of irony. Of course, if we think of elenchus merely as a method of cross-examination, as eliciting a contradiction in an interlocutor's beliefs, there is no reason to think of elenchus as a form of irony. But when we attend to the particular ways Socrates deploys elenchus – especially in the paradigm cases – we see that he is putting elenchus to ironic use. Irony is the *how* not the *what* of Socratic elenchus. (One will not be able to see this if one concentrates exclusively on the formal structure of elenchus. Nor will one see it if one focuses solely on the interlocutor's propositional attitudes; e.g. "X believes that p. But he also believes q and r which imply not-p." One also needs to see how those propositional attitudes fit into the interlocutor's pretense and his ultimate ability to recognize aspirations built into the virtue he pretends to know.)

Second, it is a commonplace of Platonic scholarship that by the time Socrates discovers the tripartite soul, he has abandoned elenchic method. And, as we saw in sections 1 and 2 above, there are good reasons for doing so: if a person's belief system is dominated by appetites or desire for honor, it is not clear that merely drawing out a contradiction in his beliefs will make much difference to him. So far, so good. But this has led commentators to assume that Book I of the *Republic* – which is largely given over to an elenchic examination of Thrasymachus – must be significantly earlier than, even tacked onto the later books, in which the soul is divided and the elenchus is not

used. Supposedly this shows that Socrates is in Book I, and his Platonically altered namesake is in Books II–X. But if we think in terms of irony, a unity will emerge amidst the differences. I do not know to what extent Plato was aware of this unity. However, the claim that Book I is simply tacked onto the *Republic* arises largely from a failure to see such unity.

Socrates divides the soul into three parts. Appetite desires sex and food (and money which can be used to gratify appetites). Spirit (or *thumos*) desires recognition and honor. Reason desires truth. He also argues that human personalities can be understood in terms of one of the parts gaining dominance over the others. So, for instance, in an honor-loving person like Thrasymachus, the desire for admiration will have the upper hand, and his reason will largely be subjugated to the calculative function of figuring out how to get more. He will have subjugated his appetites as well, for he wouldn't want to do anything that looked base. Similarly, in an appetitive personality like the oligarch, reason will be subjugated to figuring out how to acquire large amounts of wealth. And to the oligarch it will appear that wealth is worthy of honor. Socrates argues that there is only one stable, harmonious and happy personality-formation: that of the just person. In this person reason rules: it lets spirit feed on what is truly honorable; and allows the appetites to be gratified only in healthy ways. All other personality-formations are unstable and disharmonious to some degree: one should expect division and strife among the parts. In Freudian terms, all other personalities are to some extent neurotic.

Let us now return to Thrasymachus. We are now in a position to see that irony is occurring both in the macrocosm of elenchic debate and in the microcosm of Thrasymachus' soul. In the macrocosm, Thrasymachus is an ideal candidate for irony. He puts himself forward as someone who knows what justice really is. And, in putting himself forward, he gives an official account, the pretense of justice. Socrates' distinctive use of elenchus consists in forcing Thrasymachus to acknowledge that justice also has aspirations which transcend his official account.

But now that we have a theory of Thrasymachus' intrapsychic make-up we can also give a more nuanced account of what is going on within him during the elenchus. Thrasymachus is a spirited, honor-loving personality. That means that his soul is organized around *thumos*. Not only does *thumos* shape his understanding of justice, it motivates him to put himself forward as someone who deserves recognition for knowing what justice really is. Thus, in Thrasymachus' personality-organization, *thumos* is functioning as a pretending part of his soul. In an honor-loving personality, reason will be subjugated to figuring out ways to acquire honor – as understood by *thumos*. Still, Socrates has argued that every such personality-organization is unstable. Socratic elenchus takes advantage of this instability. While Thrasymachus' reason is crippled and distorted by *thumos*, there is some aspect of it which aspires to truth. Even Thrasymachus – or part of him – aspires to truth; and this helps to explain why the elenchus comes to be such an ordeal for him. After all, why not just laugh it off? He cannot because his soul is genuinely conflicted. The elenchus awakens the aspiring part of his soul and brings it into close proximity to his pretended understanding.

The outcome of this juxtaposition is – preserved and remembered through the millennia – a blush:

Thrasymachus agreed to all this, not easily as I'm telling it, but reluctantly, with toil, trouble and – since it was summer – a quantity of sweat that was a wonder to behold. And then I saw something I'd never seen before – Thrasymachus blushing.<sup>38</sup>

If we consider only the macrocosm of public debate, it is natural to think that Thrasymachus is blushing *before others*: he had wanted to show off, and he is getting his comeuppance instead. But if we think of the microcosm, we can see that the elenchus awakens the aspiring part of Thrasymachus' soul and, at least temporarily, partially frees it from its domination by *thumos*. In the moment, Thrasymachus can feel how far his pretense to knowledge has fallen short of his own aspiration to truth. We can now see that Thrasymachus is also blushing *before himself*. At least in the moment, Socrates has disrupted the unhealthy configuration of an honor-loving soul. And the aspiring and pretending parts of Thrasymachus' soul have been brought into a different relation with each other.<sup>39</sup> Thrasymachus' blush is the blush of psychic upheaval. And perhaps that upheaval will lead to more lasting psychic change. (In this context, consider Socrates' later remark that he and Thrasymachus have become friends [VI: 498c–d]; and Thrasymachus' joining in with the rest of the group [at V.450a].)

Obviously, the Socrates of the *Republic* is not particularly concerned with individual talking cures, or with the psychic transformation of adults. He is concerned with political formations which through education will properly shape the souls of children and young adults. And even if elenchus did succeed in disrupting the configuration of Thrasymachus' soul, there is no reason to think it is a particularly good method for effecting lasting psychic change in a divided soul. Thus once one discovers the tripartite soul, and the personality-structures based on it, there is reason to abandon elenchus as a therapeutic method. Nevertheless, it is not implausible to conjecture that the philosopher who thought through the tripartite theory of the soul might then wonder what effect, if any, the elenchus could have on such a soul. And he might dramatize that effect in a sophist's blush.

Finally, let us consider Socrates' famous profession of his own ignorance. In the *Apology*, Socrates says that it is precisely because he has spent his life exposing the pretenses of others to know, that he has generated widespread resentment against him.<sup>40</sup> Thus it is the practice of irony – as it is interpreted in this paper – that, Socrates thinks, will be responsible for people voting to condemn him. In contrast with others, Socrates is, famously, the wisest of men because he is the one who knows that he doesn't know. In particular, Socrates claims that he knows that he does not know how to give an adequate account of the virtues or human excellences. In terms of the structure of irony we have been investigating, Socrates "puts himself forward" as the person who is not in a position to put himself forward. That is, when it comes to knowledge of the virtues, Socrates is the man without pretense. He makes no claim to know. *He is all aspiration and no pretense*.<sup>41</sup> And thus, ironically, while Socrates can bring out the irony in others – that is his Socratic irony – there is nothing about *him* that is ironic at all. At one point Phaedrus and, at another point, Alcibiades say that Socrates is the most unique, the strangest person who has ever lived.<sup>42</sup> The Greek word is "*atopōtatos*": literally, the person most lacking a *topos* – a place, position, or location. But think of *topos* in terms of pretense: the putting forth of a claim is precisely taking up a position in argumentative space. It is saying, for example, "When it comes

to justice, I have a position; I know what it is." Socrates has no such position – he is *atopos* – and this turns out to be the quintessence of human wisdom.

There are readers of Plato who agree with Thrasymachus that Socrates' profession of ignorance is a sham – a pretense in the *pejorative* sense of pretending to be something other than one is. These readers take Socratic irony to be his saying the opposite of what he means. And thus, for them, it is only a pretense that Socrates has no pretenses. For these readers too there must be *another Socrates*. This time the other Socrates isn't Plato's mouthpiece, it is the real Socrates hidden behind his masks. I don't think there is any knock-down proof that will show that this interpretation is wrong. And if a latter-day Thrasymachus wants to hold onto it tenaciously, so be it. But, for the rest of us, I hope this essay will contribute to a different outlook. The true power of Socrates to reach out across the millennia – and *grab us* – lies in the fact that, in his irony, he is also intensely earnest. He is saying precisely what he means. It is a question for us and about us why this has been so difficult to accept.<sup>43</sup>

Notes

- 1 *Phaedrus* 229e–230a.
- 2 Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1981) (hereafter SE XVIII: 91. See also *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE VII: 134; "Resistances to psychoanalysis" SE XIX: 218; and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII: 50;
- 3 Plato, *Apology* 30a–b.
- 4 See, e.g., Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic elenchus: method is all," in *Socratic Studies*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–37.
- 5 See my *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003), pp. 1–27.
- 6 See, e.g., *Studies on Hysteria*, SE II: 3–305, especially the case history of Elizabeth von R. And cf. my *Freud* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), ch. 2.
- 7 See *Republic* IV.436b–441a.
- 8 Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, SE XIX: 1–66. For Plato's method of division of the soul, see *Republic* IV: 434d–445a.
- 9 See Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI: 57–145.
- 10 For an example of a Platonic figure taking up what Freud would call a superego position, see the discussion of Leontius at *Republic* IV: 439e–440a.
- 11 Plato, *Republic* VIII: 554a–555a, 556b–c, 559d. See also C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); and my "Inside and outside the Republic," in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 219–46.
- 12 *Republic* II: 357a–b.
- 13 See Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, SE VII: 7–122; and my *Freud* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), ch. 4; and "Give Dora a break!" in *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, eds. T. Bartscherer and S. Bartsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 14 *Republic* I: 352d.
- 15 Plato, *Phaedrus* 227b7–8.

- 16 See, for instance, *Phaedrus*' response to Socrates' impassioned palinode at *Phaedrus* 257c; and G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study in Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 86–112.
- 17 Martin H. Stein, "Irony in psychoanalysis," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 33 (1985): 35–57.
- 18 It is possible to be *pleased* that one is receiving a bill: one might be proud that one can afford to pay for it. "Fantastic" would then, unironically, mean fantastic.
- 19 *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, 2nd ed., 1989.
- 20 For good introductions (with which I disagree) see Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998), pp. 19–98.
- 21 For Thrasymachus, see *Republic* I. 337a; for Alcibiades, *Symposium* 216e4, for Callicles, *Gorgias* 489d–e.
- 22 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. P. Rhode (New York: Citadel Press, 1993), §163, pp. 128–9.
- 23 *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, 2nd ed.
- 24 In the diary entry just quoted above, Kierkegaard says: "Going to South America descending into subterranean caverns to dig up remains of vanished animal fossils: there is nothing ironical about that, for the animals one comes across today living in such places do not, after all, pretend to be the same as the ancient ones. But plumb the middle of Christendom to want to excavate the foundation of what it means to be a Christian, which bears almost the same relation to our contemporary Christians as the bones of the ancient animals to those now living: that is the most intense irony. The irony is that while Christianity is supposed to exist there are at the same time thousands of prelates in velvet, silks and broadcloth, millions of Christian's begetting Christians, etc."
- 25 The pseudonym is Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 246n. Both Vlastos and Nehamas misunderstand what Kierkegaardian irony is. While they disagree with each other, they both assume that the Kierkegaardian ironist must be saying the opposite of what he means. For Vlastos, this flows from a misreading of what Kierkegaard means by "negativity." (See *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, op. cit., p. 43.) Nehamas quotes a more compelling passage from Kierkegaard: "one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed when a person is under an illusion, it is only by deceiving him that he can be brought into the truth." (Nehamas, p. 52; quoting from Kierkegaard, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, trans. W. Lowrie; New York: Harper and Row, 1962, pp. 39–40.) Nehamas has, I think, misunderstood this passage. The point is not strictly about the need to dissemble to those under illusion; it is to recognize that *anything* one says will be systematically distorted by someone in the grip of illusion. Even an earnest, truthful communication will be misunderstood. The task then is to find a form of communication that will disrupt the illusion. This is a problem that Socrates, Kierkegaard and psychoanalysts will confront. But the answer to the problem need not involve saying the opposite of what one believes.
- 26 See Jacques Lacan, "The direction of the treatment and the principles of its power," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), pp. 215–70. But see also Paul Gray, *The Ego and Analysis of Defense* (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson, 1994).
- 27 See Hans Loewald, "The waning of the Oedipus complex," in *The Essential Loewald* (Hagerstown, MD: University Publishing Group, 2000), pp. 384–404.

- 28 For an introduction to transference, see Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, SE VII: 112–22; “Remembering, repeating and working-through,” SE XII: 147–56. See my *Freud*, op. cit., ch. 4; *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony*, op. cit., ch. 5, pp. 181–211; and “An interpretation of transference,” in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 56–79. The classic psychoanalytic essays on transference are collected in *Essential Papers on Transference*, ed. A. Esman (New York: NYU Press, 1990).
- 29 Even when a grown person is bingeing on ice cream, aspiration is there. For an introduction to the psychoanalytic understanding of eating disorders, see L. Reiser, “Love, work and bulimia,” in *Bulimia: Psychoanalytic Treatment and Theory*, ed. H. J. Schwartz (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1988), pp. 373–97; S. Ritvo, “Mothers, daughters and eating disorders,” in *Fantasies, Myth and Reality: Essays in Honor of Jacob A. Arlow, M.D.*, eds. H. Blum et al. (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1988), pp. 423–34; S. Ritvo, “The image and uses of the body in psychic conflict – with special reference to eating disorders in adolescence,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 39 (1984), pp. 449–69.
- 30 I take this case from Lawrence Levenson, “Superego defense analysis in the termination phase,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 46 (1998), pp. 847–66. I discuss this case in *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony*, pp. 121–33, 176–8, 207–11.
- 31 See note 29 above.
- 32 Levenson, “Superego Defense,” p. 858.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 For simplicity, this chapter concentrates on Freud’s structural model, but the same overall technique will apply to any model – for example, the models of self-psychology – in which there are aspiring and pretending aspects to the psyche. See, for example, Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1987).
- 35 Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates ‘contra’ Socrates in Plato,” in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 46.
- 36 Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, p. 37.
- 37 *Euthyphro* 3c, 4b.e.
- 38 *Republic* I, 350c–d.
- 39 Of course, it is also possible to conceptualize *thumos* as aspiring to honor. The point is not that there is only one proper characterization of the psychic parts; it is, rather, that there is one accurate characterization that at the same time shows how irony is possible.
- 40 *Apology* 21b–c.
- 41 See *Apology* 29a–b: “And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know.” That is, it is blameworthy to have a pretense to know that cannot live up to the aspirations of the concept.
- 42 *Phaedrus* 230c; *Symposium* 221c.
- 43 I would like to thank Gabriel Lear, Karin Abbel-Rappe, Sara Abbel-Rappe, Iakovos Vasilious, and Joan Wellman for valuable comments on a previous draft.