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## The Image of Socratic Irony from the Sophists to Nietzsche \*\*

**Abstract:** The phrase "Socratic irony", which is principally used with reference to Socrates' philosophical method, is one of the biggest unsolved puzzles of Greek philosophy. Since the beginning of its occurrence, this type of irony has been a fertile ground for the abuse of exegetical tradition. But, despite the mysteries that surrounds the image of Socratic dissembling, it seems that the questioning technique of Socrates had a valuable influence on the entire Western thought. In this paper I discuss some types of comprehending and interpreting the specific irony that Socrates used in his provocative discussions. In this way, the present study starts with the analysis of the mistaken interpretation of the Sophists and continues with an inquiry of understanding how the concept of irony evolved from Antiquity to Friedrich Nietzsche. At the same time I will reveal the ethical issues involved in using the complex Socratic irony.

**Keywords:** Socratic irony, hermeneutics, Socrates, ethics, cynicism, Nietzsche.

Associated with the method and personality of Socrates, irony has a special place in the history of philosophical ideas. In the strict sense of the term, at least for the ancient Greeks, *eirōneia* does not mean more than reading-out a false artlessness. Its main significance was that of deceit, of willful induction into error, therefore, at least until Socrates, *eirōneia* was regarded as a plain misbehaving. And, given that this "irony" has similar meanings to sarcasm, lying and other offensive attitudes, it proves that it was not at all worthwhile to make use of its subtle game. But with Socrates' *maieutics*, the immoral character of irony begins to dissipate. And it's not because he would directly searched it, but because he practiced it in his characteristic style. Due to his charisma, most philosophers will reconsider the axiological status of irony. Of course, making exception of the obvious influences of Socratic irony on western philosophy, there are also some less discussed. *Brainstorming*, for example – an educational method which, by virtue of individual freedom of

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thought, encourages the participants involved in discussion to talk and not be frightened by the strangeness or the simplicity of answers that liberates the analysis – it is a fact that proves that the Socratic irony indirectly marked the development of pedagogy too. However, in this study, starting with the interpretations of the Sophists and ending with the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, we will analyze just how the image of the Socratic irony was set throughout the history of European thoughtfulness. Also, beyond highlighting the passage that the Socrates' irony had among philosophers, we will disclose also the ethical implications of its use and abuse.

Given the negative image that irony originally had in ancient Greece, it is no wonder that the Socratic concealing sparked controversy from the beginning, being very difficult to understand and to accept it by the interlocutor. In *The Republic* (337 a), for example, Thrasymachos attacks the irony of Socrates as if he would expose why the philosopher avoids responding directly to the discussed issues. In this circumstance, the irony of the Greek philosopher is mockingly taken, being considered a plain pretense. Also, a similar interpretation emerges from the comparison that Menon makes (*Meno* 80 a) in the eponymous Platonic dialogue, between disconcerting style of Socrates and torpedo fish which paralyzes his prey. Meno feels powerless at a time in replying to the Greek ironist, which is why he ridicules him, saying that strikingly resembles both the figure and the behavior to the fish concerned. This way, Meno condemns the Socratic method, considering it generates confusion both in relation to one who practice it and to those he talks to. But the alleged doubt of Socrates was not a preamble of a torpedo attack that paralyzes its prey. Although, somehow, the resemblance seems fair, Vladimir Jankélévitch states, using other analogies, that Socrates “does not paralyze the interlocutors as the owl does which, according to the sophistry Elie, hypnotizes birds through its grimaces, or as the mask of Medusa, which turns people into stone, but it numbs them to smarten up”<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the Greek ironist does not put himself or the others in difficulty just for the pleasure of argue, but easier to remove the truth to light. Though many sophists said that the irony of Socrates is frivolous and malicious, considering it his cunning expression, it must be said that his bizarre attitude cannot be categorized so simplistically. It's true he has a pretty shrewd intelligence, but he does not seek through this to cheat, like a crook, the vigilance of the interlocutors. Through the “cunning” of his irony, meaning through the contrast he creates between what he says and expectations of others, Socrates only wants to reveal that kind of truth that usually requires difficulty.

For the purpose of customization of this philosophizing way, there should be noted that Socratic irony involves also self-irony. In general,

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ironia*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1994, p. 12.

Platonic dialogues ends without finding clear answers to the discussed issues. In *Charmides* (175 d), for example, Socrates notes that no satisfactory answer has been found regarding the definition of *wisdom*, despite the good intentions and the efforts of interlocutors to know it. Due to this kind of failures, the Greek ironist inures to always say that “he only knows that he knows nothing” or that he does not have the knowledge. Even though he knows something, he launches this ironic statement because he aims to warn us of what we know, usually, that it concerns the *wisdom*. And this idea comes out from *The Apology of Socrates*, where the protagonist recognizes that he has a kind of wisdom (a human wisdom), but he concludes as follows: “I’m afraid that the only wise one is the God, and, by the words of the oracle, he says that human wisdom worths little or nothing”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, this is why Socrates always claimed his ignorance: because all human knowledge is insignificant in relation to the divine one, the latter always staying hidden to us.

Beyond the abusive interpretations of the Sophists regarding the irony of Socrates, there were more sympathetic views, like that of Alcibiades in Plato’s *Symposium*, where he proves that he understands the irony of the philosopher in the current meaning of the word<sup>3</sup>. Except this remark, the acceptances given to the irony substantially change only after the death sentencing of the inquisitive philosopher. In Aristotle, for example, we find an interesting characterization of the litotal appearance of Socrates’ irony, reflecting its opposition to the emphasis and the pedantry of sophists: “People of false modesty who talk tilting towards diminishing truth obviously have a more agreeable nature; they seem to express themselves in such a manner not seeking any advantage, but to avoid ostentation. Such

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<sup>2</sup> Platon, *Apărarea lui Socrate* 23 a, in *Opere*, vol. I, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1974, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> Here’s how Alcibiades describes the way in which Socrates kept his temperance in love, rejecting the advances he made on him was: “And he, after listening to me, said with its deeply ironic tone, so characteristic and usual:

- Oh, dear Alcibiades! You do not seem to be a truly commoner, if all you said about me is true, if I really have the power to make you become better. It seems you found in me an amazing beauty, totally different from the most beautiful features that are seen in your person. But you see: if you, revealing it to me, want to share it with me, meaning to exchange one beauty with another, you prepare yourself a greater gain than mine. You give me the shade of the beauty and you expect to get from me real beauties! In other words, you put in mind to change my gold on brass. You’d better, wonderful friend, take notice of me not to fool you, with my scarcity. Perhaps the mind’s eye starts to be keen right in the moment it starts to get darker he light of the fleshy eyes. And you are far from it. (“*Idem*, *Banchetul* 218 d-e și 219 a, in *Dialoguri*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1968, p. 306) Therefore, the young Alcibiades recognizes the preventing wisdom of Socratic irony, in the present context suggesting that carnal love cannot be a too valuable “bargaining chip” in terms of gaining the spiritual beauty that he noticed in Socrates and, ultimately, he may be mistaken if he makes such an exchange.

people especially deny their brilliant qualities, as Socrates did. However, those who use dissemblance for insignificant or obvious matters are called slicks and they are to despise. Sometimes this attitude seems boasting [...] for not only the excess, but also exaggerated decrease denotes boasting”<sup>4</sup>. In other words, for Aristotle, only the one who always tells the truth deserves praise, almost any deviation being considered a mockery at reason. Although *eirōneia* is desirable compared to *alazoneia* (the arrogance), the philosopher from Stagira cannot place it higher than *aletheia* (the truth). And that’s because, writes Jankélévitch, “Aristotle, whose already lacks his Athenian finesse, does not taste the salt of false humility: he did not see the irony than its private privative nature [...] Why should you briefly say it when you know do it extensively? Neither science, nor truth does not claim us to become *less* wealthy, *less* powerful, *less* intelligent than we actually are; this MINUS is a defiance of reason! *There is no reason* to diminish in such way! Less than the truth means less than it should”<sup>5</sup>. Jankélévitch’s description reflects the insensitivity of the Stagirite towards the general qualities of irony, suggesting that through it we still are in the transition period of its understanding, towards the cultivated witticism.

Going further on the becoming thread of this “concept”, we find that only Roman rhetoricians will analyze the irony from a more positive perspective, close to the contemporary meanings. Due to their analysis, *eirōneia* will become *irony*, the famous trope that will relieve many of the old negative meanings. Here’s what Cicero wrote about it, keeping in mind Socrates: “It is still a civilized spirit, when you say one other than you feel, [...] I think Socrates exceeded all with his charm and civilization in this kind of irony and thought hiding. Indeed this style is very elegant, when it is tied with a spirit of seriousness and adapted with eloquent and civilized words”<sup>6</sup>. Somewhat similarly, Quintilian, the rhetorician, beyond the classical definition of irony as a trope that he has sent us, we notice that it recognizes the complexity of irony when he mentions also Socrates: “Moreover, even the whole life of a man may seem an irony, as Socrates’ life seems to have been; that is why he was told “the ironizer” because he played the ignorant and the admirer of the others as if they were wise”<sup>7</sup>. By the virtue of these findings, we can say that during the process of resignification of the irony image, the method and the character of the Greek philosopher had a decisive role.

Unfortunately, almost all opinions and nuances on Socratic irony were formed more due to the analysis of Plato’s work. If we make reference to

<sup>4</sup> Aristotel, *Etica nicomahică* 1127 b 25, Editura IRI, București, 1998, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, Editura Casei Școalelor, București, 1925, pp. 210-211.

<sup>7</sup> Quintilian, *Arta oratorică*, vol. III, Editura Minerva, București, 1974 pp. 34-35.

the irony from Xenophon's texts, for example, we see that the great Greek ironist used to be quite direct in certain circumstances. There are some Xenophon fragments of which it is clear that Socrates was not as subtle as Plato presented him to us. Such an example is as follows: "On a master who had mercilessly punished his servant, Socrates asked him which is the reason he beats him and he received the answer: – Because he is hoggish and lazy. He only likes to raise money and do nothing. – Okay, but tell me, Socrates asked him again: Do you ever think about who deserves a terrific beating, you or your servant?"<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Socrates' rhetoric question strikingly resembles the acid lines of Diogenes of Sinope. This is why we might speculate that the so-called "Socratic irony" was more transparent and direct than we are used to notice it reading the Platonic dialogues.

Closely related to these interpretations, Pierre Lévêque, suggesting that we cannot know precisely which is the real meaning of Socratic philosophy, writes that "the message of Socrates is not less mysterious than the reasons of his conviction. We only know him indirectly, from the writings of a too fool disciple and those of a too brilliant disciple"<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the debate on understanding the Socratic irony cannot be definitively closed. Similarly, Kierkegaard suggests, in turn, that in fact neither Plato nor Xenophon have rendered Socrates as he really was: "Each of the two commentators tried of course to complete Socrates, Xenophon pulling him to the low plains of profitability, Plato lifting him to the over-human regions of idea. But, irony is the midway, unseen and elusive point. On the one hand, the ironist is in his element in varied multitude of reality, on the other, he aerially and ethereal above it, barely touching the ground; but as the empire itself of its ideality is still strange, he did not turn towards, but he is ready to do it every moment. *Irony oscillates* between the ideal ego and the empirical one [...]"<sup>10</sup>. However, in an attempt to overcome these interpretation problems, the Danish thinker, argues that precisely Aristophanes, the playwright, was the closest to the Socratic spirit. And that's because, coming from the way he ridiculed Socrates – if we look like in a mirror – we could tell how the inquiring philosopher actually was. However, the fact is that we must take into account all sources where we find Socrates' figure, being aware that none can be absolutely true.

However, despite these hermeneutical dilemmas, there is a possibility less taken into account, namely that the so-called "cynicals" to be the real followers of Socrates' philosophy. Eventually, "Plato, his most gifted disciple, would soon prove the least faithful,"<sup>11</sup> writes Popper, suggesting

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<sup>8</sup> Xenofon, *Amintiri despre Socrate*, Editura «Hyperion», Chișinău, 1990, pp. 91-92.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Lévêque, *Aventura greacă*, vol. I, Editura Meridiane, București, 1987, p. 450.

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Despre conceptul de ironie, cu permanentă referire la Socrate*, in *Opere*, vol. I, Humanitas, București, 2006, p. 232.

<sup>11</sup> Karl R. Popper, *Societatea deschisă și dușmanii ei*, vol. I, Humanitas, București, 1993, p. 220.

that the Greek idealist was the disciple of the “closed society” theory, in contrast to Socrates who was a follower of the “open society.” And, because Diogenes of Sinope is among the most virulent opponents of Platonic philosophy, we might say that he has retained what was most authentic from Socratism. But, without entirely disproving this hypothesis, we cannot say that Socrates abused so much of irony that he became quarrelsome or sarcastic. Susan Prince notes, in this sense, that „Although Socrates and Diogenes become models in tandem for the wise man in later Stoicizing and Cynicizing authors, such as Epictetus and Dio Chrysostom, there is also an ancient sentiment that Cynicism is not continuous with Socraticism, presumably for its highly rhetorical character. Whereas Socrates was indifferent to poverty, the Cynic chose and embraced poverty. Whereas Socrates was ironic and bold, the Cynic was outrageously provocative and outspoken”<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, Socrates’ irony seems to be very similar to humor. According to some authors such as Harald Höffding, Socrates would even be a “great comedian”: “The fact that Socrates is among philosophers the only humorist with great style is based on that, to him, the intellectual work coincided with the teaching one, practical to man. Using irony as a method, he aimed to make individuals to ponder at the great background that a man can discover within himself, whether or not it can be expressed into some clear ideas. In this case, joke and irony were a path to sobriety”<sup>13</sup>. Since we are not concerned here with the question whether irony is a form of humor or humor is a form of irony, we retain only that the Socratic irony cannot be regarded at all as resentful as the irony of cynical manifested.

Following the evolution of the image of Socrates’ irony, it appears that the Middle Ages was a rather unfortunate period for irony in general, especially because in this period it prevails the Christian morality, and then the rigidly scholastic Aristotelianism. Any eloquent omission (jokes, silences with meaning, humor, etc.) is usually reprehensible, especially because it amplifies sins like pride or hedonism. Only by the end of the Middle Ages, due to some scholars open to the art of derision, the concept of “Socratic irony” is rehabilitated. An eloquent example which shows the influence that this concept had over the Christian religion is that referring to the syntagma *docta ignorantia* (*learned ignorance*) of Nicolaus Cusanus. The similarity between the ironic method of Socrates and the attitude of one Christian results from a dialogue of the great German scholar, inspired by the technique of Platonic dialogues. In it, the Christian claims, typically Socratic by the way, that he knows nothing about God. For a better understanding of the

<sup>12</sup> Susan Prince, „Socrates, Antisthenes, and the Cynics”, in Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, *A Companion to Socrates*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2006, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Harald Höffding, *Humorul ca sentiment vital (Marele humor). Un studiu psihologic*, Institutul European, Iași, 2007, pp. 187-188.

correlation between the irony of Socrates and the Christian's irony that, we present the following passage:

«Heathen: «Who is the God whom you worship?»

Christian: «I do not know.»

Heathen: «How is it? You worship so devoted to someone you don't not know him?»

Christian: «I worship Him just because I don't know Him.»

Heathen: «I am amazed that a man is devoted to someone he does not know.»

Christian: «It is more amazing that a man could worship someone who thinks he knows about.»

Heathen: «Why?»

Christian: «Because [man] is more ignorant about what thinks he knows than on what he knows he does not know.»

Heathen: «Please explain to me.»

Christian: «Who thinks that knows something, although nothing can be known, it seems to me to be mindless.» [...]

Heathen: «But who among people knows if nothing can be known?»

Christian: «We need to consider the one who knows that he does not know.»[...]»<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, the Cusanus' gnosiological approach reaches the famous idea of the Greek ironist, as the one that knows recognizes "he knows nothing".

Then, like Socrates, who fought against the apparent sciences of Sophists, Petrarca, one of the first humanists of the Renaissance, exposes the medieval ignorance a verve reminding of the temerity of the sage Greek. Influence of the Socratic philosophy emerges mainly from his writing *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*, where the author suggests that the teaching generally serves no purpose unless it determine us to be better. As Petrarca says, "for this I was born, and not for letters; if they come by themselves to meet us, swelling and destroying everything, building nothing: shiny soul chains, severe labor, tumultuous task. You know, oh, Lord, that you reach every wish of the soul, like every sigh, you know that these cultures, because I used it with sobriety, I never asked for nothing but to become good"<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, Petrarca does not hesitate to admit, including in front of his own friends, that ignorance of Socratic inspiration, attacking their alleged science as follows: "But our friends look down to us because the light makes us happy and we do not sit beside them to grope in the dark, as if we do not trust our knowledge; they consider us ignorant, because we do not talk about these at any street corner. And they go

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<sup>14</sup> Nicolaus Cusanus, *Despre Dumnezeuul ascuns (dialog între un păgân și un creștin)*, in *Pacea între religii. Despre Dumnezeuul ascuns*, Humanitas, București, 2008, pp. 121-126.

<sup>15</sup> Francesco Petrarca, „Despre ignoranța mea și a altora; lui Donato degli Albanzani”, in *Scrieri alese*, Editura Univers, București, 1982, p. 290.

everywhere prepared with all the possible bullshit that nobody has heard, taking pride beyond measure that they have learned – without knowing anything – to speak of all and on all, to issue sentences. Therefore he is not retained by any shame, by any other reticence and even less the awareness of their hidden ignorance”<sup>16</sup>. So, the irony and the moral ideal of the Greek thinker truly reborn only through those writers who passing in the background the Aristotle’s works, rediscover in turn those of Plato. Excepting Petrarca, one of them is Erasmus of Rotterdam, who, especially in *Praise of Folly*, attacks them with Socratic enthusiasm all the priests who, by virtue of dogma and religious authority, give the impression that they know better and that they convey precious messages from the height of their positions. Furthermore, the famous work of Dutch scholar can be seen as a praise of the Socratic irony, since Socrates, saying he only knows that he knows nothing than to acknowledge his stupidity. This means that the Socratic wisdom consists in recognizing the human stupidity in general.

Between the Renaissance humanists, Montaigne is probably the only one who reaffirms, in a personal manner, the old maxim “Know thyself!”, which was so present in the life and philosophy of Socrates. Thus, in light of mentioned Delphic urge, implicitly having in mind the image of the Socratic irony, the French humanist notes the following: “Because Socrates himself fully fed himself with the counsel of his god, that of “get to know himself”, and from this teaching he had come to despise himself, he was considered the only one worthy to wear the name of «wise». Who will know so, do not waver to get himself noticed by his language”<sup>17</sup>. In other words, knowing the ironic wisdom of Socrates, Montaigne encourages those who understand the significance of self-knowledge to express themselves in their mother tongue, as he had done in the language of his country. After introspection, once we would have discovered our own limits and weaknesses, it means that we will be ready to wisely share our thoughts. In this sense, we can say that Montaigne’s *Essays* are, largely, the written version of the Socratic way of philosophizing. This means that his “attempts” are nothing more than a spiritual exercise of self-knowledge, initiative whose single purpose is to learn how to live better.

After the brutal offensive of the Catholic Counter-Reformation that largely tempered the heroic enthusiasm of the Renaissance humanists, the French Enlightenment will break out against the Christian religion and even against faith in general. For example, Diderot, daring with his art of Platonic philosophical dialogue, will toughly criticize faith. Let’s see how things result in *Conversation of a Philosopher with the Maréchale de \*\*\**. To the perplexity of the wife of Marshal, such that an unbeliever could still have reasons to be

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 291-292.

<sup>17</sup> Montaigne, *Eseuri*, vol. I, Editura Științifică, București, 1966, p. 368.



good, Diderot, by voice of the character Crudeli, starts to explain using his Socratic patience the apparent inconsistency, bringing her in a position to make her say just the opposite: that “people think and yet always act as they had no faith in their soul. And those who do not believe”, immediately comes the ironic answer of Crudeli, “behave almost as if they believe”<sup>18</sup>. The dialogue is typical to the youth dialogues of Plato, where Socrates discusses also with ordinary people, and not just to field specialists. As regards Diderot’s dialogue, his goal seems to be to demonstrate that religion is actually a mischief and that it is not unsettling at all the thought that there would be no God. The suggestion of the French Enlightenment philosopher is that, from an ethical point of view, atheism is preferable to theism, “sinful” abuses and religious disputes proving that man, in order to be truly tolerant, is better to be unfaithful.

For Romantics, the profound meaning of Socratic irony is reflected in the creative imagination of some authors like Solger, Novalis and Schlegel brothers. “Novels are the Socratic dialogues of our time. In this liberal form, the wisdom of life ran away in front of scholastic wisdom,”<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schlegel notes with ironic fineness, realizing that irony, despite the nefarious influence of the medieval spirit, found a way to express as free as possible. But the Romantics have not remained loyal to the gracious Socratic irony, exaggerating, in an even more radical form than cynicism, its possibilities. “Socratic irony argued only the usefulness and the certainty of a science of nature; romantic irony will argue, at the beginning of nineteenth century, the very existence of nature”<sup>20</sup>, Jankélévitch noted, suggesting how far the Romantics went. For them, the irony of Socrates was the expression of absolute freedom of *inner-self* to deny and to argue the actual order of things. Because of this, probably right, Hegel will characterize the romantic irony as being “infinite absolute negativity” and therefore essentially immoral. As for the specific irony of Socrates, Hegel believed that the expression of the undermined morality of the individual who wants to impose himself in front of the objective morality of the city. The German philosopher writes that Socrates “was sentenced to death because he refused to admit the competence of the people, his greatness over a convict”<sup>21</sup>, suggesting that the ironist has been properly condemned. This does not mean that Hegel did not understand the undermined style of the Greek philosopher. As proof, here’s what it says about the significance of

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<sup>18</sup> Denis Diderot, „Convorbirea unui filozof cu soția mareșalului de\*\*\*”, in *Opere alese*, vol. I, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1956, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> August Wilhelm și Friedrich von Schlegel, *Despre literatură*, Editura Univers, București, 1983, p. 414

<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Prelegeri de istorie a filozofiei*, vol. I, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1963, p. 410.

Socratic ambiguity: “When I say that I know what rationality is, what faith is, these are only totally abstract representations. In order to become concrete they must be explained, starting from the assumption that it is not known, for itself, what they are. This explanation of such representations is provoked by Socrates; and this is the true content of the Socratic irony”<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, for Hegel, using the Socratic method is acceptable, but only as a starting point, as a principle of philosophical knowledge.

Like Hegel, Kierkegaard considers that Socrates was guilty of the charges brought against him, “because, on the one hand, the assumption of something totally abstract rather than the concrete individuality of gods meant a totally polemic reporting manner against the state Greek religion. On the other hand, also a polemic reporting manner against the state religion was installing the silence, in which a warning voice was only occasionally heard instead of the Greek life which penetrated even in the most insignificant manifestations of god consciousness; this voice (and here lies perhaps the most profound controversy) never handles the substantial interests of the state life, does not issue on them and was only interested in the totally private and particular problems of Socrates and, rigorously, of his friends”<sup>23</sup>. For Kierkegaard, irony must be a controlled act, as a sign of the balance between extreme trends, such as, for example, those of absolutization of life from here, respectively of life beyond. “In every personal life there are so many things someone has to give up, so many wild branches have to be cut. Irony can be an excellent surgeon, because, as I said, when the irony is controlled, its function is extremely important in order that the personal life regains health and truth,”<sup>24</sup> writes the Danish philosopher, suggesting the opportunity of irony as a private phenomenon, just like it happened, at least until the process, also in the case of Socrates.

Finally, referring to Nietzsche’s critique on Socratic irony, it must be said that the German philosopher manifests an ambivalent attitude towards it, meaning that he admires the ludic nature and the courage of the Greek philosopher, but most often he condemns the method of philosophizing. For example, when Socrates is interpreted in relation to Christianity, it is evident that Nietzsche appreciates the Greek ironist: “If everything goes well, it will come the time when, to strengthen our moral-rational, we will prefer to take in hand the Memories about Socrates than the Bible and when Montaigne and Horace will serve as precursors and guides in order to understand the simplest and the eternal wise mediator, Socrates. [...] Socrates exceeds the founder of Christianity by his cheerful way of his

<sup>22</sup> Idem, *Prelegeri de istorie a filozofiei*, vol. II, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1964, p. 379.

<sup>23</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Despre conceptul de ironie, cu permanentă referire la Socrate*, in *op. cit.*, pp. 267-268.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 439.

seriousness and by *his wisdom full of shuffles*, which is the best state of mind of man. In addition, he had a higher intelligence”<sup>25</sup>. Apart from criticism on Christianity, it appears that the German thinker does not despise the irony of Socrates, suggesting that this is a sign of the spiritual health that prepares us for life’s challenges. Despite this sympathy, in his later writings, Nietzsche will start to doubt the greatness of Greek ironist – “Socrates was a jester who seemed to consider seriously what actually happened here?”<sup>26</sup>, he rhetorically asks himself – concluding that there is something ignoble in all its dialectic. Here is what he thought about Socratic irony: “Is the irony of Socrates an expression of revolt? a resentment of the plebeians? Does he relish himself as an oppressed his own ferocity in the knife stabs of the syllogism? Does he avenge himself on noble people whom he is fascinated? – As a dialectician you have in hands a ruthless tool: you can use it as a tyrant, compromising you achieve victory. Dialectician leave to his opponent the care to prove that he is not an idiot: he gets you angry and at the same time he makes you helpless. Dialectician weakens the intellect of his opponent. – How? dialectic is only a vengeance form of Socrates?”<sup>27</sup> Although it is true that Socrates plays the jester in Greek city, we must not forget that the jester embodies, in fact, that ironic consciousness that, beyond its hilarious appearance, hides suffering or discontent that do not concern only him but all who are around him. Being understood in this way, he would be considered by no means as an obstacle to progress, but a balance factor. Therefore, accusing Socrates of hard-feeling or revengeful attitudes, Nietzsche proved that, in fact, he himself is the resentful one. Probably being the toughest critic of Socratic irony, Nietzsche will finally affirm that “Socrates wanted to die: the cup of poison was not given by Athens, but by himself, he forced Athens to give him the cup of poison...”<sup>28</sup>. According to him, the motivation of such a radical interpretation is that Socrates considered life as a disease; this idea is emphasized by Nietzsche, who interprets the last words of Socrates “«Oh, Crito, I owe a rooster to Aesculap.»”<sup>29</sup> and that he comments as follows: “This radical and terrible «last word» means to him who has ears to hear «Oh, Crito, *life is a disease!*» How is it possible? A man like him, who lived cheerfully and openly as a soldier – was pessimistic! In fact, it only showed a smiling face in front of life, constantly hiding the last verdict, his deepest feeling! Socrates, Socrates *suffered of life!* He revenged for that with those wrapped, horrific, pious, and curse words”<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Omenesc, prea omenesc. O carte pentru spirite libere II*, in *Opere complete*, vol. 3, Editura Hestia, Timișoara, 2000, pp. 398-399.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, *Amurgul idolilor sau cum se face filosofie cu ciocanul*, Editura ETA, Cluj-Napoca, 1993, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Idem, *Știința voioasă*, Humanitas, București, 2006, p. 218.

Indeed, as we noted in Hegel and Kierkegaard, Socrates abused the ironic method in front of his judges, especially when he told them, for instance, that appropriate punishment for him would be to be fed in Pritaneu (Plato's *Apology* 36 e). This is why we can say, without any reservation, that Socrates' «defense» is rather [...] the «accusation» that Socrates speaks against the “ungrateful” Athenians”<sup>30</sup> to its value and spiritual significance. Moreover, the accusatory tone and the air of superiority emerge right from the defense he builds: “Therefore I defend myself now: not for me, as it might think, far from me, you, Athenians; for you I defend myself, so, by condemning me, to let you sin in front of the gift that God made you”<sup>31</sup>. Betraying an obvious arrogance, we see that Socrates voluntarily assumes the role of scapegoat, being ready to let himself being sacrificed like those jesters at the court of kings, who sometimes are sentenced to death as a sign of redemption for the quietness of that society. But beyond all these records, it does not mean that Socrates had planned to die of disgust towards life. His last words should not be taken as an epigraph of the entire life. So the suggestion of the philosopher is not that the god of medicine cured him of life, but of. Therefore, Nietzsche was wrong thinking that the Greek ironist would have hated life as a whole, the “disease” Socrates got rid of was just his excruciating old age he expected. In this context, we note the very words of Socrates: “But if I live longer, I know that I have to endure all insufficiencies of the agedness: impaired vision, increasingly worse hearing; it will be much harder for me to learn something and much easier to forget what I know. Feeling so decrepit and getting to be disgusted by myself – how could I want to live more?”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, we must not forget the fact that Socrates felt, however, that posterity will give him satisfaction, the few years he would had lived worth little compared to the importance of his philosophical heritage or to the example he gave. Therefore, the last statement of Socrates before he finally closed his eyes does not have to be interpreted in the direction given by Nietzsche, as being the words through which the philosopher got down the optimism mask, but in full agreement with the specific situation in which he was: the imminence of the death sentence, respectively the imminence of conviction to the agedness burdens. In other words, weighting the pros and cons of the decision of letting him convicted to death, the ironist Greek considered he died before the most sickly and unpleasant stage of human life, succeeding, however, due to his philosophical vision, “live along all ages”<sup>33</sup>. In conclusion, we can say that Socrates abused irony towards the

<sup>30</sup> Anton Adămuț, *Cum visează filosofii*, Editura BIC ALL, București, 2008, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Platon, *Apărarea lui Socrate* 30 e, în *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Xenofon, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>33</sup> Quintilian, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

end of his life, not with a bad grace, but to release himself from the background of his deepest discontents, taking care to “hurt” his accusers and his fellows enough in order to awaken the truth from them. And by his way of life and especially by his way of dying, Socrates aroused admiration not only among those who have followed closely his ironic attitude, but also from those who knew him indirectly or only from books.

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