

Introduction

In Plato's *Theaetetus* (174a4–176a1), Socrates relates the tale of how Thales of Miletus, busy gazing into the heavens in order to examine the stars, fell into a well. Upon observing his predicament, a certain Thracian servant-girl mocked (*apokōpsai*) Thales, noting that while he was eager to know about things up in the heavens, he failed to perceive that which was (quite literally!) right below his feet. The same joke (*skōmma*), Socrates explains, can be applied to all of those who spend their lives engaged in philosophical pursuits. For the philosopher not only fails to notice what his neighbor does; he also has no idea, Socrates continues, whether his neighbor is a human being or some other kind of creature. Rather, the philosopher's attention is occupied with more abstract phenomena, with questions like “What is man?” and “What makes him different from other creatures?” Thus, whenever the philosopher is compelled to attend to more mundane matters, his lack of experience with such affairs makes him an object of laughter (*gelōta parechei*), not just among Thracian servant-girls, but among the many as well.

Yet, while the philosopher is ridiculed (*katagelatai*) by the many for his ignorance and puzzlement concerning worldly affairs, he in turn regards their obsession with such matters as laughable. The philosopher laughs (*gelōn*) when he hears some tyrant or king being praised, or

those who own a large amount of land, or those who boast of their noble lineage and birth. And just as he himself may appear ridiculous to the many when he is forced to engage in practical pursuits, it is the nonphilosopher who appears laughable to him when the former is forced to contend with philosophical matters. Thus when those versed in the legal and political affairs of the *polis* are compelled to answer abstract questions like “What is justice?” they become dizzy (*eillingiōn*) and anguished (*adēmonōn*), and being at a loss they stammer about, becoming laughable (*gelōta* . . . *parechei*) not in the eyes of Thracian servant-girls or any other uneducated person, but in the eyes of those who are philosophically minded.

This description of the philosopher's experience mirrors, of course, that of Socrates. The joke Socrates recounts about Thales revolves around the same theme that animates much of the humor depicted in Aristophanes' *Clouds*; just as the pedestrian servant-girl serves as a foil for Thales' high-minded stargazing, so the single-minded practicality of the middle-brow Strepsiades in that play calls into sharp relief the uselessness of the intellectual activities undertaken by Socrates and his students at the *phrontistērion*. The philosopher's inexperience with legal matters alludes to Socrates' own trial, and his execution by the democratic city of Athens in 399 B.C.E. And as Socrates observes in book 5 of the *Republic*, the philosophical ideas that he espouses threaten to drown him in a wave of ridicule and contempt (*kuma ekgelōn kai adoxiai*, 473c8).

That at least some of Socrates' fellow citizens laughed at him and viewed him as ridiculous is uncontroversial; what is less clear is whether Socrates laughed at his fellow citizens. In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Socrates deploys a harsh, derisive form of mockery against Strepsiades, ridiculing him for his intellectual ineptitude. In Xenophon, Socrates is also willing to mock and humiliate his interlocutors, though he does so with the goal of their moral improvement in mind. In the Platonic dialogues, however, Socrates laughs only twice, and on both occasions, he is described as doing so “gently” and “quietly” (*Phaedo* 84d, 115c). And while Socrates' irony is a prominent aspect of Plato's depiction of his

teacher, such irony is quite distinct from the overt laughter described in the *Theaetetus*. In short, the extant depictions of Socrates we have from his contemporaries disagree over the nature and purpose of his humor.

Yet, whether or not the historical Socrates did in fact laugh at and mock his fellow citizens, there is evidence that suggests that he was suspected of doing so. Xenophon, in the *Memorabilia*, records the accusation that Socrates “taught his companions to despise (*huperoran*) the established laws by saying that it would be foolish (*mōron*) to appoint magistrates by lot when no one would want to choose a pilot or a builder or a flute player by lot or for any other such task, though the harms committed when someone errs in those things are far lesser than those concerning the city” (1.2.9). Diogenes Laertius, in his *Life of Socrates*, claims that Socrates’ accusers were motivated by the ridicule he directed both at them and at the practitioners of their respective crafts (2.38–39). And Libanius, in his *Apology of Socrates*, notes that Anytus accused Socrates of being a “hater of the *dēmos* (*misodēmos*)” and of persuading his companions “to mock (*katagelan*) the democracy” (54). In short, Socrates was accused of ridiculing not only his fellow citizens, but the institutions of Athenian democracy as well.

It is my contention in this book that such concerns over Socratic humor, broadly understood, played an important role in shaping the depictions of Socrates that we find among our ancient sources. In particular, I argue that we can view these sources as engaged in a debate concerning the nature and purpose of Socratic humor, a debate whose contours were shaped by the political context in which the earliest Socratic literature was written. Socrates’ use of humor was a contested practice precisely because it raised certain democratic anxieties about its antidemocratic implications; more specifically, it was interpreted by some as reflecting Socrates’ sense of his own intellectual superiority, and hence, as expressing a derisive attitude toward both his fellow citizens and the institutions of Athenian democracy. Such derisive mockery sat in tension with an Athenian democratic ideology that placed great value on the collective wisdom of the *dēmos* and the ability of ordinary citizens to participate in the political process.

That Socratic humor was a contested practice in antiquity is a claim that can be fully demonstrated only through the analyses in the following chapters. The goal of this introduction is to set out in further detail the approach to the study of Socratic humor that will be deployed in this book. The first section offers a brief case study that illustrates the political dimensions of humor that will be the focus of this book. The second section outlines the methodological approach that will be deployed. Finally, the third section provides a conspectus of the chapters of the book.

THE POLITICS OF HUMOR

To argue that “humor” has a “politics” would be oversimplification, one that ignores the diversity among different forms of humor, accounts of what makes something funny, and their social and political implications, to briefly mention just a few considerations. This book does not seek to offer a comprehensive overview of these issues. The question of what makes something laughable has been debated with great vigor since at least Plato’s *Philebus*, and the three main scholarly theories—the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories—have already received more than ample scholarly attention.¹ Nor does this book provide a synoptic account of the practices of humor and laughter in antiquity; those looking for this can turn to the recent studies by Stephen Halliwell and Mary Beard on Greek and Roman laughter, respectively.² While the present study draws upon and is informed by such issues and concerns, its scope is more specialized: it focuses on how the various depictions of Socratic humor we find in our classical sources were shaped by the democratic context in which they were constructed. The analysis that follows is thus directed toward the specific concern that Socratic humor and irony constituted expressions of superiority that sat in tension with Athenian democratic ideals. The following example offers a starting point for identifying and unpacking this democratic anxiety concerning the practice of humor.

Demosthenes 54, Against Konon

In Demosthenes' prosecution speech, *Against Konon*, the victim, a man named Ariston, recounts the assault he suffered at the hands of a fellow citizen, Konon, and Konon's son. Ariston informs the jury that he was thrown to the ground, his lip was split open, and his eye was swollen shut as a result of the attack. To add (quite literally) insult to injury, Konon and his son began mocking Ariston until Konon "celebrated, imitating victorious fighting cocks, and his companions encouraged him to strike his elbows against his chest, as if they were wings" (9). In retaliation, Ariston prosecutes Konon on a charge of assault (*dikē aikeias*).

While Ariston formally charges Konon with assault, he repeatedly emphasizes that Konon's actions warranted prosecution under the much more serious charge of *hubris*.³ In democratic Athens, the public charge of *hubris* (*graphē hubreōs*) was applicable in cases of verbal and/or physical assault where the deliberate intent was the dishonoring or disrespecting of another.⁴ As David Halperin argues, *hubris* was the "anti-democratic crime *par excellence*."⁵ It was integrally connected to the sacrosanctity of the individual citizen body, or, as Josiah Ober puts it, to the democratic "right" to individual personal security, understood as "living without fear of being constrained by the actions of stronger persons within one's own society."⁶ It was also considered a public crime insofar as an assault against one citizen was viewed as an assault against the citizen body as a whole, and, in particular, as subverting the ability of all male citizens to participate on equal terms in the political life of their city. To treat a democratic citizen hubristically was to treat him like a slave, or to treat him in the same manner a wealthy ruler would treat a member of the disenfranchised lower classes within an oligarchy.⁷ In short, to treat a democratic citizen hubristically was to deny that individual the equal respect and equal dignity he deserved *qua* democratic citizen.⁸

While Ariston is subjected to physical violence, the verbal abuse he suffers at the hands of Konon and his companions is an important piece

of evidence that he uses in court to frame Konon's actions as hubristic. In particular, Ariston argues that Konon's imitation of a victorious fighting cock is a sign and sure proof (*sēmeion kai tekmerion*) of the latter's *hubris* (9). Given that *hubris* entailed the deliberate intent to dishonor or disrespect someone, demonstrating that one was the victim of *hubris* required more than just proof that an assault occurred; rather, it entailed establishing that the deliberate intent driving such assault was to cause dishonor. Ariston's argument, then, is that the ridicule and humiliation he experienced at the hands of Konon were constitutive of the hubristic nature of his opponent's actions.

Ariston anticipates that Konon, however, will offer his own interpretation of such ridicule, and warns the jurors to resist it: "Indeed I want to tell you what I have heard that he is prepared to say; he will attempt to lead the discussion away from *hubris* and from the deed that was committed and downplay it as one of laughter and jesting" (13).⁹ Konon, he continues, will cast the incident as the playful antics of young men who, having given themselves nicknames such as the Erect Phalluses (*itbuphalloi*) and Masturbators (*autolēkutboi*), rove about and often come to blows over courtesans with whom they have fallen in love (14). Worst of all, Konon will attempt to move the jurors to laughter over the incident and his description of it. Ariston insists, however, that none of them would have laughed had they been present during the assault, and that none of them should laugh now in the courtroom (20). What is thus at stake is the nature of such laughter and ridicule—whether it expresses the hubristic treatment that Ariston believes he suffered at the hands of Konon, or whether it is merely a kind of playful jesting that falls far short of meriting legal prosecution.¹⁰

In this respect, Ariston's claim that the jurors would not have laughed had they been present at the incident, and that they should not laugh now in the courtroom, raises both the question of the nature of such laughter and ridicule, and the appropriateness of such laughter and ridicule when it is deployed by one democratic citizen against another.¹¹ It would be inappropriate, Ariston argues, for the jurors to laugh at the humiliating

treatment he received; to do so would recreate within the courtroom the hubristic treatment he suffered in the streets of Athens.¹² Such laughter would itself constitute a further assault against Ariston's status as an equal democratic citizen: it would publicly mark Ariston as an inferior who could be abused at will, severely compromising his ability to exercise equal agency within the public sphere of democratic Athens.

Politics, Humor, and Democratic Anxieties

Demosthenes' *Against Konon* thus highlights a key set of tensions involved in the practice of humor within a democratic society. While humor can often be a "weapon of the weak" used to challenge and potentially unsettle hierarchical power structures,¹³ it can just as easily serve as a weapon of the strong in establishing and maintaining such inequalities. What this example illustrates, in part, is how our conceptions of what counts as a normatively legitimate expression of humor reflect the anxieties surrounding such inequalities between democratic citizens. Demosthenes' speech is indicative of a competing set of norms concerning laughter and humor within Athenian political discourse. For Konon (in Ariston's reckoning), such ridicule is an acceptable practice between young men, one that hardly warrants legal action; for Ariston, such ridicule subverts the egalitarian distribution of political power central to Athenian democratic ideology.¹⁴

This example in *Against Konon* allows us to identify a key democratic anxiety surrounding the practice of humor, one that revolves around the power of humor to alter the social relationships between citizens. More specifically, while the use of humor to ridicule and humiliate does not erase the formal, legal relationship between democratic citizens, it can subvert the social recognition that underpins that legal relationship by marking the victims of such ridicule and humiliation as unfit to exercise their formal rights as citizens. As Josiah Ober has recently argued in relation to the place of dignity within democracy, "When citizens live with indignity, or live with the knowledge that by

exercising participation rights they risk indignity, they are unable to make effective use of political liberty. Even if they are equal to one another in formal participation rights and before the law, citizens suffering or at high risk of indignity do not enjoy the high standing necessary for true collective self-governance.”¹⁵ Ober thus emphasizes how the exercise of political agency is not just dependent on the legal rights enjoyed by democratic citizens. The ability to exercise political agency effectively is shaped by the social recognition that citizens are fit to exercise such political power, and the ridicule and humiliation conveyed by certain forms of humor risk undermining that social recognition.

THE POLITICS OF SOCRATIC HUMOR

This book argues that we can think about the depictions of Socratic humor we find in Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and the Cynics as part of a larger debate, one that encompasses both the nature of Socratic humor and its political significance, as well as the broader questions of the ethics and politics of humor during the classical and Hellenistic periods. In particular, it argues that the kinds of democratic anxieties outlined above shaped the depictions of Socratic humor that we find in our classical sources, and that similar concerns regarding the relationship between humor, power, and agency continued to shape such depictions during the Hellenistic period. In short, if we want to understand the phenomenon of Socratic humor, we need to attend to how these authors participated in these debates, and how their respective depictions of Socrates may have been shaped by it.

Methodological Approach

Before attempting to reconstruct this debate, it is worth pausing to note the methodological approach to the study of Socratic humor that will be deployed in this book. The language of a historical “debate” about

Socratic humor is not meant to suggest that the goal of this analysis is a better understanding of the historical Socrates. Rather, the following study reflects the increasing tendency within the literature on Socrates to eschew the Socratic problem¹⁶—the question of who the historical Socrates really was—and to focus instead on how our sources present us with distinct representations and interpretations of Socratic philosophical practice.¹⁷ This move has been prompted by the recognition that those authors who constructed literary accounts of Socrates did not do so with the goal of historical fidelity in mind; rather, their depictions are fictional accounts that were shaped by a variety of contextual factors, and by their own substantive intellectual concerns. This does not mean, of course, that there are not some important similarities between the different depictions of Socrates that we find in Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle; to focus on such agreement, however, overlooks the distinct interpretations of the significance of these practices provided by these authors.

Xenophon's treatment of *akrasia* (weakness of will) provides a good illustration of this interpretive shift. For Gregory Vlastos, Xenophon's treatment of Socrates' beliefs concerning *akrasia* is at worst grossly confused, providing contradictory accounts of whether Socrates denied the possibility of *akrasia* at all.¹⁸ At best, his report is "defectively incomplete" insofar as he neglects to mention that Socrates denied the possibility of *akrasia* for both the temperate and the intemperate: an omission that likely resulted from the fact that Xenophon "does not understand it himself."¹⁹ By contrast, Louis-André Dorion has demonstrated that the differences between Plato's and Xenophon's reports concerning Socrates' denial of *akrasia* can be better explained by their respective treatments of *enkrateia* (mastery of oneself). For the Platonic Socrates, *enkrateia* is superfluous; since *sophia* is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for virtuous action, there is no need for *enkrateia*. The Xenophonic Socrates, by contrast, maintains both the possibility of *akrasia* and the need for *enkrateia*, and it is this position that Vlastos finds either incoherent or inconsistent. As Dorion demonstrates, however, it is

neither. While for the Platonic Socrates *enkrateia* is a consequence of *sophia*, for the Xenophontic Socrates it is a precondition of *sophia*.²⁰ Xenophon's Socrates thus maintains the impossibility of knowing the good and acting contrary to it, yet he believes that such knowledge of the good is possible only after one has attained mastery over oneself. This key difference further tracks the central importance the Xenophontic Socrates places on *enkrateia* for a whole host of ethical topics.²¹

Our sources also agree that Socrates deployed humor in his engagements with his interlocutors. Beyond that, however, there is little agreement between them concerning the nature and purpose of such humor. In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Socrates' humor takes the form of a direct, and harsh, mockery of his primary interlocutor, Strepsiades: Socrates repeatedly berates Strepsiades for his ignorance and his inability to comprehend the sophisticated (if somewhat silly) arguments the former makes concerning meteorology, grammar, and other matters. In Plato's dialogues, by contrast, Socrates' humor is typically ironic and self-effacing; and while such irony may vary in its directness, the direct forms of abuse and mockery on display in *Clouds* are absent. In Xenophon's Socratic works we encounter yet another distinct portrait. Xenophon's Socrates, unlike his Platonic counterpart, does deploy forms of abusive mockery against his interlocutors; yet, unlike his Aristophanic counterpart, such mockery is depicted as serving a clear pedagogical purpose, one that benefits, rather than simply denigrates, his conversational partners. Xenophon's Socrates (as I will argue in chapter 3) also consistently deploys a type of irony while in conversation with his interlocutors; nonetheless, it is a mode of irony that is quite distinct from that of the Platonic Socrates, particularly in its greater transparency. In short, while the depictions of Socrates we find in Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon all "agree" that humor was a central characteristic of Socratic practice, they each disagree concerning the nature of such humor; and, as we will see in more detail in the chapters that follow, they also disagree about the potential pedagogical and political purposes of such humor.

These authors' representations of Socratic humor are closely linked, moreover, with their respective interests in humor and its ethical and political significance. For Aristophanes, the depiction of Socratic humor in *Clouds* is part of a larger attempt to identify and justify the benefits that comic poetry, and the forms of humor associated with Attic Old Comedy, provided to Athenian citizens. For Plato, the question of Socratic humor and irony is bound up with Plato's own concerns about the pedagogical effects of poetry, and the ways in which laughter and humor can shape (and corrupt) the education of citizens. Xenophon's depiction of Socratic humor, for its part, is bound up with his analysis of the qualities needed for effective leadership,²² and the question of how humor can be used effectively is a persistent theme throughout his representation of both Socrates and a host of other exemplary figures.

Finally, Aristotle's treatment of *eirōneia* generally, and Socratic *eirōneia* in particular, are linked to his analysis of *eutrapelia* (wittiness); as will be argued in chapter 4, Aristotle's conception of *eutrapelia* can be read, in part, as a response to, and critique of, his conception of Socratic *eirōneia*. In sum, the respective depictions of Socratic humor in Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle cannot be read as straightforward attempts to offer a historically accurate portrait of Socrates; while they may, to some extent, be rooted in some basic historical facts, the details of their portraits are deeply shaped by these authors' own concerns about humor and its ethical and political significance.

With these concerns in mind, the methodological approach deployed in this book is that of a comparative exegesis of our main classical sources for the theme of Socratic humor.²³ While this approach will not yield an answer to the question of what Socratic humor really was as it was practiced in fifth-century Athens, it can provide us with a sense of how the legacy of Socratic humor developed in the period following Socrates' death and was shaped by a constellation of concerns, including those outlined above. The following section offers a brief sketch of our evidence for the claim that a concern with the ethics and politics of Socratic

humor may in fact have influenced the treatments of that theme that we find in our principal sources.

A Classical Debate

As Louis-André Dorion has noted, there were three sets of accusations to which the earliest writers of Socratic literature felt compelled to respond: (1) the attack made against Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds* in 423; (2) the formal accusations by Meletus, Lycon, and Anytus that gave rise to Socrates' trial and execution in 399; and (3) the *Accusation of Socrates* produced by Polycrates around 393, in which Socrates was accused of having been the inspiration for Critias and Alcibiades, and having taught his companions to despise the institutions of the democracy, such as selection of magistrates by lot.²⁴ From the start, then, the literature that emerges on Socrates in the fourth century is engaged in responding to these concerns; the goal of this book is to bring to the fore the role that Socrates' use of humor may have played in these debates, and how it may have intersected with certain anxieties about the political implications of Socratic questioning.

As Stephen Halliwell notes in his extensive study of Greek laughter, the distinct representations of Socratic humor by Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle may have been part of a larger debate concerning what Halliwell terms Socrates' gelastic practices—that range of activities centering around laughter and humor. Halliwell observes that the ambiguity surrounding the Socratic practice of humor in the Platonic dialogues is perhaps indicative of the contested legacy of Socratic humor during the fourth century. While, as Halliwell argues, the Platonic Socrates does not engage in overt, face-to-face mockery, he does deploy irony as a mode of tacit ridicule, tends to be more critical of individuals in both his unspoken thoughts and those concerning interlocutors who are absent, and is often harsh in mocking himself and the arguments in which he participates. What Plato offers us, in sum, is “an ambiguous, double-sided figure where laughter is concerned” and

that “it is probable . . . that this ambiguity was part of Plato’s conscious response to a larger, ongoing contest for the memory and posthumous image of the man himself.”²⁵ We can discern the evidence for such a debate, Halliwell contends, if we attend to the contrasting accounts of Socratic humor that we find in Aristophanes, Xenophon, and the Peripatetics. The Aristophanic Socrates displays a “mocking *hauteur*” in his engagement with Strepsiades; Xenophon’s Socrates “has no qualms about showing Socrates availing himself of the social power of humiliating laughter” in questioning the young Euthydemus; and Aristoxenus (a fourth-century Peripatetic) is reported to have labeled Socrates hubristic and abusive.²⁶

There is also evidence beyond our principal fourth-century sources that the Socratic practice of humor was a topic of concern during Socrates’ trial and its aftermath. In Diogenes Laertius’ *Life of Socrates*—an admittedly late source—Socrates’ primary accuser is described as motivated by the mockery that he suffered at the hands of Socrates. Diogenes writes: “For this man [Anytus], unable to bear the ridicule (*chleuasmon*) of Socrates, first set those around Aristophanes against him, and then persuaded Meletus to indict him on charges of impiety and of corrupting the youth” (2.38). Diogenes later returns to this theme, noting that each of Socrates’ prosecutors, and the groups they represented, had been the victims of Socrates’ ridicule: “Anytus was angered on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians; Lycon on behalf of the orators; and Meletus on behalf of the poets, all of whom Socrates ridiculed (*diesure*)” (2.39). While Socrates indicates, in Plato’s *Apology*, that his cross-examination of his fellow citizens has often aroused their anger and resentment (21b–23b), Diogenes’ account highlights the gelastic dimensions of these reactions.

While Diogenes’ account of the origin of Socrates’ trial points to the potential ridicule Socrates deployed against his interlocutors, Libanius’ *Apology of Socrates* suggests that such mockery may have also been directed at Athens’ democratic institutions. Libanius’ text, which is constructed as a response to the speech that Anytus purportedly

delivered at Socrates' trial,²⁷ contains the following accusation: "He [Socrates] is a hater of the *dēmos*, he [Anytus] says, and he persuades his companions to mock (*katagelan*) the democracy" (54). Though found in another late source, this remark resonates with some of the accusations recorded in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. In particular, Xenophon notes that Socrates' accuser said that "he [Socrates] taught his companions to despise (*huperoran*) the established laws, saying how it would be foolish (*mōron*) to appoint magistrates by lot when no one would want to choose a pilot or a builder or a flute player by lot or for any other such task, although the harms committed when someone errs in those things are far lesser than those concerning the city" (1.2.9).²⁸ While it is not possible to assess the historical accuracy of such charges, they do seem to indicate that some individuals believed Socrates thought that his fellow citizens harbored ridiculous beliefs and that the principles underlying Athenian democratic institutions were themselves laughable.

While these later sources suggest how the Socratic practice of humor may have raised such political concerns, there is also evidence within the Platonic dialogues that is indicative of a rivalry between Socrates' heirs concerning the nature and purpose of Socratic humor. The following case study, drawn from Plato's *Euthydemus*, illustrates this distinct aspect of the debate surrounding Socratic humor in antiquity, and how we might situate it within Plato's broader treatment of humor in the dialogues.

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Commentators on Plato's *Euthydemus* have long recognized the contrasts Plato draws between Socrates and the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in that dialogue. The two brothers possess an affinity with Socrates insofar as they claim to improve their interlocutors through the practice of refutation. Yet the technique deployed by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus is labeled as "eristic," which is used in Plato as a term of abuse identifying its practitioners as seeking only victory, rather than truth, in argument.²⁹ The eristic nature of their

arguments is indicated by their expressed goal of refuting Cleinias regardless of the truth or falsity of his responses. Of central concern in the dialogue is thus this distinction between Socratic dialectic and sophistic eristic.

This distinction is connected with Plato's depiction of the gelastic dimensions of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus' eristic practices. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus begin their conversation with Socrates by laughing at him for thinking that they still concern themselves with instructing others in martial matters (273d1). Their companions, moreover, laugh at both of the refutations to which Cleinias is subjected during their first conversation (276b7, d1). Having witnessed Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in action, Socrates then compares their techniques to someone who pulls the chair out from under someone who is about to sit down and then laughs at him when he falls (278c1). Determined to illustrate the kind of protreptic he was hoping the two brothers would deploy, Socrates asks Euthydemus, Dionysodorus, and their companions not to laugh at him and Cleinias, even if they should converse in a laughable way (278d5–6, e1). During this conversation with Cleinias, Socrates does worry that he and Cleinias have become laughable (278e4, 279d1, 4), and he expresses the same suspicion to Crito during the brief interlude at 290e–293b (291b1); yet, Socrates, unlike the brothers and their companions, does not laugh. Ctesippus, the *erastēs* of the young Cleinias, does laugh when he manages to score some argumentative points against Euthydemus (298e9, 300d6), and Cleinias joins in with him (300e1). Though it is deployed against the two brothers, Socrates identifies such laughter as akin to the same practice; Socrates narrates that Ctesippus seemed to him to be a scoundrel (*panourgos*), and that he had likely picked up the arguments he deployed against Euthydemus and Dionysodorus from the brothers themselves (300d7–9). Finally, when Socrates is refuted at the end of the dialogue by Dionysodorus, he reports that there was no one present who did not laugh, perhaps implying that even Cleinias and Ctesippus joined in with the brothers and their companions at this point (303b1–3).³⁰

This brief survey of laughter in the *Euthydemus* illustrates that part of the distinction Plato draws between Socrates and the two brothers concerns the way the latter explicitly mock those they have refuted. Lingering in the background of this contrast, however, is the connection between the Socratic *elenchus* and ridicule that is developed elsewhere in Plato's dialogues. In particular, Socrates' discussion of comic pleasure at *Philebus* 48a–50b evokes the spectacle of the *elenchus* as it is depicted by Plato.³¹ In that passage, Socrates argues that the laughable (*to geloion*) arises from self-ignorance and, most commonly, from self-ignorance concerning wisdom. Though the connection between the *elenchus* and this conception of *to geloion* is not drawn in the *Philebus* itself, it suggests that Socrates makes his interlocutors appear laughable by exposing their self-ignorance. Such a recognition of the gelastic dimensions of the *elenchus*, moreover, might lie behind Socrates' observation that many people enjoy (*chairousin*) listening to him when he questions others, since such examinations are “not unpleasant” (*ouk aēdes*, *Ap.* 33c). At the same time, this connection between the discussion of *to geloion* in the *Philebus* and Socrates' description of the *elenchus* in the *Apology* creates a potential puzzle. In the *Philebus*, Socrates also claims that such laughter is an unjust expression of envy (*phthonos*, 49c–e): thus, if Socrates is aware that these spectators are pleased by the laughable appearance of his refuted interlocutors, might that not make him complicit in the unjust pleasure those spectators experience?³² This puzzle might lead us to conclude that the relationship between Socrates and ridicule is likewise problematic.

Yet, the *Euthydemus*, along with the *Laches*, suggests an alternative conclusion. In the latter dialogue, Plato indicates an awareness of the implications of the connection between the definition of *to geloion* in the *Philebus* and his depiction of the Socratic *elenchus*. In particular, the *Laches* contains an exploration of a very similar dynamic in its depictions of Socrates' two interlocutors, Nicias and Laches. As the dialogue progresses, Nicias and Laches swap roles as spectator and interlocutor, and that alternation allows us to see two distinct modes of being a spectator of a Socratic refutation. While Nicias remains a silent spectator

during Socrates' examination of Laches, Laches continually interrupts, claiming not to know what Nicias means, stating that he is speaking strange things (*bōs atopa legei*, 195a2) and is speaking nonsense (*lērei*, 195a6). In a manner reminiscent of the *Euthydemus*, Socrates tells Laches that they ought, in that case, to teach (*didaskōmen*) Nicias, rather than abuse him (*loidorōmen*, 195a7). After Nicias has been refuted, Laches notes, sarcastically, that he had believed that Nicias would have discovered what courage is, and held great hope (*megalēn elpida*) that he would do so (199e13–200a3).³³ Nicias responds with the observation that Laches does not care if he himself is ignorant, as long as others are also found to be ignorant; Nicias adds that when he becomes sure about these matters, he will teach Laches and not be envious (*didaxō kai se, kai ou phthonēsō*), perhaps associating the latter with such envy (200a-c). The incorrect lessons that Laches draws from the *elenchus* thus stem, as in the *Euthydemus*, from a lack of any genuine concern with the truth.

This brief exploration of the *Laches* does not solve the puzzle mentioned above, but it does suggest that not all of Socrates' spectators will react in the way that Laches does. It further suggests that there are important distinctions to be drawn between the exposure of self-ignorance, witnessing such an exposure, and actually taking pleasure in it, distinctions that point toward an important difference between what Socrates does and what individuals like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus do. While the two brothers appear to take great pleasure in refuting others, and their companions show no restraint in laughing at those who are refuted, Socrates appears averse to both. Though Socrates observes, in the *Euthydemus*, that he and Cleinias appear laughable, he does not laugh.³⁴ Socrates' discussion of the laughable in the *Philebus*, moreover, would seem to support this distinction: while Socrates maintains that *the laughable (to geloion)* is defined as a kind of vice wherein self-ignorance is mixed with weakness and the inability to take revenge, *the act of laughing (gelōmen, 49e9)* entails being pleased by the self-ignorance of others. What is problematic, then, is not finding others laughable, but taking pleasure in such recognition—the expression of which is the act

of laughing. Socrates does not practice such laughter, and he advises others not to do so either.³⁵

As will be argued more extensively in chapter 2, this contrast is part of Plato's more general portrait of a Socrates who does not engage in direct forms of mockery and ridicule. Yet the distinction that Plato draws in the *Euthydemus* is not just a theoretical one; rather, there is evidence that suggests that in distinguishing between the gelastic practices of Socrates and those of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, Plato is engaged in a dispute concerning Socrates' legacy among his fourth-century followers. In particular, Louis-André Dorion has argued that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were not fifth-century sophists and contemporaries of Socrates but fourth-century philosophers of the Megarian school.³⁶ If Dorion is correct,³⁷ then the contrasts Plato draws between Socrates and Euthydemus and Dionysodorus ought to be understood as part of a debate concerning Socrates' legacy among his immediate successors. The contrasts Plato draws also appear to provide evidence for the broader claim that there was a more general debate during the fourth century concerning Socrates' gelastic tendencies. The Megarians could, through Euclid, declare a Socratic pedigree for their philosophical practices, and the affinity between the Socratic *elenchus* and the method of refutation practiced by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus is perhaps a testament to that fact. By staging the encounter between Socrates and these Megarian philosophers in the *Euthydemus*, Plato may be suggesting that the Megarians drew the wrong lessons from Socrates, especially concerning the goal of the *elenchus*. And if the Megarians were associated with the gelastic practices on display in the *Euthydemus*,³⁸ then Plato may also be criticizing their misplaced focus on deploying such refutations for the purpose of ridicule, and the vicious pleasure they took in laughing at their opponents.

Plato's engagement with the Megarians over the legacy of Socratic humor in the *Euthydemus* offers one key example of how this phenomenon may have been treated as a contested practice during the classical period. Demonstrating that the wider Socratic literature of this period

reflected such concerns, however, will be the work of the core chapters of this book. The final section of this introduction offers a brief overview of these chapters, while indicating how the largely ethical concerns surrounding Socratic humor discussed above carry with them important political implications.

OVERVIEW

This book presents a new narrative account of Socratic humor, but it does not pretend to offer a comprehensive account of every major example of Socratic humor in our ancient, or even classical, sources. Once one dives into the extant Socratic literature with an eye toward the themes of humor and irony, the issue that quickly emerges is not a dearth of evidence, but an overabundance. To provide a comprehensive treatment of these themes in Plato alone would require detailed attention to every dialogue—even in the *Laws*, where Socrates does not appear, there are important discussions of comedy and laughter that ought to be considered in order to properly frame Plato's treatment of these themes. The same could be said of Xenophon. While Xenophon's Socratic works account for a much smaller percentage of his overall corpus, humor is a persistent theme throughout his works.³⁹ This larger context is important for judging Xenophon's treatment of the theme of Socratic humor, precisely because it is often argued that Xenophon transposes his own concerns and ideas onto his portrait of Socrates. Thus, while the analysis offered in the following chapters is informed by an understanding of the available evidence, it does not attempt to be exhaustive.

The study of Socratic humor in this book begins with Aristophanes' *Clouds*. I argue that Aristophanes presents a democratic critique of Socratic philosophy and the particular form of Socratic mockery with which it is associated in the play. This critique focuses on a specific democratic anxiety concerning the threat Socratic intellectualism poses to the operation of democratic authority in classical Athens. Drawing on the work of Josiah Ober and Danielle Allen (as well as

contemporary treatments of authority by Robert Brandom and Jeffrey Stout), a notion of democratic authority is sketched that emphasizes the fact that each democratic citizen is authorized to hold their fellow citizens to account. I argue that Socrates' use of mockery in *Clouds* subverts this notion of democratic authority by ridiculing those who do not possess his intellectual sophistication, and in doing so, marking them as unfit to hold him accountable. It is this notion of superiority, coupled with a mockery of his intellectual inferiors, that Strepsiades learns from Socrates and deploys against his creditors.

While previous interpretations of *Clouds* have generally focused on Socrates' education of Pheidippides, and the danger this education poses to the traditional forms of authority located in the gods, the city, and the family,⁴⁰ the interpretation presented in this book is unique in its emphasis on the danger Socratic education poses to a democratic notion of authority. Given this central democratic anxiety surrounding the Socratic practice of humor, chapters 2 and 3 situate Plato's and Xenophon's respective portraits of Socratic humor and irony as responses to this concern. It is my contention that these depictions, in various ways and to various extents, attempt to defend Socrates from the accusation that he practiced a form of humor that reflected antidemocratic beliefs and practices. While this approach reflects recent work that emphasizes the apologetic nature of the Socratic literature,⁴¹ the arguments of these chapters further suggest how both Plato and Xenophon use the figure of Socrates to reframe their readers' conceptions of democratic citizenship and the practices of humor that might be associated with them. In other words, while both the Platonic dialogues and Xenophon's Socratic works suggest that Socratic philosophical practice may have been more consonant with Athenian democratic norms and practices than Socrates' accusers had maintained, both authors also seek to refigure the horizons of what a democratic mode of citizenship might look like and how democratic citizens might laugh and joke with and at each other.

With these considerations in mind, chapter 2 focuses on the use of the word *eirōneia* in the Platonic dialogues as a framework for evaluating

Plato's presentation of Socratic humor and irony. While Plato's engagement with Socratic humor and irony extends well beyond his limited use of this word, the use of *eirōneia* and its cognates to describe Socrates and his actions is absent from the representations found in Aristophanes and Xenophon.⁴² Plato's use of the word *eirōneia* is thus unique, and it provides a road map for understanding Plato's somewhat ambiguous presentation of the implications of Socratic humor and irony.

Demonstrating that argument, however, requires attention to the meaning of the word *eirōneia* and its cognates in the classical period. This is especially important, given that recent work by Michel Narcy and Melissa Lane has challenged the idea that *eirōneia* signifies irony and that it ought to be translated as such.⁴³ Focusing on Demosthenes' use of *eirōneia*, I argue that *eirōneia* is best understood as a solipsistic form of irony, one in which the ironist herself is the primary, if not sole, audience for the irony. In this sense, *eirōneia* resembles a kind of practical joking, one in which the *eirōn*'s interlocutor is made the unwitting butt of the *eirōn*'s joke. The practice of *eirōneia* does constitute a type of mockery, though one that is far more indirect than that practiced by the Aristophanic Socrates.

Having established that *eirōneia* constitutes a distinct type of ironic humor, the chapter then turns to Plato's use of the term and its cognates throughout the dialogues. I argue that Plato's depiction of Socratic *eirōneia* is bound up with the question of Socrates' relationship to sophistry; on this reading, whether Socrates' interlocutors perceive him to be practicing *eirōneia* (understood as the kind of solipsistic irony described above) is thus a product of their perception of Socratic practice more generally. This reading is developed by focusing on two groups of passages where Plato uses the term *eirōneia* and its cognates: first, its use in the *Sophist*, *Euthydemus*, and *Cratylus*, where the practice of *eirōneia* is associated with sophistry and the sophists; and, second, its use in the *Apology*, *Republic*, *Gorgias*, and *Symposium*, where Socrates' interlocutors accuse him of speaking and/or acting with *eirōneia*. While Plato seems to discredit the reliability of those who charge Socrates

with *eirōneia* by depicting these accusations as themselves ironic, his illustration of the difficulties in distinguishing between Socrates and the sophists in later dialogues like the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* reveal an essential ambiguity at the heart of the Socratic practice of both *eirōneia* in particular and irony more generally. More specifically, whether Socrates' interlocutors perceive him to be practicing *eirōneia* (like Thrasy-machus) or a more transparent and playful form of irony (like Phaedrus in the dialogue that bears his name) depends on what they take to be the nature and purpose of Socratic philosophy.

Plato's depiction of Socratic *eirōneia* (and irony and humor more generally) thus complicates the portrait we find in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Whereas the humor of the Aristophanic Socrates is a direct, abusive form of mockery, one that is used to express superiority over others, the ironic humor of the Platonic Socrates is far more indirect, and its perceived purpose varies from interlocutor to interlocutor. For those who understand the driving goal of Socratic questioning to be winning the argument, Socrates appears to be deploying *eirōneia* in order to mock and ridicule them; those who take Socrates to be genuinely motivated by a search for the truth, in contrast, view Socrates as engaged in a more transparent, and less vicious, form of irony, one that is both more playful and reciprocal than that associated with *eirōneia*. In Plato, then, Socratic humor (in the form of *eirōneia*) does have the potential to exacerbate certain anxieties about equality and inequality within a democratic community; at the same time, Plato's depiction suggests that the nature and purpose of Socratic humor is not as univocal as Aristophanes' portrait suggests. Plato's depiction of Socratic *eirōneia* ultimately highlights how the relationship between Socrates and his interlocutors shapes the effects of its practice, and further, its potential political implications. This analysis of the political dimensions of Socratic humor is developed through attention to Socrates' interpretation of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology*.

Chapter 3 begins by situating Xenophon's depiction of Socratic humor within two main contexts: first, the accusation, recorded by

Xenophon at *Memorabilia* 1.2.58, that Socrates would quote *Iliad* 2.188–202 in support of the idea that it is praiseworthy to abuse, both physically and verbally, ordinary citizens; second, the symposia scenes in the *Cyropaedia* (2.2, 8.4), in which Xenophon illustrates Cyrus' attempts to navigate the political anxieties surrounding the practice of humor. Taken together, these passages demonstrate Xenophon's attentiveness to the political dimensions of humor and suggest that his depiction of Socrates' gelastic practices is part of his more general effort to defend Socrates from his accusers. The remainder of the chapter illustrates how Xenophon's distinctive portrait of Socratic humor is connected with his emphasis on Socrates' usefulness to his fellow citizens and the city of Athens.

The humor of Xenophon's Socrates differs from that of his Platonic counterpart in two main respects: first, Xenophon's Socrates engages in the abusive forms of mockery and ridicule that are eschewed by the Platonic Socrates (but are practiced by the Aristophanic Socrates); second, while Xenophon's Socrates uses irony, it is a form of irony that is distinct from both *eirōneia* and the other forms of irony associated with the Platonic Socrates. I argue that this distinctive type of irony is connected with the crucial role that *enkrateia* (mastery of oneself) plays in the pedagogical approach deployed by Xenophon's Socrates. It also tracks the specific kinds of Socratic conversations emphasized by Plato and Xenophon, respectively; while the irony of the Platonic Socrates is linked to his practice of the *elenchus*, that of the Xenophontic Socrates is connected with those protreptic conversations in which Socrates attempts to lead his interlocutors toward virtue. Thus, while the Platonic Socrates deploys irony specifically to draw his interlocutors into conversation, Xenophon's Socrates does so in order to reveal the gap between the noble goals to which his interlocutors aspire and their abilities to achieve those goals. This interpretation is developed through close attention to Socrates' conversations with his fellow citizens at *Memorabilia* 3.1–7.

While the first three chapters of the book focus on the depictions of Socratic humor offered by Socrates' contemporaries, chapters 4 and 5 turn

to Aristotle and the Hellenistic schools. Though neither Aristotle nor the thinkers discussed in chapter 5 are directly concerned with the specific democratic anxieties that constitute the focus of the first three chapters, their discussions of the ethics and politics of humor revolve around similar concerns. In particular, their analyses illustrate how humor can be used to explore, navigate, and contest the operations of power, and in doing so testify to the fact that Socrates' legacy continued to shape philosophical discussions of humor in the later classical period and beyond.

Aristotle critically engages with ideas that he identifies as Socratic throughout his philosophical writings, and it has long been acknowledged that his treatment of *eirōneia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* was shaped in part by his understanding of the Socratic practice of *eirōneia*. I argue that we can interpret Aristotle's conception of *eutrapelia* (the virtue pertaining to laughing and joking well) as an alternative to his mainly negative assessment of Socratic *eirōneia*. Aristotle's association of *eirōneia* with magnanimity does qualify his classification of *eirōneia* as a vice; at the same time, it highlights the element of superiority connected with the practice of *eirōneia*. As a hierarchical practice, *eirōneia* sits in tension with the "social virtues" Aristotle identifies at *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.6–8—friendliness, truthfulness, and wittiness; in particular, it is distinct from the kind of reciprocity involved in *eutrapelia*, which requires the ability both to laugh and joke well and to endure the laughter and joking of others. While this does not make *eutrapelia* a democratic virtue, it does lend it a certain democratic potential, one that is unpacked through a return to Demosthenes' *Against Konon* along with an analysis of the use of the term *eutrapelia* during the classical period.

The fifth and final chapter explores the legacy of Socratic humor and irony in the Hellenistic schools, with a particular focus on Diogenes of Sinope and the Cynic practice of humor. The chapter begins with an overview of discussions of Socratic humor and irony within Stoic and Epicurean philosophy in order to establish the continued disagreement concerning the nature and purpose of Socratic humor and irony in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The chapter then turns to

the Cynic practice of humor and its connection to the Cynic goal of living in accordance with nature. I argue that Cynic humor does have a Socratic pedigree, one that we can trace by attending to Xenophon's depiction of Antisthenes in the *Symposium*. The remainder of the chapter explains how the Cynic practice of humor, in both its mockery of others and its endurance of the mockery of others, was deeply connected with a practice of self-cultivation that attempted to enable the true Cynic to resist conventional norms and ways of life that sought to prevent him or her from living in accordance with nature.

The conclusion brings together the distinct depictions of Socratic humor developed in the previous chapters. Rather than arguing that Socratic humor is a singular phenomenon with one particular political meaning and purpose, I argue that what the study of Socratic humor reveals are the sites at which power is reinforced, contested, and/or negotiated. In particular, it illustrates how attempting to make sense of the political implications of Socratic philosophy requires attending to how our sources depict Socrates as deploying humor in ways that both work within and challenge Athenian democratic ideology. The result is neither a democratic nor an antidemocratic reading of the politics of Socratic humor, but one that can explain both its challenge to democratic politics and its potential as a resource for reimagining democratic practices.