

## **Why Socrates Mocks His Interlocutors**

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At *Crito* 44b-46a, Crito urges Socrates<sup>1</sup> to flee Athens before Socrates is put to death. Crito argues that Socrates should flee for the following reasons: Crito would lose a friend; those who are not close to the situation may assume that Crito is not willing to spend the money to save his dear friend's life; Socrates should raise and educate his children; and both Socrates and his friends would bring shame upon themselves by succumbing to cowardice. To these impassioned arguments, Socrates famously responds with the words that have guided his intellectual life:

My dear Crito, your eagerness is worth much if it should have some right aim; if not, then the greater your keenness the more difficult it is to deal with. We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me. (46b)<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, Socrates clearly lays out the circumstances in which he will escape his death sentence; if Crito hopes to persuade Socrates that fleeing is truly the right thing to do, he must provide an argument for fleeing that Socrates deems the “best” argument—for Socrates “listens to *nothing*” but the argument that “seems best to [him].”

But given the straightforward nature of these terms, there appears to be a great problem with the way that Socrates conducts himself in many of the dialogues. One would imagine that a person only persuaded by rational arguments—as Socrates states he is—would only offer rational arguments in return. Throughout the dialogues, however, there is an abundance of what Iakovos Vasiliou terms “play.”<sup>3</sup> Time and time again when faced with an interlocutor, rather than simply stating his own rational arguments, Socrates uses irony in a way that mocks and ridicules the interlocutor. One clear example of Socrates’

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<sup>1</sup>By “Socrates,” I am referring to the character we find in those texts generally considered to be Plato’s “early” or “Socratic” dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are taken from *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper.

<sup>3</sup> Vasiliou 1997, 456.

stinging irony<sup>4</sup> can be found in the *Euthyphro*. Socrates challenges Euthyphro to teach him what piety is; when Euthyphro fails, Socrates urges him to continue debating so that they can both get to the bottom of the nature of piety. Instead of persuading Euthyphro with logical arguments, however, Socrates mocks him:

[Y]ou know [what piety is], if any man does, and I must not let you go.... If you had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant. For fear of the gods you would have been afraid to take the risk lest you should not be acting rightly, and would have been ashamed before men, but now I know well that you believe you have clear knowledge of piety and impiety. So tell me, my good Euthyphro, and do not hide what you think it is. (15c-d)

Socrates' treatment of Euthyphro is particularly rough and does not seem to illustrate purely rational tactics. At this point, one may legitimately ask: Why, given his adherence to reason, does Socrates resort to mocking his interlocutors, as he mocks Euthyphro in this scene?

To complicate matters further, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that one should “attempt to care for the city and its citizens with the aim of making the citizens themselves as good as possible” (513e). If Socrates believes this notion to be true, how can he explain the way he treats his interlocutors? Socrates tells us in the *Apology* that his philosophical mission is to seek out “anyone, citizen or stranger, whom [he] thinks wise” and to assist the god by showing “him that he is not wise” (23b). Given Socrates' philosophical mission and the fact that Socrates believes that everyone should care for the city by making

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<sup>4</sup> Michelini uses the word “stinging” to describe the techniques that Socrates uses against his interlocutors (Michelini 1998). Perhaps the best way of understanding this particular form of irony is to take a look at *Apology* 30e-31 where Socrates himself alludes to this feature of his discussions: “I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company.” Socrates expresses the fact that he has caused some annoyance to his fellow citizens because of the way he has conducted himself. These “gadfly” actions serve as an explanation for “stinging” irony. I do not presume to provide an explanation for every type of irony that Socrates employs; I am concerned with irony that is used to mock an interlocutor.

its citizens as good as possible, how does Socrates believe that mocking his interlocutors will help him achieve his goals?

Despite the fact that examples of Socrates' mocking irony can be found often in Plato's dialogues, most recent scholarship has been focused upon defining what sort of irony Socrates is using.<sup>5</sup> The questions of why Socrates would choose stinging irony over rational argumentation and how Socrates believes mocking his interlocutors will benefit them are briefly considered in these works, but no in-depth examination exists. In this paper, I will first examine recent scholarship concerning Socrates' use of mocking irony in the dialogues. There are two directions one can take: First, I will examine those scholars that merely dismiss Socrates' mocking irony as deceptive and thus attempt to avoid the apparent conflict all together; second, I will review the more fruitful attempts to reconcile Socrates' mocking irony with his statements in the *Crito* and the *Gorgias* and show how these attempts are inadequate. Finally, I will offer my own account of how Socrates could regard mocking irony as a useful companion to rational argumentation and how it can benefit those who receive it.

### **Socrates: The Great Deceiver?**

When looking at the apparent paradox, there are two roads that we can follow. On the one side, we can simply dismiss Socrates as being deceptive in these passages. The apparent paradox seemingly dissolves itself because we no longer have to worry about Socrates' statements being consistent with one another—when he mocks his interlocutors, he is not engaging in rational argumentation and may actually

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<sup>5</sup> See, for examples, Vlastos 1991, 21-44; Gordon 1996; Vasiliou 1998; Vasiliou 2002. Vlastos defines the most prevalent form of Socratic irony as complex irony, where what is said is both meant and not meant by Socrates. For example, when Socrates disavows knowledge, he disavows knowledge that is more than human while still claiming to have human wisdom. Gordon argues that Vlastos's conception of irony is incomplete because one needs to take the dramatic context of irony into account in order to interpret its meaning. Vasiliou argues that the most prevalent form of irony is what he calls conditional irony. Conditional irony is based upon the idea that "if the antecedent were true, then Socrates *would* really believe the consequent; however, it is clear to the reader, though not always to the interlocutor, that Socrates believes that the antecedent is false" (Vasiliou 1997, 462). In his later work, Vasiliou refines his account of conditional irony to include what he calls reverse irony. Reverse irony is "when Socrates says what he actually believes to be true, but what his audience is bound to understand as ironic" (Vasiliou 2002, 221). Though this account of irony does not seem to be an example of irony at all, since it violates a condition of irony that one has to mean something other than what they say in order for irony to work, it still is an attempt to define the particular type of irony Socrates utilizes.

be intentionally deceiving them. Regardless of the fact that he himself claims to be motivated solely by reason, his true goal in engaging others in conversation is sometimes only to mock and deceive them. Many scholars have voiced this deceptive view over the years<sup>6</sup>; Kierkegaard believed that Socrates was the “anti-sophist who by ironies of sophistry tricks sophists into truth” (Vlastos 1991, 42).<sup>7</sup> Another scholar, Paul Friedlander, said that Socrates is “the living witness to the fact that he who knows the truth can deceive better than he who does not, and that he who deceives voluntarily is better than he who deceives involuntarily” (Friedlander 1964, 145). Perhaps one of the most extreme versions of this deceptive view can be seen in Henry Teloh’s work, where he claims that Socrates’ mocking irony—particularly in reference to Euthyphro—serves “simply to confuse Euthyphro” and, thus, Euthyphro is “confused into [agreeing with Socrates]” (Teloh 1983, 36). Teloh even goes so far as to claim that Socrates’ tactics in the Euthyphro are comparable to throwing “a cloud of dust in [Euthyphro’s] face” (*Ibid.*).<sup>8</sup> In other words, there is no shortage of scholarship that takes up the view that Socrates often uses irony in the dialogues in ways that are intended to deceive and confuse his interlocutors.

While these responses attempt to dissolve the problem of interpreting Socrates’ statements, they simply act to make the paradox even more apparent. The scholarship I have reviewed in this paper suggests that its authors do not believe that Socrates is a complete deceiver. Rather, most scholars seem to believe that Socrates engages in deception only *some of the time*. If a person commits himself or herself to the idea that Socrates sometimes chooses to deceive, why should Socrates sometimes choose to engage in purely rational argumentation. These views do not provide any adequate answers or resolve these problems.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to the scholars listed here, Vlastos also notes the same point of view in the work of O’Brien 1967, and Kahn 1983 (Vlastos 1991, 42).

<sup>7</sup> Vlastos’s Note: “‘Socrates tricks Protagoras out of every concrete virtue; by reducing each virtue to unity, he completely dissolves it; while the sophistry lies in the power through which he is able to accomplish this. Hence we have at once an irony borne by a sophistic dialectic and a sophistic dialectic reposing in irony’ (Kierkegaard 1965, 96)” (Vlastos 1991, footnote 77).

<sup>8</sup> In his review of Teloh’s work, Nicholas D. Smith highlights these aspects of Teloh’s argument and notes that Teloh’s claim is troubling: “Perhaps even more troubling is Teloh’s claim that Socrates sometimes does not even seem to care to make anything clearer to his interlocutor” (Smith 1990, 108).

<sup>9</sup> Vlastos 1991. Gregory Vlastos also argues against this deception claim by essentially saying that deception cannot be an aim of irony, for if irony is to have its desired effect it cannot deceive. Vlastos’s view is inadequate, however,

Some may argue that Socrates deceives his interlocutors by falsely flattering them, such as when Socrates mocks Euthyphro's false understanding of piety.<sup>10</sup> It is true that Euthyphro does not seem to be able to see through Socrates' irony at first, but Socrates does not leave Euthyphro at this point in the dialogue. If he did, Socrates could accurately be accused of deceiving. But Socrates just tightens the argument more and more until Euthyphro finally realizes that Socrates is mocking him. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates' irony has not deceived the interlocutor, for Euthyphro does not leave with a false belief in his own wisdom. The true nature of Socrates' false flattery is soon revealed to the interlocutor not as praise, but rather as a challenge to whatever he is praising them for.<sup>11</sup>

One would be hard pressed to explain just how Socrates is benefiting his interlocutors by deceiving them, for Socrates clearly states that citizens should make each other better. Finally, if Socrates is a deceiver, then there is no way for us to decipher his philosophy for we are only being deceived if we attempt to do so. If every statement, regardless of context, can be considered a deceptive statement than nothing that Socrates ever says can be taken seriously and *we cannot rely upon any of the dialogues for evidence of any position*—including the position that Socrates is a deceiver. Thus, those who argue that Socrates is deceiving his interlocutors cannot securely cite any evidence for their view. Instead of resorting to this conclusion, it is much more fruitful for us to try and reconcile Socrates' irony with his

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because in his view it remains true that Socrates' interlocutors can end up being deceived—Socrates would know he could and did have this effect on them.

<sup>10</sup> For example, at *Euthyphro* 5b.

<sup>11</sup> Vasiliou 1997. Iakovos Vasiliou also argues that Socrates' irony is often "missed by a careless interlocutor who is anxious to hear himself complimented" (Vasiliou 1997, 463). Vasiliou sidesteps the issue of Socrates' deception, however, by viewing the dialogues as a construction of the literary figure, Plato. Plato's dialogues are fictional accounts that are intended for a reading audience. Though Socrates may deceive his interlocutors, he does not deceive *us*, the reader. In this way, Vasiliou divorces the dialogues from the historical Socrates by calling into account the fact that the reader has read the dialogues and, thus, has a contextual understanding to aid in interpreting Socrates' irony.

I see two main problems with this view. One, it interprets Socrates as a deceiver but tries to hide this assertion by claiming that the intended audience is not deceived. If this view is true, then Plato chose to have Socrates (his "fictional" character) contradict himself when he is speaking to his interlocutors. We are supposed to feel better, however, because Plato's character has an inside joke with us, the reader, and makes *us* aware of our false beliefs. This view also depicts Socrates as not caring about the lives of his fellow citizens, but rather the reader's lives. I do not think this view is plausible, nor do I believe that Plato would choose to have Socrates openly contradict himself on key issues. Secondly, Vasiliou claims that Euthyphro fails to understand Socrates' ironies; I still contend that by the end of the dialogue, Euthyphro is not in doubt about whether or not he has a clear grasp on piety—he openly admits that he does not have a clear grasp. Euthyphro is not deceived at the end of the dialogue.

adherence to reason. If we deny that Socrates is a deceiver, we must now follow the second path and explain why Socrates would use irony in place of rational argumentation and just how this method benefits his interlocutors. I shall now turn to recent scholarship's attempts to reconcile these two issues.

### Review of Recent Scholarship

First, it will be useful to divide the various scholarly views of Socrates' irony into three distinct perspectives:

- (A) Irony is a riddling device (Vlastos<sup>12</sup>). Riddles leave the interpretation up to the hearer. Thus, Socrates chooses to riddle his interlocutors because he does not care if his interlocutors actually know the truth; he believes that if one is to "come to the truth, it must be by [one's self] for [one's self]" (Vlastos 1991, 44).
- (B) Irony "functions to change the cognition of its object" (Gordon<sup>13</sup>). Irony deals with those who may be deceived by the irony (the outsiders) and those who understand the irony (the insiders). Thus, the purpose of Socrates' irony is "to change the cognition of the reader" in a way that will lead the interlocutor from an "outsider to insider, from not getting the irony to getting it" (Gordon 1996, 136).
- (C) Irony is a punishment that Socrates deals to his interlocutors under the guise of a humble nature (Michelini<sup>14</sup>). Socrates believes that caring for another may involve hurting rather

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<sup>12</sup> Vlastos cites three main reasons an individual might choose irony as a means of communication: humor, mockery, and to riddle someone. The first two are fairly obvious forms of irony but the third, according to Vlastos, is "little noticed" (Vlastos 1991, 21). Irony of the riddling variety can be used to test a person's intelligence and common sense. The trouble with riddling variety is that it "risks being misunderstood" (Vlastos 1991, 22) precisely because it *riddles* the interlocutor, thus leaving the interpretation up to the hearer.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon argues that Socratic irony should be viewed in the dramatic context of the dialogues. Vlastos's weakness, Gordon argues, arises in the fact that irony is often interpreted by "how something is said" or by "whom" and "in what context" (Gordon 1996, 131-132).

<sup>14</sup> Michelini 1998. Michelini actually offers several reasons for why Socrates uses irony: (1) Irony is a "self-depreciation...trick to disarm opponents" (Michelini 1998, 52); (2) Irony is a "pose of inferiority" that "lessens the danger that beginners may abandon philosophy before they begin to learn" (*Ibid.*); (3) Irony is a benefiting punishment (Michelini 1998, 57-59). I focus on (3) because the first two merely set up Socrates' final goal, which is to punish his interlocutors for holding their false beliefs.

than pleasing.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Socrates' mocking irony serves to punish the interlocutors, which benefits them in a similar manner to punishment for certain crimes in the *Gorgias*.<sup>16</sup>

First, let us run these three views through the first question. Why does Socrates use mocking irony instead of rational argumentation? Vlastos attempts to answer the question by making Socrates into a provocative riddler who cares less for speaking the truth plainly and more for getting his interlocutors to come to the right conclusion on their own. The problem with this interpretation is that it does not seem to cover all forms of irony, particularly the stinging variety. Vlastos explains his theory by summing up what he believes Socrates' irony is aimed at:

Socrates doesn't say that the knowledge by which he and we must live is utterly different from what anyone has ever understood or even imagined moral knowledge would be. He just says he has no knowledge, though without it he is damned, and lets us puzzle out for ourselves what that could mean. (Vlastos 1991, 44)

Vlastos zeros in on the form of irony that his definition of "complex irony"<sup>17</sup> is aimed at explaining, namely Socrates' disavowal of knowledge claim. But do other forms of irony hand us a puzzle to unravel? For instance, does mocking irony truly riddle the hearer? Perhaps we might be puzzled by a man who seems to have great knowledge yet claims he has none, but I do not think we are puzzled by someone who outright mocks us. Vlastos's example of the frustrated tutor seems to combine aspects of irony rather than being a specimen of the true "riddling" variety. When the tutor tells Paul that he is brilliant, he is not really asking Paul to reflect upon his performance. Moreover, the jab seems to be aimed at expressing the tutor's frustration with Paul and, in some ways, mock him in a punishing manner. In the case of Socrates, it does not appear that Socrates' mockery is best understood as handing his interlocutors riddles to unravel. Socrates' jabs at Euthyphro, for instance, seem to point out precisely

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<sup>15</sup> *Gorgias* 478A1-B2; 478D6.

<sup>16</sup> Socrates himself compares his treatment of Callicles to a form of punishment during their discussion of whether or not it is better for a soul to be disciplined or to be undisciplined at *Gorgias* 505c: "Callicles: I don't know what in the world you mean, Socrates. Ask somebody else. Socrates: This fellow won't put up with being benefited and with his undergoing the very thing the discussion's about, with being disciplined."

<sup>17</sup> Complex irony occurs when "what is said is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another" (Vlastos 1991, 31).

what Socrates thinks of Euthyphro's claim to understand piety. Socrates does not mock Euthyphro for the sake of riddling him. He appears to be mocking Euthyphro in a way that exposes Euthyphro's ignorance and, to a certain degree, shames him for it.

Vlastos's theory is inadequate precisely because it cannot explain the stinging irony that is so prevalent in the dialogues. Socrates tells us that he is only moved by the best argument, not that he is moved by riddles that cause him to come to the truth on his own. One would think that Socrates would merely weigh his arguments against those of his interlocutors and let reason decide whose arguments are better. Instead, according to Vlastos's view, Socrates poses riddles and lets his interlocutors come to whatever conclusion they happen to settle on. For these reasons, I cannot accept Vlastos's theory as an adequate explanation for what Socrates is trying to achieve with his mocking irony.

Gordon answers the question in a different way, but does not support the answer that she provides and her theory does not get us anywhere. Even if we grant that Socrates is using irony for the sole purpose of changing his interlocutor's minds—so that they simply *understand* the irony—we have not solved anything. It is a necessary condition of using effective irony that the audience understand it, but it is not a sufficient condition for understanding why Socrates chose to use irony in addition to rational argumentation. Gordon does not address the question of why Socrates uses irony over other methods of inquiry.

Michelini provides a different answer to our original question. Michelini argues that the conclusions Socrates and Polus reach in the *Gorgias* provide us an understanding of Socrates' stinging irony:

The experience of undergoing trial and sentence is shown to be parallel to medicine, in that legal punishment cures the unjust soul (478A1-B2) making us more sober and self aware (478D6)... The discussion with Polus even reaches the conclusion that punishment, the cure for wrongdoing, is a good that one must seek for oneself and for everyone that one cares for. (Michelini 1998, 54)

Although there does seem to be evidence that Socrates' stinging irony is aimed at punishing his interlocutors in some way,<sup>18</sup> Michelini's theory does not provide an adequate explanation for why Socrates would choose to use punishment. Further, why does caring for the soul require punishment? While Michelini's theory offers an explanation of the effects and rationality of punishment, a much more detailed account is needed to explain why Socrates would choose this method over caring for one's soul by replacing false wisdom with an awareness of one's own ignorance.<sup>19</sup>

So exactly how does Socrates' think his mocking irony benefits his interlocutors? Vlastos would have us believe that Socrates benefits his interlocutors by riddling them and forcing them to come to some understanding on their own. Gordon tries to answer the question by saying that it benefits interlocutors by taking them from outside the irony to inside the irony. Michelini comes the closest to answering our question adequately: Socrates' mocking irony benefits his interlocutors by punishing them, something that may be necessary in order to care for one's soul. But precisely how does punishment benefit the soul?

In my view, which I defend in the rest of this paper, Socrates uses his stinging irony in order to mock and punish his interlocutors precisely because he wishes to change their cognitive state. But how exactly does Socrates believe he will change his interlocutor's mental state with mockery? In the next two sections, I will establish how Socrates believes that mockery and stinging irony can help dislodge beliefs a person may hold. Then I will answer both of the questions we have been concerned with: Why does Socrates choose to use stinging irony instead of rational argumentation; and how does Socrates think his mockery will benefit his interlocutors?

### **Shame and Human Motivation**

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<sup>18</sup> Gorgias 505c; see footnote 21 above.

<sup>19</sup> This is the primary reason that I believe Michelini's account is inadequate—it does not answer the questions that this paper is concerned with. I agree with Michelini's view in so far that I believe that Socrates is, in some way, punishing his interlocutors with his mocking irony. I expand Michelini's view and answer the questions that her essay does not concern itself with in the later sections of this paper.

Many scholars have pointed to the fact that Socrates' rough treatment of his interlocutors seems to help dislodge the beliefs that the interlocutors hold.<sup>20</sup> One common theme, however, of all these arguments is that there appears to be no explanation for exactly *how* Socrates is dislodging beliefs. One particular question to keep in mind is the question that started this paper. If Socrates is a man persuaded only by reason to adopt a course of action, why does Socrates decide to persuade others with mockery?

Paul Woodruff provides an interesting account of Socrates' *elenchos* that will be worth examining for my position.<sup>21</sup> When asked what Socrates is doing in the *elenchos* when he examines his interlocutors roughly, Woodruff responds more or less by saying that Socrates shames his interlocutors in order to dislodge their beliefs. Why? The answer lies in Greek culture and the fifth-century view of human motivation; in particular, Woodruff examines Thucydides' account of human motivation. While viewing Thucydides' *History*, Woodruff notes that:

In the course of [Thucydides'] study, [Thucydides] notes with regret that human beings are rarely moved by rational or moral considerations. Human claims to moral or rational motivation are often disguises for the more common movers of our nature—fear, greed, and ambition. (Woodruff 2000, 134)

Whereas Socrates states that he is moved solely by the argument that seems best to him, Thucydides provides a different account of human motivation—an account founded upon the notion that humans are motivated by fear, greed, and ambition more than reason. Shame, as Woodruff defines it, “is a painful emotion one feels at the thought of being exposed in weakness, foolishness, nakedness, or

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon 1996; Vasiliou 1997; Michelini 1998. Gordon says “Socratic irony is among the most powerful tools at Socrates' disposal for turning the lives of his interlocutors toward philosophy” (Gordon 1996, 137), but does not provide any argument as to exactly how this tool works beyond taking an interlocutor from not understanding the irony to understanding it.

Vasiliou believes that “Socrates' use of conditional irony is a way of mocking his interlocutor into conceding his own lack of knowledge and appreciating the necessity of further examination” (Vasiliou 1997, 472). However, his explanation of irony is inadequate because he refers to Socrates' conditional irony and not his particularly abusive stinging irony. Moreover, Vasiliou does not provide any argument for precisely how irony actually changes the cognition of the interlocutor (or why Socrates would choose this method over rational argumentation).

Michelini argues that Socrates' punishment of Callicles is “an expression of genuine good will that corrects the false benevolence of Callicles as it corrects his false ideas” (Michelini 1998, 59). Michelini does not provide any argument, however, about precisely how Socrates' punishing irony actually corrects the false ideas of interlocutors or why punishment is preferable to simply rationally correcting their false ideas.

<sup>21</sup> Woodruff 2000.

perhaps even wickedness, to the view of a community whose laughter would scald” (Woodruff 2000, 133). Shame, which is an aspect of fear, is a human motivator and it is precisely this reason, I claim, that Socrates uses his stinging irony in order to dislodge beliefs in his interlocutors.

Woodruff notes a problem with this view, which is the apparent paradox that arises in Socrates’ statements. On the one hand, Socrates seems to reject shame as a reasonable method of inquiry, such as Woodruff notes in the *Gorgias* when Socrates “asks his companions to set shame aside, as he does, in order to carry on the discussion” (Woodruff 2000, 143). On the other hand, Socrates “appeals to shame for his own part on a number of occasions” (*Ibid.*), such as when Socrates tells Crito that it “would not be fitting at my age to resent the fact that I must die now” (*Crito* 43b). Thus, the question emerges: “Why, then, if Socrates accepts the rational critique of shame, does he present himself as a shame-monger to his city and his friends?” (Woodruff 2000, 143). Woodruff responds by saying that shame is a powerful motivator and that “[p]eople often do change their behavior in order to avoid being shamed” (*Ibid.*). Socrates shames his interlocutors precisely because he knows it is such a powerful motivator of human action.<sup>22</sup>

But even if we grant that shame seems to be a powerful human motivator, it still remains to be seen how mocking irony that shames interlocutors fits into our account of Socrates in such a way as to adhere to Socrates’ claim to follow reason in the *Crito*. It is more than apparent that Socrates seems to have condoned the use of shame: he uses it all over the dialogues. As Woodruff asks, “if the deciding factor in the elenchus is whether or not the companions are ashamed of holding certain views, could elenchus be a rational procedure for the acquisition of knowledge?” (Woodruff 2000, 145). Woodruff is convinced that it cannot be considered a rational procedure because it seems that shame is an appeal to conscience, which has “no standing in the court of knowledge” (*Ibid.*).

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<sup>22</sup> Woodruff also addresses the question of whether or not shame itself (and not just how it is implemented) stands up to rational criticism. He points out that it seems irrational to yield to shame because: “1. Shame is felt relative to the judgment of a community; 2. Shame can overpower a rational decision to do what is best; 3. Shame will have no effect on those who think they can conceal what they do.” (Woodruff 2000, 144). Woodruff responds by separating shame into three different categories and claiming that Socratic shame is the shame that an interlocutor feels when “confronted by his own painful self-examination” (*Ibid.*). For arguments about how this personalized shame avoids the three irrational points of criticism, see Woodruff 2000, 143-145.

Woodruff proceeds to rehearse two defenses of Socrates' commitment to reason.<sup>23</sup> Woodruff dismisses both of these defenses, however, by calling upon the fact that neither view seems to explain the particular way that shame acts in the *Gorgias*.<sup>24</sup> Woodruff believes that Socratic shame is irrational because it relies on the notion that everyone has been born with a sense of shame that will react to Socrates' elenctic methods<sup>25</sup>—a claim that he claims is a “profoundly humanist article of faith, but...not susceptible to rational defense” (Woodruff 2000, 146). Socrates' use of shame does not constitute an appeal to reason and rationality; instead, it appeals to a sense of moral conscience inside of each interlocutor.

Although I agree with Woodruff's assessment of Socrates' use of shame, I do not believe that we have to abandon hopes of reconciling shame with rationality. In order to understand Socrates' use of shame and mocking irony, I believe it is necessary to view these techniques as a part of Socrates' rational inquiry. Socrates uses shame in order to motivate his interlocutors to give up whatever false beliefs they are ashamed of holding. Moreover, these techniques not only operate in a rational way, they serve to benefit the interlocutors upon whom they are used.

### **Socratic Intellectualism and the Soul**

If we are going to save an intellectualist account of Socrates from Woodruff's attacks, we are going to have to come to terms with the traditional intellectualist view of Socrates. This view stems from statements that Socrates makes in the *Meno* in which he argues that the difference between good and bad people is not that they desire good and bad things, but rather that they both desire good things but have different beliefs about what is good and bad (77b6-78b2). Thus, “[f]or Socrates, when people act badly or viciously or even just out of moral weakness, that will be merely a result of intellectual mistake” (Penner

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<sup>23</sup>Woodruff rehearses the following two defenses: First, we might say that Socratic shame is rational because “it comes as a result of being caught in a contradiction” (Woodruff 2000, 145). In essence, one is not ashamed because of others overhearing one's contradictions, but rather simply in light of the fact that one is breaking rules of logic. Secondly, “shame avoidance would be rational” because contradiction implies an internal divide in one's soul, a “mental civil war” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of this point, see Woodruff 2000, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Woodruff 2000, 145-146.

2000, 165). The intellectual mistake they have made is precisely that bad people *believe* that a certain bad thing is actually good for them. The implication under the traditional intellectualist account, as laid down by Penner, is that “*only philosophical dialogue* can improve one’s fellow citizens” (Penner 2000, 164; his emphasis).

The traditional intellectualist view has some problems, however. As Lloyd Gerson<sup>26</sup> and Brickhouse and Smith<sup>27</sup> have recently critiqued it, the traditional intellectualist view leaves several features of Socrates’ moral psychology inexplicable. According to the traditional intellectualist account of Socrates, the only method of correcting one’s bad beliefs is through the process of intellectual dialogue. But in the *Apology*,<sup>28</sup> as Brickhouse and Smith point out, there is a serious problem with this view. Socrates clearly makes a distinction between two types of wrongdoing—the type of wrongdoing that requires punishment and the type of wrongdoing that requires education. The latter sort of wrongdoing requires simple “cognitive changes in one’s conception of one’s good” (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 21); but the former sort of wrongdoing, Socrates implies, merits much more traditional forms of punishment, such as “pain and suffering” (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 22). The traditional intellectualist view breaks down when trying to answer this apparent paradox. It seems that Socrates does not believe that pure cognitive correction is the only method that can “improve one’s fellow citizens” (cp. Penner 2000, 164).

At this point, Brickhouse and Smith set about defining a new intellectualist account of Socrates, based upon the recognition of motivational factors other than the desire for benefit. Their view describes a “more complex moral psychology, one that retains a central tenet of ‘pure intellectualism,’ namely, that no one acts contrary to what he or she believes is best, but which also assigns a specific causal role to

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<sup>26</sup> Gerson 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Brickhouse and Smith 2002.

<sup>28</sup> See *Apology* 26a5-8: While addressing Meletus, Socrates badgers Meletus and ends by saying “[b]ut you’ve avoided associating with me and you didn’t want to instruct me, and instead wanted to bring me here to trial where it’s the law to try those who need punishment, not instruction.”

nonrational desires” (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 22).<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, by recognizing these aspects of human nature, Socrates’ distinction between the two types of wrongdoing can be understood, whereas in the traditional account they remain inexplicable.

The question remains, however, of how these appetites actually affect the soul. People are drawn to action by their appetites in order to satisfy their desires of what is good for them. The problem lies in persons with undisciplined souls, those who have no control over their appetites and passions. Their actions will serve to satisfy their desires, but because they have false beliefs about what is good for them, their actions will actually end up strengthening their false beliefs. As Brickhouse and Smith explain it, this new view of Socratic intellectualism provides an explanation for aspects of Socrates’ moral psychology<sup>30</sup> that are inexplicable under the traditional intellectualist account. But as I shall soon show, there are other reasons for adopting this view as well. By using this conception of Socratic intellectualism, we can solve the problems I consider in this paper.

### **Reconciling Mocking Irony and Rationality**

Armed with this new concept of appetites and passions and their work in the soul, combined with a corresponding account for punishment that accords with the intellectualist view, we can explain precisely how Socrates dislodges beliefs in his interlocutors and why he chooses irony over rational argumentation. Recalling Woodruff, we have seen how Socrates sometimes shames his interlocutors. Shame is a human motivator that lies outside of pure reason; in fact, it seems related to fear in the context of a group. Woodruff, however, ends his argument by stating that Socrates’ use of shame is non-rational because it relies on a human being’s sense of conscience, which is not a purely rationalistic concept.

But what happens if we examine Socrates’ punishing irony through the lens of our new conception of Socratic intellectualism? Human appetites and emotions are motivators of human action precisely because they motivate us to act upon our beliefs of what is good for us. Why should Socrates

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<sup>29</sup> For a more complete discussion of this feature of Socrates’ moral psychology, see Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 173-181, 216-226; Brickhouse and 2002; Devereux 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Namely, aspects concerning how wrongdoing actually damages the soul in Socrates’ opinion.

choose to subject his interlocutors to a painful elenctic process? According to our new conception of Socrates' intellectualism:

Pain and suffering help wrongdoers attend to reasons that, in turn, help them resist the inflated appearances presented by inflamed appetites by linking the wrongdoing to which such appearances would lead them with something they are eager to avoid, namely, pain. Corporal punishments, then, give habitual wrongdoers especially powerful reasons not to engage in wrongdoing even though the satisfaction of their appetites through wrongdoing has weakened their inclination to consider reasons at all. (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 30-31)

In this view, Socrates' irony serves as a device that he uses to help dislodge beliefs inside of his interlocutors. This punishment, as Woodruff observes, occurs in the form of shame and it motivates his interlocutors to abandon the beliefs that they feel ashamed of holding. Socrates understands the power that human emotions have over the souls of his interlocutors; accordingly, it seems reasonable to believe that it is perfectly rational to use certain punishing techniques (indeed, whatever is most effective) to dislodge his interlocutor's false beliefs.

Why should Socrates choose irony over purely rational argumentation? Beyond the fact that it seems absolutely logical for one to dislodge beliefs by using human motivators that motivate all human beings, Woodruff states the power of Socrates' usage of shame: "Rhetorically, shame is a good choice for Socrates because it is a powerful motive for change. People often do change their behavior in order to avoid being shamed" (Woodruff 2000, 143). Shame and punishment are powerful tools that Socrates uses against interlocutors, who are often otherwise resistant to Socrates' elenctic discussions.

According to Woodruff, Socrates' use of shame is not rational because it is rooted in faith—the faith that everyone has a sense of shame that can be called into action during the *elenchos*.<sup>31</sup> But examined under the lens of this new intellectualist account, Socrates does not seem to be rooting his *elenchos* in faith. In order for an interlocutor to abandon a false belief, not only must they have a

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<sup>31</sup> Woodruff 2000, 145-146.

cognitive reason for changing their position, he must be motivated to adopt a new position. Without extra-rational motivation the interlocutor is not likely to listen to reasons or arguments about which view they should hold. Socrates, by sometimes mocking his interlocutors, is appealing to the interlocutor's sense of shame, which causes them to be motivated to listen to reasons and arguments.

But when does Socrates believe that it is appropriate to feel shame? Socrates admits that he himself is motivated by shame at several points in the dialogues.<sup>32</sup> For example, when arguing with Callicles in the *Gorgias* about whether one should ever commit injustice, Socrates says something that is quite revealing about his method:

Now if someone were to refute me and prove that I am unable to provide [protection against committing injustice] for myself or for anyone else, *I would feel shame at being refuted*, whether this happened in the presence of many or of a few, or just between the two of us. (522b-e; my emphasis)

Socrates directly states that he would feel shame at being refuted and having inconsistent beliefs. Thus, it is appropriate to feel shame when one has inconsistent beliefs and is refuted, which is precisely what Socrates reveals about his interlocutors. Further evidence of this view can be found earlier in the *Gorgias* when Socrates first begins speaking to Callicles:

And yet for my part, my good man, I think it's better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I'm only one person. (482b-c)

Socrates is quite lucid when articulating that it is important for one's beliefs to be in harmony with each other and for a person to be in harmony with one's self. Hence, it is natural and appropriate to feel shame if one's beliefs are shown to be not in harmony with each other.

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<sup>32</sup> As examples, Woodruff says: "Socrates appeals to shame for his own part on a number of occasions (e.g. *Tht.* 183e); shame at his ignorance keeps him at work in search of knowledge (*Hip. Ma.* 304d); and shame prevents him from violating deeply held beliefs (*Phdr.* 237a, with 243b-d)" (Woodruff 2000, 143).

This is an important point, for Socrates clearly makes a distinction between when one should feel shame and when one should not be motivated by it. Socrates tells us that he would feel ashamed at being shown to have inconsistent beliefs; Socrates also tells Crito that it is “wrong to believe that we should care for the opinion of the many” (48a). By making this distinction, Socrates clearly separates the shame that arises in the *elenchos* from the shame that is felt relative to what the “many” accept. This shame, the shame felt relative to the “many,” can be called “public shame.”<sup>33</sup> This form of shame is “the most vulnerable to rational criticism” (Woodruff 2000, 144) because it seems irrational to yield to public shame due to the fact that this particular sort of “shame is felt relative to the judgment of a community” and not relative to a greater standard (*Ibid.*). The shame that Socrates feels when his beliefs are shown to be inconsistent, on the other hand, Woodruff calls “Socratic shame”:

By this Socratic shame I mean a full awareness that one has betrayed values that are entirely one’s own. Feeling such shame brings on two discoveries of oneself—that one is truly committed to these values, and that one is not living up to them.  
(Woodruff 2000, 144)

This sort of shame, the kind that arises in the *elenchos*, is the form of shame that is appropriate for an interlocutor to feel. “Socratic shame” targets an interlocutor’s appetites, passions, and false beliefs about what is good for them.

Furthermore, there seems to be an interaction between “Socratic shame” and cognition. If one feels shame about holding inconsistent beliefs, he or she will certainly try to restore the honor he or she originally had by changing one or more of the beliefs to make them consistent with each other. Likewise, it is reasonable for us to assume that if Socrates were refuted, he would change his beliefs about whatever he was examining in order to regain consistency. That being so, it is reasonable for us to explain what Socrates is trying to do by using his stinging irony. Socrates’ irony helps to evoke “Socratic shame” inside of his interlocutors, as Woodruff points out, in the same manner that Socrates would feel ashamed in an argument—such shame arises from holding false and inconsistent beliefs. The interlocutors are then

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<sup>33</sup> Woodruff 2000, 143.

put in a position where they must change one or more of their beliefs in order to regain consistency and honor.

### **When is Mocking Irony Necessary?**

When does Socrates believe that shaming an interlocutor is necessary in order to help that person? It appears that Socrates does not always believe that mocking the person he is talking to is necessary; his treatment of Crito, for example, is certainly nothing like his treatment of Callicles. In other words, Socrates does not mock and punish every one who has false and inconsistent beliefs, as he proves Crito has. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates' treatment of Callicles is particularly rough; I contend that it is no coincidence that Callicles is also one of the most aggressive interlocutors that Socrates faces—not to mention the most likely to suffer the greatest consequences for holding his views. Try as Socrates might, he simply cannot dislodge Callicles' beliefs using normal philosophical dialogue techniques. As the conversation goes on and on, Socrates becomes more and more fierce in his ironic attacks against Callicles. One might view Socrates' growing heat as an example of Socrates losing his cool and snapping back at an equally hot-tempered Callicles, but a different explanation can be offered. Socrates, being fully mindful of the effects of punishment, seems to increase Callicles' punishment as the conversation continues in order to try and dislodge the false beliefs that Callicles holds. Hence, one reason Socrates uses mocking irony is because it is a powerful motivator for human change that is particularly effective in cases where simple dialogue would surely fail—as his dialogue with Callicles seems to indicate.

This particular interaction between Socrates and a frustrating interlocutor also reveals another important detail about Socrates' use of mocking irony. From the beginning of Socrates' discussion with Callicles, it is clear that Callicles is attacking Socrates and his tactics:

Callicles: Socrates, I think you're grandstanding in these speeches, acting like a true crowd pleaser. Here you are, playing to the crowd now that Polus has had the same thing happen to him that he accused Gorgias of letting you do to him...Although you claim to be pursuing the truth, you're in fact bringing the

discussion around to the sort of crowd-pleasing vulgarities that are admirable only by law and not by nature. And these, nature and law, are for the most part opposed to each other, so if a person is ashamed and doesn't dare to say what he thinks, he's forced to contradict himself. (*Gorgias* 482c-483)

Callicles viciously attacks the way that he believes Socrates has handled both Polus and Gorgias earlier in the dialogue; he accuses Socrates of trapping his interlocutors and shaming them so that they are either forced to contradict themselves or be silent. Callicles' attacks against Socrates are important because Callicles clearly separates himself from the errors that he believes Polus and Gorgias have both made. Callicles will not be ashamed as easily as his companions; Socrates points this out in the moments following Callicles' attack: "And as to my claim that you're able to speak frankly without being ashamed, you yourself say so and the speech you gave a moment ago bears you out" (*Gorgias* 487d-e). For the rest of the dialogue, Socrates increases the intensity of the argument and his use of mocking irony to combat Callicles' aggressive attacks. Callicles, in response, seems to refuse to listen<sup>34</sup> and delivers more personal attacks.<sup>35</sup> Thus, another factor in whether or not Socrates decides to shame his interlocutors is directly related to the interlocutor's attitude. Callicles aggressively attacks Socrates and is not as susceptible to shame as many of the interlocutors Socrates faces in the dialogues. Rational argumentation will simply fall deaf on someone who refuses to listen to arguments and, instead, aggressively launches personal attacks. Socrates, in turn, combines rational argumentation with mocking irony in an attempt to "persuade [Callicles] to change [his] mind" (*Gorgias* 493c).

But there is one final factor that determines whether or not Socrates resorts to mocking irony in order to benefit his interlocutors. Not only is Callicles aggressive, his particular beliefs seem to have disastrous consequences if acted upon:

[Socrates:] What is it that you and Pindar hold to be true of what's just by nature?

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<sup>34</sup> An example of this can be found at *Gorgias* 501c-d when Callicles refuses to go along with Socrates' line of reasoning and seems to be refusing to seriously consider Socrates' arguments: "No, I won't dissent. I'm going along with you, both to expedite your argument and to gratify Gorgias here."

<sup>35</sup> For example, at one point, Callicles compares Socrates' lifelong pursuit of philosophy as "playing like a child" and "deserving of a flogging" (*Gorgias* 485c).

That the superior should take by force what belongs to the inferior, that the better should rule the worse and the more worthy have a greater share than the less worthy? You're not saying anything else, are you? I do remember correctly?

Callicles: Yes, that's what I was saying then, and I still say so now, too.

(*Gorgias* 488b)

Callicles believes that justice is the rule of the superior; the superior man, Callicles believes, “live[s] correctly [and] ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them” (*Gorgias* 491e-492). Socrates, on the other hand, believes that this view has the most reprehensible consequences. Instead, Socrates hopes to persuade Callicles that “the orderly life, the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time” is preferable to the “insatiable, undisciplined life” (*Gorgias* 493c-d). If acted upon, Callicles' beliefs lead to a life that seeks pleasure first and foremost and does not care about the consequences of the undisciplined life. Callicles' particular beliefs distinguish themselves from Crito's. Crito's particular beliefs are aimed at aiding Socrates to flee his death sentence. The consequences of such an action, although still unacceptable to Socrates, are not nearly as reprehensible as the consequences of an undisciplined life.<sup>36</sup> A second factor, then, in whether or not Socrates decides to shame his interlocutors is how serious and reprehensible the false beliefs are that the interlocutors hold. Even if his interlocutors are not particularly aggressive, as in the case of Euthyphro,<sup>37</sup> Socrates still feels the need to shame his interlocutors if the consequences of his interlocutors holding their beliefs are serious enough.

When does Socrates believe that mocking irony is necessary in order to benefit his interlocutors?

While not exhaustive, three important factors are: 1) If rational argumentation will fail on its own; 2) If the interlocutor is particularly aggressive; and 3) If the interlocutor is passionately firm in holding false

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<sup>36</sup> The consequences of leading an undisciplined life are handled in the next section of this paper. For a detailed account of the dangers of leading an undisciplined life, see Brickhouse and Smith 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Euthyphro's tactics are not particularly aggressive and they are certainly nothing like those techniques employed by Callicles. In regards to the consequences of holding the particular beliefs that Euthyphro seems dangerously firm in holding, however, Socrates believes that it is shameful for Euthyphro to prosecute his own father for murder without a clear understanding of piety (*Euthyphro* 15d-e).

beliefs that lead to disastrous consequences—such as a ruined, incurable soul. Socrates does not feel that every single person that has false beliefs needs to be mocked, as he demonstrates in the case of Crito. Sometimes rational argumentation is all that is needed to convince an interlocutor of their own inconsistent beliefs. But when an interlocutor is particularly aggressive and appears ready to act out the most reprehensible consequences of their beliefs, Socrates seems equally ready to aid his own rational arguments with mocking irony and shame in order to combat the interlocutor’s tactics.

### **How Mocking Irony Benefits Interlocutors and Readers**

We can now also solve the second problem of this paper as well. How does Socrates believe that his stinging irony benefits his interlocutors? Viewing this question from the new intellectualist account of Socrates, we can finally make full sense of Socrates’ statements in the *Gorgias* concerning punishment:

It is appropriate for everyone who is subject to punishment rightly inflicted by another either to become better and profit from it, or else to be made an example for others, so that when they see him suffering whatever it is he suffers, they may be afraid and become better. (525b)

Socrates’ shaming irony is an example of punishment that is inflicted correctly; that is, the punishment is aimed at dislodging the interlocutor’s false beliefs. In this manner, the interlocutors will cast aside their false beliefs and be led (or shamed into accepting) new theories. Why should Socrates punish them? According to Socrates, unless the person already has a ruined soul, punishments always make the punished person “better” or “profit from” the punishment.

These statements also accommodate the views of Socratic shame that involve the surrounding audience.<sup>38</sup> Any one that witnesses the arguments will be made better through the process of the *elenchos*, including the reader of the dialogues. One reason for studying the dialogues seems to be that we believe we can learn something from them. But how exactly does Socrates’ use of shame benefit the reader? If we happen to agree with anything the interlocutors say, our own beliefs will be shown to be

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<sup>38</sup> Gordon 1996; Vasiliou 1997.

inconsistent with one another by the end of the dialogue. If we are shown to have inconsistent beliefs, we feel shame in the same manner that the interlocutors feel it—the shame of holding inconsistent beliefs. As we read about Socrates dragging Callicles through the painful *elenchos*, we suffer along with him in some ways. His suffering becomes an example for us and we become better by witnessing his punishment because we are forced to consider our own beliefs and, possibly, to accept new theories. Thus, not only are the interlocutors made better by Socrates' punishments, those who witness the arguments (including the reader) actually benefit from the example made of the interlocutor. Socrates' use of stinging irony is perfectly aligned with his statements that one should “attempt to care for the city and its citizens with the aim of making the citizens themselves as good as possible” (*Gorgias* 513e). Socrates makes the citizens as good as possible by helping them to realize their ignorance through the process of making them ashamed of their false beliefs. But the benefits of Socrates' use of stinging irony do not stop at the interlocutors and the citizens of Athens. By dragging his interlocutors through the painful process of the *elenchos*, Socrates also benefits anyone that can see the example that is made of the interlocutor because the audience is forced to examine their own understanding.

Accordingly, Socrates also benefits his interlocutors by caring for their soul. If a person continues to act upon false beliefs about what is good for them, he or she will become less capable “to consider whether the pleasures that attracts them is actually good” (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 32). In other words, the sooner that Socrates can help dislodge false beliefs inside of an interlocutor, the sooner that he or she will be able to act in better manner, presumably a more virtuous and just manner. The ultimate benefit that Socrates provides his interlocutors is to help discipline their appetites and prevent the interlocutors from developing incurable souls. The more we lead undisciplined lives, the more and more we will be deceived about what is truly beneficial to us. If this life is pursued recklessly, it can end up leading the undisciplined soul to become a ruined soul—the state that Socrates describes as an incurable soul (*Gorgias* 525b1-c6). The ultimate consequence of the undisciplined soul then, for Socrates, is the ruined soul, which is simply “incapable of appreciating reasons, no matter how strong those reasons are, for avoiding injustice” (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 32). The ultimate benefit that Socrates provides his

interlocutors is to help discipline their appetites and prevent the interlocutors from developing incurable souls.

### **Conclusion**

Socrates is no deceiver—his use of irony could not be further from the purpose of deception. Of course, if we give up this simple solution to dissolving the paradox of Socrates' stinging irony we must then provide an account of how Socrates' tactics can be understood in a rational context. In this paper, I have argued for this position. Although Socrates' tactics cannot be understood under a traditional intellectualist account of Socrates, the rather different form of intellectualism that Brickhouse and Smith attribute to Socrates provides a basis for understanding not only Socrates' moral psychology, but his elenctic tactics as well.<sup>39</sup> When combined with Woodruff's account of Socrates' use of shame, an account of Socrates' stinging irony that accords with Socrates' adherence to reason and his desire to benefit his fellow citizens can be attained. Socrates shames his interlocutors precisely because he knows how powerful a human motivator shame is in dislodging beliefs (even his own). It is not hard to see, then, how Socrates believes that he is benefiting his interlocutors by shaming them; the punishment that his comments deliver benefit the interlocutor precisely by dislodging false beliefs and forcing interlocutors to come to terms with their own inconsistency.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This fact, additionally, provides more evidence for believing that the traditional intellectualist account of Socrates is inadequate and that we should give serious thought to move in the direction laid out by Woodruff and Brickhouse and Smith.

<sup>40</sup> I am grateful to Nicholas Smith for comments and criticisms of several earlier drafts of this paper.

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