

Socrates' Opinion on the Art of Evenus from an Oblique Optative in Plato's *Apology* 20b8-c1

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At the beginning of Plato's *Apology* Socrates says: καὶ ἐγὼ τὸν Εὐήνον ἐμακάρισα εἰ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἔχει ταύτην τὴν τέχνην καὶ οὕτως ἐμμελῶς διδάσκει (20b8-c1). In this text we find the syntactic phenomenon known as "oblique optative", but coordinated with another verb in indicative mood. The only coincidence regarding this use of the optative is that the main verb has to be a past tense. But there is little coincidence around the semantic reasons for this use of the optative. In the present paper we will try to show the specific semantics of the oblique optative and its importance for the interpretation of the text.

At the very beginning of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates defends himself from one particular accusation: charging for teaching, as if he were a sophist. After a typical argument by analogy, Socrates remembers asking Calias, wealthy Athenian who used to employ sophists, if there was someone capable of making men good through the teaching of political virtue. Calias, Socrates says, answered affirmatively mentioning Evenus of Paros. In that moment Socrates says these words, according to Duke-Hicken-Nicoll-Robinson-Strachan's edition (1995):¹

καὶ ἐγὼ τὸν Εὐήνον ἐμακάρισα εἰ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἔχει ταύτην τὴν τέχνην καὶ οὕτως ἐμμελῶς διδάσκει (20b8-c1).²

In this text we find the syntactic phenomenon known as "oblique optative": in the conditional protasis starting with εἰ in 20b9, instead of the indicative mood (or subjunctive with ἄν), there are two verbs, one optative and another one indicative, both coordinated with καί. The only coincidence between different grammars regarding this

¹ This was also Burnet's edition both in Burnet, John. *Platonis opera. Tomus I* (Oxford University Press 1900) and in Burnet, John. *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito* (Clarendon Press 1924).

² The codices B, T and W have the optative ἔχοι in 20b9, while the Par. 1810 has the indicative ἔχει. On the other hand, in 20c1 we find διδάσκει in codex B and in the Armenian of XIXth. century (Arm.), while T, W, P and V have the optative διδάσκοι.

use of the optative seems to be the fact that the tense of the main verb has to be secondary, *i.e.* past tense. In our text we have the aorist ἐμακάρισα. But there is little coincidence around the semantic reasons for this use of the optative.³

According to Goodwin (1889), “after past sentences the indicative and the optative are in *equally* good use” (§670).⁴ This general opinion suggests an equivalence between the indicative and the optative in sentences depending on verbs in past tenses. Further on in his analysis of the compound sentence, Goodwin specifies a little more the semantics of this kind of subordinate sentences: “the principles which govern dependent clauses of indirect discourse apply also to all dependent clauses in sentences of every kind, if such clauses express indirectly the past thought of any person, even that of the speaker himself. This affects the construction only when the leading verb is past; then the dependent clause may either take the optative, in the tense in which the thought was originally conceived, or retain both the mood and the tense of the direct discourse” (§694). Here are some of the examples Goodwin gives, with his own translations:

(i) διδόντος δ' αὐτῷ πάμπολλα δῶρα Τιθραύστου, εἰ ἀπέλθοι ἐκ τῆς χώρας, ἀπεκρίνατο ὁ Ἀγησίλαος (Xenophon, *Ag.* 4.6.1-3).

When T. offered (to give) him many gifts, if he would go away, Agesilaus answered.

(ii) Οὐκ ἦν τοῦ πολέμου πέρασ οὐδ' ἀπαλλαγὴ Φιλίππῳ, εἰ μὴ Θεβαίους καὶ Θετταλοὺς ἐχθροὺς ποιήσειε τῇ πόλει (Demosthenes, *Cor.* 145.1-3)

Philip saw that he could neither end nor escape the war unless he should make the Thebans and Thessalians hostile to the city. (§696)

Even when the second translation is rather a paraphrase, it can be seen that in both cases the oblique optative is translated according to those who explain its semantics as some kind of futurity in the past.⁵ This being the case, Tithraustus offered

³ For an exposition of different historical approaches to the oblique optative, cf. Van Rooy, Raf. “The relevance of Evidentiality for Ancient Greek: some explorative Steps through Plato” (*Journal of Greek Linguistics* 16, pp. 3-46, 2016) and Lillio, Antonio. “On the oblique optative in Herodotus’ completive sentences, an evidentiality mark in Ancient Greek”. In Logozzo, F. & Pocetti, P. *Ancient Greek Linguistics*, (De Gruyter 2017). Pp. 313-335.

⁴ Statements of this kind, merely descriptive, without precisions about the semantics of this use of the optative mood, are repeated in §§169, 462, 689.II and in Smyth, Herbert Weir. *Greek Grammar* (Harvard University Press 1920: §2176).

⁵ V.g. Vigo: “as an interpretative hypothesis, we suggest that the value of the optative in most of the cases often included under the name ‘oblique optative’ consists in the expression of a futurity relative to the past”, Vigo, Alejandro. “El optativo llamado oblicuo o de

multiple gifts in the past, as long as Agesilaus was to leave the location in the future (future relative to that past). In the second example, there was neither end nor escape from war for Philippus unless he was to make Thebans and Thessalians enemies of the city in the future (again, the future relative to that past).

This interpretation is, no doubt, correct. However, it does not apply to every case, being one of them our example in Plato's *Apology*. Indeed, it would make little sense if Socrates were saying that he considered Evenus blessed if he was going to have that art in the future. We know well that that is not what Socrates has in mind. Furthermore, even if that was the case, how to explain the indicative διδάσκει next in the same subordinate sentence, coordinated with ἔχει at the same syntactic level? It would not make any sense that Socrates considers Evenus blessed because in the future he will have an art but, at the same time, considers him blessed because he is teaching that same arte... since he does not have it yet!

If we now go back to Goodwin's *Grammar*, we find something more interesting: he quotes our text from Plato's *Apology*, but with both subordinate verbs in indicative mood:⁶

καὶ ἐγὼ τὸν Εὐήνον ἐμακάρισα εἰ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἔχει ταύτην τὴν τέχνην καὶ οὕτως ἐμμελῶς διδάσκει.

I congratulated him (told him he was happy), if he really had this art.

Then we find a marginal note that follows immediately: “here ἔχει and διδάσκει might be used”. Thereby, the main explanation given *supra* in §670 –“after past sentences the indicative and the optative are in *equally* good use”– is reaffirmed: there seems to be no special difference between both verbal moods. This kind of approach, though grammatically correct, neglects the specific semantics of the subordinate optative.

In a similar position as Goodwin's, Duhoux is a little more specific when he says that this optative bears “two modalities expressed by the formations it substitutes: the expectation (subjunctive / future indicative / perfect future) and the fact (indicative tenses, except future)” (2000: 231).⁷ Even when semantically richer, this explanation

subordinación”. In Mascialino, L. & Juliá, V., *Guía para el aprendizaje del griego clásico II* (Baudino 2005: 90; the translation is ours).

⁶ He obviously takes the alternative ἔχει in Par. 1810.

⁷ The translation is ours.

considers the optative a mere “substitution” (*substitue*) of the expected moods and, by doing that, deprives it of a proper sense of its own. Kühner-Gerth say that the oblique optative is used to express “past thoughts and speeches”, the original “potential semantics” of the optative being “completely obscured” (1963: 254-255)⁸, reducing its semantics merely to the past time situation. After analyzing several approaches to the phenomenon, Lillio concludes that “the procedure, in other words, is not readily explicable, given that, apparently, it is not subject to any clear rules of distribution beyond the dependence on sentences in which the main clause has a historical tense” (2017: 315). Lillio’s conclusion is not, however, pessimistic, since it aims to analyze each occurrence of these optatives particularly, in order to determine its semantics in this or that particular case. This means that, even when grammatically explicable with no further problems as dependent of a past tense verb, the subordinate optative is so semantically complex that it requires a meticulous analysis in each particular occurrence.⁹

Humbert’s (1945) explanation adds a very useful aspect. Departing from the fact that, even when not obligatory, the use of the oblique optative is not merely optional but responds to the need of the speaker to “express the strict relation between two propositions” (§202), he says:¹⁰

If the language has been able to express the wills to be made (Indicative) or the eventualities actually expected (Subjunctive), it is no less surprising that it has chosen this expression of the possible (Optative) when the subordinate seems so committed in the past that excludes all reality in the verification or any eventuality in the expectation (§204).¹¹

We have seen the linguistic possibility of the indicative mood, the subjunctive with *ǎv*, and the optative without *ǎv* (oblique) in these kind of subordinates sentences. Humbert adds the semantics of each alternative: objective verification, expectation arised from eventuality and purely hypothetical possibility, respectively. This way of interpreting the subordinate optative coincides with those who claim that it expresses some *doubt* of the speaker, in the sense that what he or she says with those optatives is

⁸ Quoted by Van Rooy (2016: 34).

⁹ This does not mean, of course, that it is impossible to get to general explanations, but only that those generalities need to be revised to see how they match each particular context.

¹⁰ Lillio points out the various doubts of the specialists on this subject, concluding that “we would, therefore, be dealing with a *consecutio modorum* used, shall we say, on a discretionary basis” (2017: 314).

¹¹ The translation is ours.

something they are not completely sure about, *i.e.* has some hypothetical aspect. One of them is Basset:

With the oblique optative the speaker interprets also the source of the statement. According to our analysis, the speaker marks a point of view that he ascribes to the first utterers, without adopting it himself. [...] By not adopting the point of view of the utterer, he stands his distances.¹²

The doubt turns into distance from the original utterers of the information the speaker is now bringing from the past. As we can see, the use of the optative gives place to a double semantic movement both in time (now the speaker is talking about something that took place –allegedly– in the past) and in person (the first person of the speaker is distinguished from the third person whose opinions he speaks of, even if that third person was himself in the past).¹³

Before returning to our text, if we now look at some other oblique optatives in the *Apology*, we can see the semantics of the doubt of the speaker regarding what he is saying.

(i) ἤρето γὰρ δὴ εἴ τις ἐμοῦ εἶη σοφώτερος (21a5-6).

He <sc. Chaerephon> certainly asked if there was someone wiser than I.

The context of the famous question of Chaerephon is clear: Socrates was not even aware of the kind of wisdom (σοφία τινά, 20d7) everyone said he had. That is why it was not himself who went to Delphi, but Chaerephon, the impetuous (σφοδρός, 21a3), who had the courage (ἐτόλμησε, 21a4) to make the question. The meaning of the optative without ἄν is not the possibility (“asked if there *could be* someone wiser than I”), but the hesitation of the speaker (Socrates) regarding not only the question of the

¹² Basset, Louis. “L’ optatif grec et la dissociation énonciative”. (*Lalies* 4, 1984, p. 16); the translation is ours. Cf. also Fontoynt, Victor. *Vocabulario griego comentado y basado en textos*, (spanish version of L. Ribot Armendia, Santander, Sal Terrae 1944: p. 31). Mendez Dosuna, Julián. “Le valeur de l’optatif oblique grec. Un regard fonctionnel-typologique”. In Bernard Jacquino (ed.), *Les complétives en grec ancien: Actes du colloque international de Saint-Etienne (3–5 septembre 1998)*, pp. 331-352 (Publications de l’ Université de Saint-Étienne 1999) and Faure, Richard. “The Oblique Optative, a Case of Narrative Tense: The Example of the Future Optative”. In Annamaria Bartolotta (ed.), *The Greek Verb. Morphology, Syntax, Semantics. Proceedings of the 8th International Meeting of Greek Linguistics. Agrigento, October 1–2, 2009*, pp. 131-148 (Peeters 2014) follow Basset in this matter.

¹³ This is what Basset, Louis. “La représentation subjective d’un point de vue passé: L’optatif oblique dans les complétives déclaratives chez Thucydide”. In S. Rémi-Giraud and M. Le Guern (eds.), *Sur le verbe*, pp. 91-111, (Presses Universitaires de Lyon 1986: p. 111) calls “escape from nynegocentrism” (νῦν and ἐγώ).

utterer (Chaerephon), but also the answer of the oracle: καὶ πολὺν μὲν χρόνον ἠπόρουν τί ποτε λέγει (“and for a long time I was at loss as to what he <sc. the oracle> meant”, 21b7).

(ii) ἔδοξε μοι οὗτος ὁ ἀνὴρ δοκεῖν μὲν εἶναι σοφὸς ἄλλοις τε πολλοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ μάλιστα ἑαυτῷ, εἶναι δ’ οὐ· κάπειτα ἐπειρώμην αὐτῷ δεικνύναι ὅτι οἶοιτο μὲν εἶναι σοφός, εἶη δ’ οὐ (21c5-8).

It seemed to me that that man seemed to be wise to many other men and specially for himself, but was not. Then I tried to show him that he believed to be wise, but was not.

In this text we find two opinions involved: the one of the speaker (μοι) and that of the person he is trying to prove wrong (αὐτῷ). It is clear that the speaker does not share his opinion with the person to whom he refers. The optative mood is used to show this difference in a subtle way, without having to say so explicitly.¹⁴ Thus, we find again the semantics of the doubt of the speaker in relation to the things he says and, as a consequence, the distance from his own words referring the opinion of others. Indeed, this seems to be an important restriction on the use of the oblique optative: “this mood can only be used when the contents of the proposition are represented from the point of view of the protagonist as particular to someone else or to himself in a different (i.e. past) situation”.¹⁵

(iii) ἔγνων οὖν αὖ καὶ περὶ τῶν ποιητῶν ἐν ὀλίγῳ τοῦτο, ὅτι οὐ σοφία ποιοῖεν ἃ ποιοῖεν, ἀλλὰ φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιάζοντες ὥσπερ οἱ θεομάντις καὶ οἱ χρησμοδοί (22b8-c2).

Hence, also in the case of the poets I recognized this in a short time: that they did not composed what they composed by wisdom, but by certain nature and inspired, just like prophets and oracle givers.

According to Socrates, poets do not have knowledge of what they do –meaning there is no poetic technique– but do it only because of some kind of natural condition, inspired and out of reason. That is why he is not completely sure about their supposed action of “composing” (ποιεῖν). We see again two opinions faced to each other: the poets claimed they compose by wisdom; Socrates knew (ἔγνων) they did not.¹⁶

Let us now go back to our text from the *Apology* and its two verbs in different moods coordinated. We can say that Socrates is not completely sure that Evenus

¹⁴ This would have been impossible with the indicative and the subjunctive, since they convey commonly accepted views.

¹⁵ Van Rooy (2016: 36). Cf. Basset (1984).

¹⁶ Cf. other oblique optatives with this semantics in 22a6-8, 22b2-5, 22c9-d2, 22e4-5, 32c4-8, 40a4-6.

actually *had* the art of teaching political virtue (something reaffirmed by the adverbial expression ὡς ἀληθῶς), but was indeed sure that he pretended to *teach* it and charge for it, even a modest amount. Just as we saw *supra*, we have here two different opinions: Calias says that Evenus had the art of the πολιτικὴ ἀρετή and that he taught it for money. Socrates, on the other hand, is not completely sure that he had that τέχνη, but agrees with Calias that he taught it for money. Hence the optative ἔχοι and the indicative διδάσκει, respectively. The use of the oblique optative is here possible since we are in a situation where the speaker is quoting an opinion he does not agree with. The richness of this example relies in the fact that we can see two moods working together, in the same sentence and coordinated with καί: both the semantics of the doubt-distance (optative) and that of the commonly accepted views (indicative).¹⁷

But there one last interesting way of analyzing the semantics of the oblique optative in our text: by checking the sentences that come immediately after.

ἐγὼ γοῦν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐκαλλονόμεν τε καὶ ἠβρυνόμεν ἂν εἰ ἠπιστάμην ταῦτα· ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ ἐπίσταμαι, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι (20c1-3).

I myself would be certainly proud and put on airs if I had understood those things. But I certainly do not understand <them>, men of Athens.

The first sentence has a protasis with an indicative imperfect tense without ἂν and an apodosis with indicative imperfect tenses with ἂν, meaning that Socrates builds an unreal scenario in which he may have had such a knowledge. Since he never had it, the scenario is completely unreal. There is no doubt or distance, nor possibility or eventuality. In the second sentence, the reality of the indicative mood closes the modal arch: Socrates certainly does not know any kind of art regarding politics. These sentences illuminate the semantics of the oblique optative immediately before: Plato did not mean unreality nor possibility, but doubt and distance of the speaker from what he is saying.

If we now look at some published translations of the text, we may see that some of them do not convey this semantic subtlety:

Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he really has this wisdom, and teaches at such a moderate charge (Jowett, 1892).

¹⁷ Basset (1984: 14 ff.) finds the original use of the oblique optative in Homer (even when there is not subordination, but *paratáxis*) with the main semantics of irony. Perhaps some remnant of such Homeric origins has lasted until Plato's attic, giving Socrates' words that ironic shade that he liked so much.

I thought Evenus a happy man, if he really possesses this art, and teaches for so moderate a fee (Grube, 2002).

And I regarded Evenus as blessed if he should truly have this art and teaches at such a modest rate (Leibowitz, 2010).

And I thought Evenus was lucky if he really did have such skill and teaches for such a modest sum (Emlyn-Jones & Preddy, 2017)

Et moi de considérer qu'Événos était vraiment un homme heureux, à supposer qu'il possédât réellement cet art et qu'il pût l'enseigner à des conditions si mesurées (Brisson, 2005).

Y yo consideré dichoso a Eveno, si realmente poseía tal arte y lo enseñaba tan atinadamente (Vigo, 1997).

Y yo consideré feliz a Eveno, si verdaderamente posee ese arte y enseña tan convenientemente (Calonge, 1997).

Jowett and Grube do not make any difference between the two verbs, as if they were just indicatives in present tense.¹⁸ Something similar happens in Brisson's, Vigo's and Calonge's translations. In their recent translation Emlyn-Jones & Preddy translate ἔχοι in past tense and διδάσκει in present, showing no more than a time difference between the two of them but missing the semantics of the mood. Thus, the speaker escapes from his time, but not from himself, *i.e.* does not separate his own opinion from the opinion he is bringing from the past.

In our opinion, Leibowitz finds the most accurate translation by adding the modalizer "should" to the optative. Our own proposal could consist in adding "should" or, maybe, a stronger modal indication to emphasize the difference between the two moods. It could be something like this:

And I considered Evenus blessed if he truly kind of had that art and taught it for such a modest number.

Even when we can look for better and tighter translations, the truth is that these uses of the oblique optative seem to be difficult to translate without having to resort to periphrasis or even paraphrases. But beyond that, the real importance of this phenomenon relies not so much on the way we translate them, but on how it contributes particularly to the proper understanding of each text in which it appears.

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¹⁸ We should remember that the Par. 1810 has ἔχει, instead of ἔχοι.

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