

Plato's *Charmides* as a Political Act: Apologetics and the Promotion of Ideology

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PLATO'S *CHARMIDES* devotes most of its time to a conversation between Socrates and Critias, the infamous leader of the Thirty. It is named after a subordinate interlocutor, Charmides, who also served in a subordinate role in that infamous government. For these reasons alone, it is natural to attribute to Plato some apologetic purpose, even if the dialogue does not, on the surface at least, lend itself easily to such analysis.¹ Many scholars simply mention the presence of Critias and Charmides as having some political significance without relating it in any way to the philosophical contents of the dialogue.² Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the difficulties of conceiving knowledge of knowledge are related to the tyranny

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the term apologetic in the Greek rather than the English sense: it refers to efforts to refute and dispel charges of wrong-doing, not to humble requests for forgiveness.

² C. Kahn, for example, mentions the apologetic element, but does not make more out of the presence of Critias and Charmides than an indication of Plato's unusual personal interest in the dialogue: "Charmides and the Search for Beneficial Knowledge," ch.7 of *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge 1996) 186–187. See also M. M. McCabe, "Looking inside Charmides' Cloak: Seeing Oneself and Others in Plato's *Charmides*," in D. Scott (ed.), *Maieusis, Essays on Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat* (Oxford 2007) 1–19, at 1 n.1. Even T. Tuozzo's recent book-length treatment of the dialogue, *Plato's Charmides: Positive Elenchus in a "Socratic" Dialogue* (Cambridge 2011), which offers a very good account of contemporary attitudes towards Critias (see esp. 53–66), does not relate the philosophical arguments to any apologetic purpose.

of the Thirty. Those who do treat the dialogue's arguments as related to the political significance of its characters tend to assume that the goal must be to defend Socrates from charges of responsibility for the behavior of Critias.³ Indeed, the well-known connection between Critias and Socrates played an important role in the controversy over Socrates, whether during the trial itself, as many believe, or only afterwards. There are some mild signs of an apologetic effort on this front in the dialogue, but if that were the main aim, Plato would have been better off minimizing the contact between Socrates and Critias or emphasizing Socrates' hostility towards Critias to a greater degree, as Xenophon does in *Memorabilia* (1.2.29–38). Instead, Plato presents a mild if not favorable portrait of Critias and a striking, gratuitous reminder of warm relations between him and Socrates (156A).⁴

Not only is there no overt effort to address the controversy concerning Socrates and Critias, there seems to be little connection between Plato's portrait of Critias and the portrait of the murderous Critias found in historical works such as Xenophon's *Hellenica*. As John Burnet once commented, Plato "is so careful to avoid anachronism in these dialogues that no one could ever guess from them that they were written after Kritias and Charmides had met with a dishonoured end."⁵ Plato writes as though the regime of the Thirty had never occurred. He presents the dialogue as an innocent philosophical-literary composition, dwelling far above the petty squabbles of politicians and historians. This striking effort to ignore that disgraceful period may itself be part of an indirect apologetic

³ See the discussions of L.-A. Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* (Paris 2004), and N. Notomi, "Ethical Examination in Context. The Criticism of Critias in Plato's *Charmides*," in M. Migliori et al. (eds.), *Plato Ethicus: Philosophy is Life* (Sankt Augustin 2004) 245–254.

⁴ See G. Danzig, "The Use and Abuse of Critias: Conflicting Portraits in Plato and Xenophon," *CQ* (forthcoming), for a more detailed consideration of the portrait of Critias.

⁵ J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy, Thales to Plato* (Glasgow 1914) 209.

effort on behalf of Socrates, Critias, or both, but it makes it difficult to confirm the existence of any apologetic effort at all.

If there are apologetic aims here, they are not of the obvious sort.⁶ Still, we must bear in mind that Plato's apologetic efforts are generally far subtler than those of Xenophon.⁷ Given the prominence of Critias in the later controversy over Socrates, it is hard to imagine that Plato could have been oblivious to this issue while composing a conversation between the two. Although the investigation of subtle or indirect apologetics is an invitation to abusive interpretation, I will try to limit this danger by making use of external evidence, such as that provided by Xenophon concerning the nature of public hostility to Socrates and that provided by the author of the seventh letter. While it is a mistake to rely implicitly on Xenophon's portrait of Socrates, his record of the *charges* against Socrates, as opposed to his responses to them, cannot be very far from the truth, since the charges would have been a matter of common knowledge and any great misrepresentation of them would make his responses irrelevant. In considering this issue, my chief innovation is the hypothesis that the apologetic aims seem especially obscure in this dialogue because we have not correctly identified the apologetic issue. While Plato had some thought about exonerating Socrates, his main apologetic aim in *Charmides* is to moderate the reputation of Critias and advance his own political agenda in a somewhat hostile environment.

Defending Socrates: sophrosune

As we learn from Xenophon, one of the prominent charges against Socrates in the post-trial context was that he failed to teach his companions *sophrosune* before teaching them politics

⁶ The obscurity of the apologetic effort can be seen in the fact that although Dorion does recognize its existence in *Platon: Charmide Lysis*, he did not list *Charmides* as one of the obviously apologetic dialogues in L.-A. Dorion and M. Bandini (eds.), *Xenophon Memorables I* (Paris 2000) LXVII.

⁷ Cf. Dorion, *Xenophon Memorables I* LXVII: "La subtilité de Platon tient surtout au fait, nous semble-t-il, que sa défense de Socrate est toujours indirecte."

(*Mem.* 1.2.17).⁸ Critias, whose political career, like that of Alcibiades, was marred by a serious lack of moderation, was the most obvious example. The fact that *Charmides* is devoted to a discussion of this particular virtue with Critias cannot be unrelated to this charge, yet there is no direct reference to it in the dialogue. Plato's concern with this issue seems indicated best by one indirect reference to it: when Socrates first offers to cure Charmides' headache, he tells him that before doing so he needs to know whether he already possesses *sophrosune*, since he has sworn to cure headaches only after insuring that the patients possess this trait (156D–157C). In the immediate context this is a useful lie, an excuse for involving the boy in a philosophical discussion. But in the context of the controversy over Socrates, it would have presented a passably clear reference to the charge that Socrates failed to teach *sophrosune* before teaching political competence. It also suggests that the cure of the headache is in some way related to political skills.

Xenophon responded to this charge by arguing that Socrates did make reasonable efforts to teach *sophrosune* to his students but that lessons in virtue can never provide lasting results (*Mem.* 1.2.17–23). In *Charmides* we find Socrates discussing *sophrosune* with his notorious student Critias, and yet he makes no overt attempt to teach him *sophrosune* or anything like it. Clearly Plato is not taking the apologetic line used by Xenophon, if he is taking one at all. Rather than teaching *sophrosune*, Socrates raises difficulties with every definition of it that is brought to his attention, including those that he himself suggests. So far from teaching *sophrosune*, Plato's Socrates does not even know what it is. This is not completely inconsistent with Xenophon's portrait, for Xenophon did not argue that Socrates explained the nature of *sophrosune* to his students, but rather that he offered himself as a model of *sophrosune* for emulation (1.2.17–18). Al-

⁸ Plato's concern with this charge is evident in *Gorgias*, where Socrates inquires whether Gorgias insures that his students know justice before teaching them rhetoric (459D–E).

though Plato's adoption of the form of a dramatic dialogue makes it impossible for him to tell us explicitly what apologetic aim if any he is pursuing, he does provide a portrait of a Socrates whose interest in philosophy enables him to overcome a powerful erotic desire for the beautiful young Charmides. One could argue that, like Xenophon's Socrates, he provides a model of something like *sophrosune*.

Plato's Socrates offers no substantive teaching on *sophrosune*, and instead he reduces Critias to *aporia*. Aside from constituting a clear acknowledgement that Socrates neither taught nor tried to teach this important virtue, this familiar spectacle may also contain an implicit exculpatory explanation for this failure: Socrates did not teach *sophrosune* because he did not know what it is. If this seems a poor excuse, the dialogue also shows how difficult it is to say what *sophrosune* is. If no one knows what it is, how can anyone reasonably blame Socrates for failing to teach it? How can anyone be charged with corrupting the youth if no one knows what virtue is in the first place? This was an important part of Plato's line of defense in *Apology*, where he has the prosecutor, Meletus, reveal his ignorance of the meaning of the charges he has brought (25B–26B), so there is nothing surprising in finding it here as well. It may be part of Plato's apologetic strategy throughout the dialogues; but such a line of defense is dangerously close to an admission of guilt.

There is another way, however, in which the aporetic results may have somewhat more impressive implications. As Dorion argues, by teaching Critias that he neither possesses *sophrosune* nor knows what it is, Socrates aims implicitly at restraining him from participating in politics.⁹ If *sophrosune* is a prerequisite to

⁹ In Dorion's view, Plato also intimates that in some cases exposure to the *elenchos* can provide a kind of self-knowledge that also produces something like moderation (*Platon: Charmide Lysis* 57–64). N. Notomi, "Critias and the Origin of Plato's Political Philosophy," in T. M. Robinson and L. Brisson (eds.), *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides: Proceedings of the V Symposium Platonicum* (Sankt Augustin 2000) 237–250, reaches a different conclusion; in his view, the *aporia* to which Socrates drives his interlocutor shows that he corrupts young men by dispelling notions of virtue: "Doubt about social values

political activity, its absence implies an obligation to refrain from any political activity whatsoever. Dorion (21) summarizes this view as follows:

Comme la sagesse [sc. *sophrosune*] est un réquisit qui ne souffre pas d'exception, et que le dialogue montre non seulement qu'ils ne sont pas sages, mais encore que c'est Socrate qui s'évertue à leur faire reconnaître que leurs conceptions de la sagesse sont erronées, il n'en faut sans doute pas plus, aux yeux de Platon, pour disculper Socrate.

More moderately, we can say that although Socrates may not have succeeded with Critias, by showing him his lack of *sophrosune* he did at least attempt to turn him from a political career. If this is the aim of the portrait of Socrates in *Charmides*, it resembles Plato's account of Socrates' efforts to dissuade Alcibiades from a career in politics (*Symp.* 216A) and Xenophon's account of Socrates' efforts to dissuade Glaucon from a career in politics (*Mem.* 3.6). Similarly, in *Euthyphro* Socrates' questions seem to aim at dissuading Euthyphro from taking legal action against his father.¹⁰ In these places and others, Plato seems to be showing that, far from leading others into damaging political action, Socratic dialectic had the potential of leading them into a state of doubt which makes political action impossible.

Thus, although failing to teach Critias *sophrosune*, Socrates in a sense instills it in him by this very lesson. By making him aware of his lack of understanding of *sophrosune*, Socrates, paradoxically enough, provides Critias with a reason to exercise the kind of restraint that *sophrosune* was supposed to provide. Since Critias is forced to acknowledge that he does not know the nature of *sophrosune* and cannot explain how he could possibly know whether or not he knows anything, he cannot set forth

and belief in justice and the good, when combined with political ambition, will easily lead to absolutism, as Critias demonstrated" (250). While the general point is well taken, there is little evidence in *Charmides* that Plato viewed Socratic dialectic as corrupting, nor does Notomi explain why Plato would want to offer such an explanation of Critias' failings.

¹⁰ See G. Danzig, *Apologizing for Socrates* (Lanham 2012), ch. 3.

any reasonable claim to political expertise on the basis of the possession of these qualities.

This idea, that Socratic dialectic provides something like *sophrosune*, can be seen from another angle. The incantations by which Socrates offers to cure Charmides' headache refer clearly enough to the dialectical arguments he uses.¹¹ If the cure of the headache as a preliminary to further discussion implies also the provision of something like *sophrosune*, and if Socratic dialectic cures it, then, even if it results in *aporia*, Socratic dialectic must teach a form of *sophrosune*. In this sense, Socrates did teach *sophrosune*, just as Xenophon claimed.

Violence and persuasion

Xenophon informs us that his accusers charged that Socrates encouraged violence (*Mem.* 1.2.9). He responds to this by a typical *eikos* argument to show that Socrates would more likely have made use of persuasion than of violence (1.2.10–11). Plato seems to raise this issue in the dramatic frame he provides for *Charmides*. In the opening, Socrates returns to Athens from the war in Potidea and is warmly greeted by his friend Chaerephon. Why does Plato choose this context and this friend for his interrogation of Charmides and Critias? Dorion suggests that the opening words are meant to indicate that the dialogue will deal with a political subject such as the rule of the Thirty.¹² This may be true; but the connection between Potidea, at the very beginning of the war, and the rule of the Thirty, at its very end, is at best a distant one.¹³ To the contrary, Plato's focus on Socrates' military service may be designed to show that Socra-

¹¹ *Chrm.* 157A, 175E, 167A. See Dorion, *Xenophon Memorabile* I 92 n.101, and *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 60–63, 67; J. Redfield, "Socrates' Thracian Incantation," in *Dans le laboratoire de l'historien des religions, Mélanges offerts à Philippe Borgeaud* (Geneva 2011) 333, 358–374.

¹² *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 33–34.

¹³ It may be introduced merely in order to explain how Socrates came to learn the Thracian doctrine of holistic healing that he later insists upon. If so, however, this would imply that the treatment of this Thracian doctrine was of more central interest to Plato in the dialogue than it seems to be.

tes was a loyal member of the democracy, even serving in its military adventures.¹⁴ This aim may also explain the presence of Chaerephon, who makes little substantive contribution to the discussion: as Plato points out in *Apology* (21A), Chaerephon was a warm friend of the democracy, and was exiled by the Thirty. Reminding the reader of Socrates' loyal service and good democratic credentials in these ways is useful for offsetting the impression of Socrates as a supporter of the oligarchs, if he was so viewed.

But the main point of the opening is surely to point up the contrast between the violent activities of war and the peaceful activities that Socrates prefers.¹⁵ When Socrates arrives at Athens, his associates are eager to hear about the battle (153C), but Plato fails to record even Socrates' perfunctory description of it and moves swiftly on to the subjects that do interest Socrates. It was the democracy that stirred up war in Greece in the fifth century, not the Socratics. Just as Plato in *Republic* (327A) reminds the reader of the religious innovations, including the importation of new gods, that were a regular feature of democratic life in Athens, this reminder of democratic violence, together with the emphasis on Socrates' preference for peaceful pursuits, offers an implicit response to the accusation that Socrates fostered violence.¹⁶

Defending Plato

The apologetic motifs we have discussed so far are not particularly transparent. But there is not much more that can be found in *Charmides* concerning the defense of Socrates.¹⁷ We

¹⁴ Socrates' service in Potidea is also mentioned in *Apology* (28E), where it serves obvious apologetic purposes, and in *Symposium* (219E), which is also a highly apologetic work.

¹⁵ Noted by W. T. Schmid, *Plato's Charmides and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality* (Albany 1998) 3–4.

¹⁶ The claim that democracy rests on violence was a general claim of Socrates' students. See Alcibiades' interrogation of Pericles (*Mem.* 1.2.39–47) and *Republic* 327C.

¹⁷ As Dorion notes, Plato also defends Socrates in places by attributing to

will do somewhat better if we turn from the Socratic controversy to what we may call the Platonic controversy. Awareness of this issue provides an entirely different perspective on the apologetic purposes of *Charmides*.

While a positive portrait of Critias is undoubtedly useful for defending Socrates, it is even more useful for defending the reputation of Plato and his family.¹⁸ One can never safely disregard an author's personal interests when considering the apologetic aspects of his or her writings. While some books are published merely to promote a worthy cause or to provide useful information or entertainment, it is hard to deny that personal ambitions and the desire to make a good impression often play an important role in the psychology of those who seek an audience. Anyone concerned with his or her own reputation in fourth-century Athens would have been careful to make a positive impression in anything he or she published. My focus on Plato's efforts to forward his own personal career distinguishes this paper from studies of Plato's contribution to contemporary political or social ideological debates.

As we know, Plato had a special vulnerability concerning his own connection to Critias and the Thirty. Even those who argue that Plato did not write the seventh letter would have to admit that the document provides clear evidence of this connection and, more importantly, of public perception of this connection. The obviously apologetic character of the letter (see 324B) would be inexplicable if Plato were not known to have associated with the Thirty. Although it is impossible to say what form this association took, Plato must have played more

Critias statements that had been attributed to Socrates. See for example *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 48–49.

¹⁸ J. Burnet once commented that the opening scenes of the dialogue describe Critias in such positive terms that they seem to represent a “glorification” of Plato's connection to Critias and Charmides: *Greek Philosophy* 169. See also O. Gigon, *Kommentar zum ersten Buch von Xenophons Memorabilien* (Basel 1953) 40; C. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge 1996) 186–187.

than the merely passive role of sympathetic spectator to which he admits: entertaining private sympathy would not in itself create any public perception of an association and a fortiori no need for apologetics. The letter shows not only that there was a public perception of Plato's association with the Thirty, but also that at the time of the letter the issue had become serious enough to demand a reply.¹⁹

Since Plato's own relationship to Critias and the other members of the Thirty was a subject of controversy, his portrait of Critias must have been written with at least one eye on this potentially damaging subject. If the dialogue offers a defense not mainly of Socrates, but of Plato, we can already explain one of its uncomfortable features: why does Plato portray Socrates as enjoying such friendly relations with Critias? Offering such a portrait would indeed be a most unreasonable way to defend Socrates from the charge of having associated with Critias. But Plato is not primarily concerned with salvaging Socrates' reputation, or at least he is not willing to do so at any cost. If he would portray Socrates as utterly unsympathetic to Critias, he might contribute something to Socrates' reputation, but he would also be harming Critias' reputation, together with that of all those who, like himself, had been associated with Critias. Rather than portraying a Critias who was shunned and rejected by Socrates, in the manner of Xenophon in *Memorabilia*, Plato had much to gain by offering a relatively positive portrait of Critias. And the fact that Socrates was glad to associate with him only shows, to anyone with a modicum of respect for Socrates, how decent Critias appeared to be in the early days. Plato may be using the association with Socrates to moderate Critias' reputation and his own.

Self-promotion

Plato was not merely a political actor and author, he was also a founder of a school and someone who seems to have always

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the circumstances surrounding the publication of the seventh letter, see Danzig, *CQ* (forthcoming).

nursed aspirations for effecting social change. In addition to defending Socrates and himself in *Charmides*, Plato seems also to aim at forwarding these ambitions by rehabilitating some of the ideological slogans that were associated with Critias. These include *sophrosune*, self-knowledge, and doing one's own things. The rehabilitation of slogans associated with Critias would not be easy given the deep unpopularity of the rule of the Thirty in Athens. Like other promoters of unpopular ideologies, Plato would have been compelled to walk a fine line between defending and denouncing the ideology in question. In *Charmides* he criticizes Critias' understanding of these slogans, but at the same time he shows that it is not the verbal formulations themselves which are at fault but only one particular misunderstanding of them.²⁰ By this means he distances himself from Critias at the same time that he paves the way for the reassertion of these very slogans as properly understood.

As Notomi has argued, Plato uses *Charmides* not merely to investigate *sophrosune*, but also to investigate an ideology he associates with the historical Critias.²¹ There are several signs of this. First of all, the dialogue agrees with Xenophon's portrait of Critias in *Hellenica* in emphasizing the concepts of *sophrosune* and self-knowledge. This is surely not a coincidence and may well reflect slogans that were associated with the historical Critias.²² Even if Xenophon's references to these subjects in

²⁰ See Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 44–46: “Les définitions avancées par Critias sont justes, mais comme il ne comprend pas en quel sens elles sont vraies, il est prêt à les laisser tomber dès la première difficulté que Socrate soulève à leur sujet, de sorte qu'elles sont plutôt abandonnées en cours d'examen que réfutées en bonne et due forme” (44–45).

²¹ See Notomi, in *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides* 237–250 and *Plato Ethicus* 245–254. Notomi sees the progression of the argument “not as logically consequent but as implying and revealing an underlying ideology” (*Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides* 246). He would include the concept of expertise as a Critian doctrine (247–248).

²² See especially Notomi, *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides* 237–250; P. Wilson, “The Sound of Cultural Conflict: Critias and the Culture of *Mousiké* in Athens,” in C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (eds.), *The Cultures within Ancient*

Hellenica can arguably be explained as embodying a reaction to Plato, they would not be appropriate in an ostensibly historical work if they were not plausibly attributable to Critias and the Thirty. The ideas attributed to Critias in *Charmides* cannot be ascribed confidently to the historical Critias: Plato was not an historian. But they are a construction of his views that would seem plausible to an audience at the time of publication.

An historical or biographical interest is displayed here not only with regard to Critias, but also with regard to Charmides. Socrates' interrogation of Charmides bears a significant relationship to the conversation between the two recorded by Xenophon in *Memorabilia* (3.7). Xenophon's Socrates encourages a modest, retiring Charmides to recognize his own abilities and enter political life. Plato's Socrates addresses similar issues, refuting Charmides' definition of *sophrosune* as quietness and arguing that vigorous activity is often better than slow, quiet activity (159B–160D). Similarly, he rejects Charmides' second effort to define *sophrosune* as *aidos* (160E–161B). The rejection of these definitions can be understood as a reaction to problems in the formulation of the definition, but it is better understood as a rejection of the substantial concept of *sophrosune* that Charmides has in mind. By refuting this concept of *sophrosune*, Socrates is encouraging Charmides to overcome his own personal bashfulness and make more active use of his abilities, just as Xenophon's Socrates does. In leading him to this conclusion, Socrates asks Charmides to look into himself to examine the *sophrosune* he possesses (160D).²³ The emphasis on Charmides'

Greek Culture (Cambridge 2003) 181–206; A. Rotstein, "Critias' Invective against Archilochus," *CP* 102 (2007) 139–154; F. Pownall, "Critias in Xenophon's *Hellenica*," *SCI* 31 (2012) 1–17. On the propaganda of the Thirty see L. Gianfrancesco, "Aspetti propogandistici della politica dei Trenta Tiranni," in *Contributi dell'Istituto di Storia Antica* II (Milan 1974) 20–35.

²³ Although some scholars assume that Charmides possesses *sophrosune*, the fact that on introspection Charmides reaches inadequate definitions may indicate not merely his inability to express himself, but also a lack of this virtue. As Critias agrees later, a *sophron* must possess self-knowledge if he

self-awareness also recalls the efforts of Xenophon's Socrates to make Charmides aware of his own personal abilities. It is hard to know whether these similarities reflect a common recollection of the historical Charmides or are a result of literary borrowing. But in either case, they show that in addition to offering a treatment of *sophrosune*, Plato also means to offer a portrait of Charmides, whether understood as a literary or an historical figure.²⁴

This biographical interest can be seen also in the fact that Plato draws attention to the identities of the authors of the ideas under consideration. Charmides produces his first two definitions of *sophrosune* by his own powers, and the second only after an explicit request by Socrates to "look into yourself" (160D). On the other hand, Charmides says he heard his third definition from someone else, whom Socrates takes to be Critias (161B–C). Socrates' assumption may be based merely on the fact that Charmides has spent time with Critias, but it is just as likely that the idea sounds to Socrates like the kind of thing Critias would say. When he encounters difficulty defending this definition, Charmides glances at Critias, as if to confirm his authorship of the definition (162B). For a third time Plato draws the connection by having Socrates reflect to himself that he is certain that Critias is the author (162C), although publicly he maintains the pretense that he is unaware of the origin of this definition even after Critias agrees to defend it.²⁵

is truly *sophron* (164A–C). See also Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 43. McCabe, in *Maieusis* 11–14, suggests that the request for Charmides to "look into yourself" foreshadows the definition of *sophrosune* as self-knowledge.

²⁴ This may also go some way toward explaining why, as J. Beversluis notes, *Cross-Examining Socrates: A Defense of the Interlocutors in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Cambridge 2000) 136–141, Plato makes use of weak arguments in this section. His primary aim is to produce a plausible argument that reflects Socrates' effort to stir the young man up.

²⁵ It seems clear that this is a pretense, and that Socrates maintains it in order to ridicule the author with impunity. He asks Charmides if the author was an idiot or a fool and forces Charmides to say in the past tense "I thought he was wise" (162A–B).

The triple reference to Critias' authorship of the definition of *sophrosune* as doing one's own things suggests that the dialogue is an investigation of ideas attributable to the literary or historical Critias.

If we look at the dialogue from this point of view we can avoid some of the problems that arise for those who view it primarily as an investigation of *sophrosune*.²⁶ On that view, two problems stand out: on the one hand the dialogue does not investigate one of the most prominent concepts associated with *sophrosune*, namely self-restraint in the face of pleasure.²⁷ On the other hand, the most prominent subject treated in *Charmides* is the concept of "knowledge of knowledge," a concept that does not seem to have been popularly associated with *sophrosune* at all. Both of these anomalies can be explained as resulting from the focus on a particular political ideology associated with Critias: in *Hellenica* Xenophon treats the concepts of *sophrosune* and "knowing oneself" in the context of Critias and the Thirty.²⁸ Plato's treatment suggests that we need to add "doing one's own things," and possibly some form of supervisory expertise here described as "knowledge of knowledge" as additional slogans associated with that regime.

But why would Plato investigate the ideology of Critias?

²⁶ This is the approach of most studies of the dialogue. See for example T. G. Tuckey, *Plato's Charmides* (Cambridge 1951); R. McKim, "Socratic Self-Knowledge and 'knowledge of knowledge' in Plato's *Charmides*," *TAPA* 115 (1985) 59–77; R. F. Stalley, "Sophrosunē in the *Charmides*," in *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides* 265–277; Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* 183–209; Tuozzo, *Plato's Charmides*.

²⁷ See H. North, *Sophrosyne* (Ithaca 1966) 158. The idea of self-restraint is important in Socratic thinking. It is found in Xenophon's *enkrateia*, in Aristotle's *sophrosune*, and in Plato's treatment of pleasure in *Republic*. It is also present in the dramatic frame of *Charmides*, where Charmides' beauty overcomes Socrates' composure (155D–E).

²⁸ Xenophon's Critias speaks privately of *pleonexia* as his aim (*Hell.* 2.3.16), while emphasizing the importance of *sophrosune* in public (2.3.34) and accusing his rival Theramenes of *pleonexia* (2.3.33). Self-knowledge is an important theme in Thrasybulus' address to the reformed oligarchic party (2.4.40).

Notomi argues that Plato does this in order to defend Socrates by showing that Critias' views are not accurate reflections of the Socratic doctrines they sound like.²⁹ So too, Dorion argues that Plato tries to show that although Critias' ideology may have seemed to be based on Socrates' ideas, it in fact constituted a fundamental misunderstanding of them:³⁰

d'une part il [Platon] reconnaît – ce que ne saurait nier – que Critias fut lié à Socrate et qu'il a retenu des bribes de son enseignement, mais, d'autre part, il montre surtout que Critias n'avait qu'une connaissance superficielle de l'enseignement de Socrate³¹ ... et qu'il n'était pas sage puisqu'il ignore en quoi consiste la sagesse et qu'il se montre impétueux dans le cours du dialogue. Or comme la sagesse est une vertu indispensable au dirigeant politique, il s'ensuit que Critias n'était pas apte à assumer des responsabilités politiques et que Socrate ne peut être tenu responsable des crimes commis par son disciple, puisqu'il s'est efforcé de lui faire comprendre qu'il n'était pas sage.

Both of these scholars assume that the primary apologetic aim of the dialogue is to defend Socrates. They also assume that Athenians viewed Critias as a faithful student of Socratic political ideology. If that is true, then indeed demonstrating that Critias failed to grasp Socrates' thought would exculpate Socrates from an important charge. Although there is little evidence that anyone ever claimed that the rule of the Thirty was

²⁹ In *Plato Ethicus* 248, 250–254.

³⁰ *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 45.

³¹ Dorion's argument (50–51) that Critias seems oblivious to Socrates' hints that *sophrosune* means paying attention to one's soul and that self-knowledge also means paying attention to one's soul (54–57) is doubtful. Although Socrates refers to the soul several times in his conversation with Charmides, he refers to it only once (175D) in his conversation with Critias, and even there he is speaking about Charmides. Dorion builds this part of his argument on a comparison with *Alcibiades I*. It is of course possible that members of the original audience, who would likely have included Plato's students, would have been specially attuned to this issue. But its lack of prominence in the text means that if Dorion's interpretation is right Plato wrote in an esoteric fashion.

an accurate application of Socrates' own principles (this may have been Aeschines' point later in the fourth century, but it is not clear), it is of course possible that they did. But it does seem clear that they primarily blamed Socrates for having associated with Critias and failed to correct him (Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.12, 17), and Critias' failure to grasp Socrates' ideas would not be an effective defense against this charge. Indeed, that failure would only demonstrate Socrates' irresponsibility in associating with unreliable students. On the other hand, demonstrating that Critias misunderstood Socrates would certainly serve the interests of a Plato who wishes to distinguish his own ideology from the ideology of Critias.³²

There is another way in which the dialogue serves better as a defense of Plato than as a defense of Socrates. It is sometimes noted that criticisms of Critias are to be found in *Charmides*.³³ Of course, these criticisms are few and quite mild; but even if they were stronger, they would not serve in any way to exculpate Socrates, unless they were expressed by him. Criticisms of Critias that are found in the narrative do not serve to distance Socrates from Critias in any way, and on the contrary they only serve to heighten his guilt for associating with a bad person. But such narrative criticisms do demonstrate the author's reservations about Critias, and hence serve Plato's personal and political apologetic interests.

Promoting a new ideology

As we have noted (496 above), the refutation of Critias differs from many of the Socratic refutations that appear in other dialogues in that Socrates does not reject Critias' formulations completely, but rather rejects only an interpretation of them that he attributes to Critias. Clearly, Plato shows that Critias

³² Plato's continuing concern with distinguishing himself from Critias may be reflected also in the fact that in *Republic* he represents the tyrant as standing at the farthest remove from the philosopher-king.

³³ See Notomi, in *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides* 237–250; Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 19–25; Danzig, *CQ* (forthcoming).

did not have a full understanding of these Socratic concepts and to that extent he criticizes Critias.³⁴ But why does he wish to imply that the formulations themselves are reasonable? Why not simply refute the doctrines that Critias defends and replace them with something better? One could arguably connect this with Plato's focus on Socrates: if these slogans were known to be associated not only with Critias, but also with Socrates, it would have been impossible to have Socrates reject them altogether. The most Plato could have done in such a case would have been to argue that Critias misunderstood.

But it is surely no coincidence that in his most explicit attempt to formulate a political ideal—*Republic*—Plato offers better interpretations of some of the very doctrines he criticizes here,³⁵ defining *sophrosune* as a harmony among the parts of the soul³⁶ and offering a very different account of “doing one's own things.”³⁷ Why does Plato wait for *Republic* to explain the mean-

³⁴ L. Lampert offers the interesting theory that the doctrines Critias sets forth were ones he had learned from Socrates himself before he went to Potidea, and that in investigating Critias' understanding of these doctrines he is investigating how well his student has understood him, in pursuit of his initial desire to know about the state of philosophy in Athens (153D): *How Philosophy Became Socratic: A Study of Plato's Protagoras, Charmides, and Republic* (Chicago 2010) 147–240. I leave it to the reader to judge whether this moderately esoteric but very detailed and generally well-argued interpretation is convincing or not. Aside from other difficulties, this theory makes the interrogation of Critias radically different from all other seemingly similar interrogations in the Socratic dialogues, without giving the reader a reasonable chance of catching on to this difference.

³⁵ In *Alcibiades I* we find another re-interpretation of the Critian doctrines: self-knowledge means knowledge of the wisdom of the soul (130E), it is identified with *sophrosune* (133C), and is a prerequisite to political activity (134B–C).

³⁶ 443A–B, 441D–E; see also *Alcibiades I* 127C. On the ways in which *Charmides* foreshadows *Republic* see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* 203–209.

³⁷ He offers a critique of the ‘Critian’ interpretation of the phrase, without mentioning Critias (370A), and then adopts the phrase as a definition of justice in the meaning of doing one's job (433A–B, 443B–E). See also *Alcibiades I* 127B–C. *Republic* also contains a profound meditation on the

ings of the arguably Socratic slogans he considered in *Charmides*? If his point were merely that Critias misunderstood Socrates, we would have to view the new conceptions set forth in *Republic* as a further step in the rehabilitation of Socrates' reputation. I find it hard to view *Republic* primarily as an apologetic work of this kind. Most scholars would agree that *Republic* contains ideas that Plato developed himself, and it is hard to imagine that Plato created them merely in order to respond to criticisms of Socrates.

The fact that in *Republic* Plato formulates his views in terms that resemble doctrines associated with Critias would have made it difficult for him to set them forth without first distinguishing them from their Critian cousins. By criticizing the Critian views in *Charmides*, Plato not only defends Socrates, he also paves the way for presenting the views he himself prefers to promote, distinguishing them from the similar-sounding slogans of Critias. This way of understanding Plato's aims helps make sense of some of the otherwise perplexing details of the argumentation in *Charmides*.

Doing one's own or doing the good

There is considerable disagreement concerning the exact structure of the argument with Critias.³⁸ One essential dividing point is found between Critias' first and second attempts to define *sophrosune*. The first attempt concerns Critias' theory that *sophrosune* means "doing your own things" (161B–164D); the second concerns his theory that it means "knowing yourself" (164D–176D). This way of dividing the conversation has the advantage of creating two lines of argument in which similar patterns emerge. In both cases, Critias is focused on the "self" while Socrates tries to replace this with the concept of the "good." In the first section, Critias offers the self as a basis for

concept of knowledge of good and bad, the concept which emerges as most satisfactory in *Charmides*.

³⁸ For treatment of this question see Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 35 n.3, and Tuozzo, *Plato's Charmides* passim.

determining *praxis*: doing one's own things. In the second, he offers it as an object of knowledge: knowing oneself. In both cases, Socrates leads him to recognize the importance of the concept of the good, first as a basis for action and then as an object of knowledge.

Socrates disposes of the first definition attributed to Critias in short order. He argues that, on one interpretation at least, the principle of doing one's own things is absurd. It makes no sense to demand that each person in a city produce his or her own food, clothing, shelter, and other commodities. In particular he focuses on the damage that this individual self-sufficiency would cause to the city (161E–162A). After Socrates and Charmides have some fun at the expense of this absurd definition of *sophrosune*, Critias, who seems to be the author of that definition, defends it by making a distinction between doing and making. With some prompting from Socrates, Critias argues that *sophrosune* is doing good things, and Socrates finds nothing objectionable in this definition and quickly changes the subject (163D–E).

What is of interest here is Socrates' gratuitously hostile assumption that Critias' "doing one's own things" means individual self-sufficiency.³⁹ Socrates knows that this formulation could be interpreted in a much more reasonable way: rather than concluding that it is simply wrong, he assumes, ironically or otherwise, that the author of the definition must have meant something else. He suggests that it is a riddle (161C–D, 162A–B) susceptible to both false and true interpretations. But he makes no attempt to uncover its true meaning here.

Scholars have noted that in *Republic* Plato's Socrates offers an alternative interpretation of this very formula, giving it a meaning directly opposite to what Socrates proposes in *Charmides*. Rather than providing for all one's own varied needs oneself, in *Republic* doing one's own things means performing a single task expertly for the good of the community (433A–434C). I will not

³⁹ See Beversluis, *Cross-Examining Socrates* 142–143.

speculate on which if either of these two concepts was entertained by the historical Critias. It is perfectly conceivable that the concept Plato records in *Republic* was essentially the same as that used by the historical Critias and that Plato attributes to him the more implausible interpretation in *Charmides* in order to distinguish himself falsely from Critias. It is also possible that Critias really did emphasize individual self-sufficiency. It may be that both interpretations are Platonic inventions. But the result is the same: by attributing a ludicrous interpretation to Critias, Plato clears the way for his own affirmation of an identical formula with a more reasonable meaning. This resembles the passage in the seventh letter (326A–B) where Plato’s disenchantment with Critias’ rule did not lead him to forswear politics as a whole, as does Socrates in *Apology*, but led him to a new formulation of the conditions necessary for a genuine aristocracy.

What is the purpose of this peculiar manner of treating *sophrosune*? If Plato aimed in *Charmides* to defend Socrates by suggesting that Critias had misunderstood his ideas, it is strange that he does not explain what Socrates really meant in this very work. The fact that he reserves the solution for a later work in which he expounds what sounds like his own political ideology creates the impression that he has aims other than the defense of Socrates. It suggests that *Charmides* is a preparation for *Republic*, and that Plato is as much concerned with the rehabilitation of political doctrines as with the defense of historical figures. In effect, Plato offers a two-part response to Critian ideology, first showing that Critias misunderstood the formula “doing one’s own things,” and then showing in *Republic* how a presumably fictional Socrates would have understood it. This Socratic understanding is preferable precisely because it contributes to the benefit of the city (*Resp.* 433A–434C), which is the same point of view from which Critias’ formulation is criticized in *Charmides* (161E–162A). Why Plato desired to maintain the formula “doing one’s own things,” despite its apparent association with Critias, is a matter of speculation. It may have been indelibly associated with the historical Socrates

or have been attractive for other reasons. But the result of Plato's various treatments of it is that he is enabled to rehabilitate this formula for his own use.

Knowledge of the self or knowledge of the good

Once Critias has reached the unobjectionable conclusion that *sophrosune* means doing good things, Socrates turns to the question of its intellectual aspect (164A). Critias agrees that in addition to doing good things, the *sophron* must know that he is *sophron*.⁴⁰ He is so entranced by this notion of knowing one's own virtue that he gives a long discourse on the theme in which he drops his old claims and now says that *sophrosune* is simply self-knowledge.⁴¹

Here begins the investigation of the concept of self-knowledge, which soon becomes reflexive knowledge and occupies the bulk of the rest of the dialogue.⁴² Socrates compares self-knowledge to other kinds of sciences, asking what it produces. Critias objects that it is not like other sciences, for it does not produce anything. Undeterred, Socrates asks about its subject matter. Critias again replies that it is not like other sciences for it has no peculiar subject matter. After some back and forth, Critias attempts to clarify his position by claiming that *sophrosune* is knowledge of itself and of other sciences (166E). If he had insisted that *sophrosune* has no subject matter at all he might have escaped Socrates' interrogation, but he would have wound up with a poor and anomalous virtue to boast of. He

⁴⁰ The idea that virtue implies an awareness of one's own virtue also appears in Aristotle's discussion of the great-souled man and the speaker of truth (*Eth.Nic.* 4.3, 1123b9–13; 4.7).

⁴¹ He tells Socrates that he will argue for this view, "in case you don't agree that *sophrosune* is knowing oneself" (165B). With this comment, Critias seems to imply that Socrates was himself associated with the idea of self-knowledge, and so cannot but agree with him.

⁴² A substantial number of scholars find this entire discussion of knowledge of knowledge unrelated to the investigation of *sophrosune*. See H. Bonitz, *Platonische Studien*³ (Berlin 1886) 243; Tuckey, *Plato's Charmides* 35. I will try to show here that it is an essential part of Plato's apologetic strategy.

also agrees when prompted that *sophrosune* includes knowledge of ignorance (166E) and accepts a description of the *sophron* as someone who is able to discern both what he himself knows and does not know, and also what others know and do not know (167A).

This description of the *sophron* has spawned considerable interest on the part of commentators who find that Critias' concept of the knowledge of knowledge and ignorance reminds them of Socrates' dialectic investigations, which also seem to aim at determining whether someone knows or not.⁴³ Although he never finds anyone who can make good on a claim to knowledge, Socrates' ability to demonstrate that his interlocutor does not know seems to assume that his method could, in principle, confirm the presence of knowledge.

It is not difficult to see why Plato would offer a description of a *sophron* which makes him resemble Socrates. What is odd is that after doing so he devotes the bulk of the remainder of the dialogue to having Socrates refute the possibility of gaining this kind of knowledge. If such knowledge is impossible, not only will it be impossible to confirm anyone's possession of knowledge, it will be equally impossible to confirm anyone's lack of knowledge. Furthermore, Socrates' own claim to know that he lacks knowledge, if that is what he claims (see *Ap.* 21B, 23B, 29B), would be impossible if there is no such thing as knowledge of ignorance.

Socrates offers arguments that make the possibility of reflexive knowledge appear ludicrous. He asks whether there are other cases of reflexive activities of the soul such as vision of vision, wish of wish, fear of fear, and Critias fails to find an analogue. Socrates offers examples of hypothetical reflexivity that are even more absurd, asking whether the double can be double the double? Or the greater be greater than the greater? In the end he formulates the problem as follows: "whatever applies its own faculty (*dunamis*) to itself must have the nature

⁴³ For references see Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 64 n.2.

(*ousia*) to which that faculty is applied.” In other words, if sight is to be an object of sight it must have color; if the greater is to be an object of the greater, it must be lesser. These examples are rhetorically effective since they make reflexivity look absurd, and indeed Critias cannot find any parallel to the reflexivity he asserts of knowledge.

By raising these difficulties with Critias' definition of *sophrosune*, Plato's Socrates questions the possibility that there can be knowledge of knowledge or ignorance. McKim has argued that by criticizing the possibility of knowledge of knowledge, Plato is offering a critique of Socrates' own method of inquiry.⁴⁴ On his view Plato wishes us to “identify the [incoherent] Critian conception of self-knowledge with the kind of self-knowledge which Socrates alone among all men possessed, the knowledge of his own ignorance” (63). He argues that the dialogue shows that knowledge of knowledge is impossible; that if it were possible it would not be *sophrosune*; and that if it were *sophrosune*, then *sophrosune* would not be beneficial (66). This critique shows that Plato recognizes that Socratic dialectic is incapable of affirming or denying claims to knowledge (76) and is useless in any case. *Charmides* could then be seen as a turning point in Plato's intellectual development, the point at which he abandons Socratic dialectic and moves in another direction.

This view has been challenged by Dorion⁴⁵ who argues that there are substantial differences between the Critian view of *sophrosune* as knowledge of itself and other sciences and the Socratic practice of the *elenchos*. The Socratic *elenchos* aims at exposing false pretenses to moral virtue, not to technical knowledge.⁴⁶ While the arguments Socrates uses in *Charmides* might show that he could not determine whether or not a doctor knows anything, they do not show that he could not determine

⁴⁴ McKim, *TAPA* 115 (1985) 63 ff. See also Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* 201–202.

⁴⁵ *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 64–68.

⁴⁶ This point has been made independently by Tuozzo (*Plato's Charmides* 244).

whether or not someone possesses knowledge of virtue. Indeed, in *Charmides* itself, Socrates uses the *elenchos* to determine whether or not Charmides and Critias possess knowledge of *sophrosune*.

Another difference between the Critian conception of *sophrosune* as knowledge of itself and the other sciences and the Socratic *elenchos* is its greater claim to knowledge. While Socrates may aim to discover (moral) knowledge in others, his practice of the *elenchos* never enables him to succeed in doing so. At the most the Socratic *elenchos* arguably provides knowledge of Socrates' own and others' ignorance. Critias, on the other hand, is primarily interested in the knowledge of knowledge and only accepts the expansion of his claim to include knowledge of ignorance on Socrates' prompting (166E–167A).

But does the Socratic *elenchos* even provide knowledge of ignorance? Socrates never claims in an unambiguous manner that he actually *knows* he is ignorant. After recounting the story of the oracle in *Apology*, Socrates says ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρὸν σύννοια ἐμαυτῷ σοφὸς ὢν (21B). Had he wanted to assert that he knows that he is not wise, he would have written σύννοια ἐμαυτῷ μὴ σοφὸς ὢν. As it is, his statement is ambiguous: it seems to mean only that he does not know himself to be wise any area, big or small.⁴⁷ Not knowing one is wise is not the same as knowing one is not. Socrates seems to claim

⁴⁷ M. Stokes translates “In nothing, great or small, do I know that I am wise” (*Plato: Apology* [Warminster 1997] 49). There are places where Socrates makes a stronger affirmation of his knowledge of ignorance. For example, in offering his interpretation of the oracle, Socrates says, οὗτος ὑμῶν, ὃ ἄνθρωποι, σοφώτατός ἐστιν, ὅστις ὡσπερ Σωκράτης ἔγνωκεν ὅτι οὐδενὸς ἀξιός ἐστι τῆ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν (23B) It is no accident, however, that in this passage he substitutes the verb γινώσκω, which may mean merely to recognize or be aware of, for οἶδα. At 21D, the point seems to be that in contrast to others, he does not think he knows what he does not know. Socrates does at one point claim explicitly that he does not know something, but here he is referring to a very special subject, namely the nature of the afterworld: ὅτι οὐκ εἰδὼς ἰκανῶς περὶ τῶν ἐν Ἄιδου οὔτω καὶ οἴομαι οὐκ εἰδέναι (29B).

not knowledge of ignorance, but rather ignorance of knowledge.

Just as Socrates never claims to have knowledge of his own ignorance, so too it is not clear that he ever reaches the conclusion that his interlocutors are ignorant. To the extent that he succeeds in his aporetic arguments, he merely leads his interlocutors to doubt that they know what they thought they knew. But he does not establish either in himself or in them knowledge of ignorance. The Socratic method leads only to a state of doubt concerning one's knowledge or ignorance, not to knowledge of such states. The possibility that one could know without knowing that one knows may seem counter-intuitive, but in fact it is the only way to maintain the possibility of knowledge without entering into an infinite regress (see below).

The refutation of Critias' expanded doctrine of *sophrosune* as knowledge of knowledge and ignorance certainly does not entail a rejection of this understanding of the Socratic position. On the contrary, the refutation of Critias implies the impossibility of knowing whether one knows or not, and hence is virtually identical to the Socratic position. We must distinguish therefore between the Socratic understanding of self-knowledge or reflexive knowledge and the Critian understanding. When Socrates attacks Critias' concept of *sophrosune*, he is not attacking the Socratic concept at all.⁴⁸

One merit of this view is that it draws the discussion into the same pattern as the previous discussion of doing one's own things. Just as Critias' formulation "doing one's own things" is a riddle which is susceptible to both reasonable and unreasonable interpretations, so too the concept of self-knowledge is a riddle with two interpretations. While Critias understands it as the ability to discern one's own knowledge or that of others, Socrates understands it as awareness of one's or others' possible

⁴⁸ *Chrm.* 171c. For more arguments to this effect see Dorion, *Platon: Charmide Lysis* 65–68, and the references in Tuozzo, *Plato's Charmides* 252 n.24. Contrast Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* 200–203.

ignorance.⁴⁹ These are completely contrary conceptions.

As we have noted, Critias' fault lies not in his formulations, but in his lack of understanding of what these formulations may mean. While Critias suggests that doing one's own things means making one's own clothes, food, utensils, and so forth, rejecting the division of labor inherent in political society, Plato later explains this formulation as referring, in opposite fashion, to the concept of strict division of labor, in which each person performs only one task.⁵⁰ While Critias understands self-knowledge as knowledge of knowledge, and hence as a means of testing and identifying experts, Socrates understands it as something less than knowledge, as an inability to confirm the presence or absence of knowledge in oneself.

If we compare the interpretations that Plato attributes to Critias with those he attributes to Socrates, a common pattern emerges. While Critias displays confidence in his possession of knowledge, Socrates displays humility. Doing one's own things does not mean possessing the kind of multi-task self-sufficiency Plato mocks elsewhere,⁵¹ but rather performing a single task for the benefit of the community. Similarly, self-knowledge does not mean knowledge of one's own knowledge, or even of one's ignorance, but rather incertitude on both counts. Just as Xenophon's Thrasylbulus mocked the hypocritical ideology of virtue and self-knowledge of the Thirty and their supporters in

⁴⁹ Dorion also recognizes the distinction although he describes Socrates' position somewhat differently: "selon Socrate, la connaissance de soi est la reconnaissance de sa propre ignorance; selon Critias, au contraire, la connaissance de soi est la science d'elle-même et de toutes les autres sciences, donc une espèce de science universelle, omnisciente et hégémonique" (*Platon: Charmide Lysis* 57; see also 59, 64–68). Dorion does not fully explain how this knowledge of ignorance is related to self-knowledge, which he understands as knowledge of one's soul: "une connaissance de l'âme qui débouche elle-même sur la connaissance du bien et du mal" (56).

⁵⁰ In *Republic*, doing one's own things is justice (433A–E); in *Alcibiades I* and *Timaeus* it is *sophrosune* (131B–C; 72A).

⁵¹ See *Hippias Minor* 369B–C.

Hellenica (2.4.40), so too Plato distances himself from it in *Charmides*. His depiction of Socratic intellectual humility, the awareness that he may be ignorant, both here and elsewhere, testifies to a quality which would make for a much safer political leader than the intellectually confident Critias. And if Plato can portray this quality as the virtue of Socrates, a reader may easily assume that Plato possesses it himself.

This strategy, however, creates its own problems for a politically ambitious Plato. The image of the intellectually humble lover of wisdom who is aware of his possible ignorance is useful politically precisely because this humility precludes him from taking decisive steps in the political realm. Socratic ignorance implies the abandonment of political activity.⁵² If Plato were to seek his own political advance on such grounds alone he would be trapped by his own rhetoric, unable to advance any political program without contradicting his own principle. This may help explain the fact that Plato describes Socrates not as knowing that he does not know, but rather as not knowing whether or not he knows. On the one hand this is a more modest position epistemologically since it does not assert even knowledge of ignorance. But at the same time, and for this very reason, it leaves open the possibility that Socrates may possess knowledge without knowing it.

It may seem paradoxical to suggest that a person could possess knowledge without knowing it. Plato generally seems to assume that the difference between knowledge and right opinion is precisely this: that in the case of knowledge one knows that one knows and can give a demonstration of that (see e.g. *Meno*). However there is an obvious problem with such a view: if reflexive knowledge, knowledge of knowledge (k2), is a necessary condition for the possession of knowledge (k1), then if k2 is inaccessible, as *Charmides* suggests (but see below), so too is k1. This would lead to the conclusion that no one can possess knowledge. Yet the assumption of a common-sense distinction

⁵² See 491 above.

between knowledge and opinion is basic to Platonic thought (see *Gorgias* for example). Moreover, even if k2 were available, as a form of knowledge its possession would be possible only if we knew that we possess it. Knowing that we possess k2 would be a form of knowledge distinct from k2: we can call it k3. Thus the assumption that knowledge is possible only if reflexive knowledge is possible leads to an infinite regress. As Aristotle shows, there must be a first form of knowledge, which he calls *nous*, and whose existence cannot be confirmed by any other form of knowledge.⁵³ It is a kind of knowledge that one must possess without knowing that one does. If Plato was aware of such speculation, he was wise to have Socrates refrain from asserting that he knows himself to be ignorant.

At the same time, Socrates never says that he has refuted the possibility of knowledge of knowledge, only that he cannot see how knowledge of knowledge is possible, and that it would require a great man to do so (169A–C). Plato's frequent references to such outstanding individuals (e.g. *Cri.* 47B, *Lach.* 184E) need not be interpreted as ironic or merely hypothetical if in fact Plato should prove capable some day of identifying some such individual. It is true that Socrates presented powerful analogies to show that reflexive knowledge is absurd, but these were not decisive. The comparison to other non-reflexive qualities does not necessarily contradict the possibility that knowledge can be reflexive, but rather may only highlight the uniqueness of knowledge should it prove to possess such a capacity. Plato has in fact prepared us to see the weakness in the analogies: previously Critias has objected every time Socrates argued on the assumption that *sophrosune* must be like other forms of knowledge (165E–166A, 166B). The same objection can be raised against Socrates' analogies here, which do not even concern forms of knowledge. Although other mental activities—such as vision and hearing, wishing and fearing—may not be reflexive in character, knowledge may

⁵³ *Eth.Nic.* 6.6, 1140b31–1141a6.

well be.⁵⁴ By his inability to explain the uniqueness of knowledge, Critias has shown that he is not the great man who would be needed to explain this point. But nothing has shown that such a man may not be found, although no hints are offered as to who may be one.

Indeed, the idea that knowledge is uniquely reflexive is not an outlandish notion at all. Knowledge of knowledge is akin to the subject we commonly refer to as epistemology, a science concerned with the study of knowledge. The possibility of seeing sight presumably means seeing a particular act of sight. If the analogy is not misleading, knowledge of knowledge would be knowing a particular act of knowing. In order for that to be possible, this act of knowing would need to possess the characteristics of an object of knowledge, the “the nature (*ousia*) to which that faculty is applied.” If, as Aristotle argues, the knowing and the thing known are identical,⁵⁵ then this condition would be met. The identity of the knowing and the known implies that the act of knowing, like the thing known, is an object of knowledge. If god is thinking in actuality, and is thinking about himself, then he is thinking about thinking.⁵⁶ If Plato was aware of any such speculation, he was wise not to foreclose the possibility of reflexive knowledge.

Knowledge of good and bad

After showing the difficulties involved in knowledge of knowledge, Socrates argues that such knowledge is politically useless anyway. Even if one possessed knowledge of knowledge it would not enable one to know oneself, or to know what someone else knows or does not know. It would enable one to know *whether* someone has knowledge or not, but not what kind of knowledge he has (170A–171C). Only someone with knowledge

⁵⁴ In *Alcibiades I* 132C–133C, Socrates recognizes the possibility of an eye seeing sight, by seeing itself in a mirror, and similarly the possibility of the soul knowing its own wisdom.

⁵⁵ *De an.* 3.5, 430a19–20; 3.7, 431b17.

⁵⁶ *Metaph.* 1072a9–29, 1074b15–1075a11; cf. *De an.* 429b22–430a9.

of medical science, for example, could tell if another possesses this particular form of knowledge.⁵⁷ If so, this kind of *sophrosune* will be of no use for running our lives or running the state.⁵⁸

If this form of knowledge is as useless as it is unavailable, it seems clear that the would-be political expert should look in another direction for political expertise. Socrates swiftly offers a better option, arguing that what is necessary for political rule is the knowledge of good and bad. The knowledge of good and bad was not, so far as we know, either a traditional element of oligarchic ideology or a component of Critias' ideology. It is a new formulation which promises to correct the mistakes of Critias. Just as previously Socrates argued that the good and not the self provides an adequate standard for action, so too here he argues that the good and not the self provides a useful object of knowledge. Plato raises no difficulties with the possibility of acquiring knowledge of good and bad, and in *Republic* it is both possible (although difficult) and necessary for the establishment of a good city.

This suggestion, however, conflicts with the presentation of a skeptical Socrates. The acknowledgement of a form of knowl-

⁵⁷ This seems to imply the need to possess encyclopedic knowledge in order to play the role of expert supervisor in the city. But how could one know that one possessed encyclopedic knowledge unless one had access to another form of encyclopedic knowledge by which one could test this knowledge? J. Beversluis objects to this argument on the grounds that even a non-expert can "distinguish a competent doctor from a quack" (*Cross-Examining Socrates* 153–155). But he shows only that a non-expert can sometimes identify a quack, not that he can discern an expert; and even then, the non-expert can only do so when possessing sufficient medical knowledge to observe the mistake in question, so knowledge remains an unavoidable requirement.

⁵⁸ By arguing that *sophrosune* is an inadequate political principle, Plato turns the tables on Socrates' critics. Their recommendation of teaching *sophrosune*, it turns out, was exactly what Critias tried to do: he tried to base his government on an inadequate understanding of an inadequate principle, and this is what led to disaster. Far from correcting that disaster, by insisting on the importance of *sophrosune* Socrates' critics only encourage it.

edge that could serve as a genuine basis for an ideological politics conflicts with the aim of showing that a true Socratic, because of his awareness of possible ignorance, is free from the political dangers associated with a confident ideologue like Critias. The necessity for presenting this contradictory line of argument may be explained as arising from Plato's political ambitions: if he would accept Socratic skepticism completely, he would effectively preclude himself from playing any role in political life. This may be the reason that he never unambiguously affirms knowledge of ignorance or the impossibility of reflexive knowledge.

On the one hand, the presentation of Socrates as skeptical of Critias' theories serves to advance Plato politically by implying his freedom from dangerous ideology. On the other hand, the promotion of the ideology of knowledge of good and bad also serves to advance Plato politically by implying that he possesses the one form of knowledge truly necessary for political life. In effect, both the expression of skepticism about political ideology and the contrary affirmation of the existence of a form of knowledge sufficient for pursuing a scientific political rule serve a political aim. At the first stage Plato avoids the dogmatism of Critias, replacing it with a politically safe Socratic skepticism. But this post-ideological position serves only as a temporary station until he turns to the grander ideology of knowledge of good and bad.⁵⁹ As we recall, in the seventh letter Plato's disgust with politics leads only to a brief apolitical stance which is swiftly replaced by the grand ideological political vision of the philosopher-king (326A–B).

Plato's ability to present the case against Critias implies that he does not himself make the mistakes that he attributes to Critias, and hence that his own ideology of the knowledge of good and bad must somehow be immune to the critique he has offered of Critias, although he does not explain how. The read-

⁵⁹ This analysis invites consideration of the parallel between the political implications of Socratic skepticism and contemporary post-ideological political thought.

er may assume that since he has displayed skepticism towards so many theories in his compositions, including the theories of Critias, Plato's affirmation of the knowledge of good and bad must somehow be on firmer ground. Plato's contrasting images of a skeptical and a dogmatic Socrates throughout his works may reflect this same paradox.

Conclusion

Xenophon in *Memorabilia* defended Socrates by dissociating him from Critias, whom he acknowledged as a disreputable character, and by arguing that Socrates was a good teacher who stressed *sophrosune* and *enkrateia* in every way, even defining the political or kingly art as *enkrateia* (*Mem.* 2.1, 4.2). He argues that despite this, some of Socrates' students were incorrigible and virtue is always fragile. Plato, on the other hand, does not dissociate Socrates sharply from Critias, and does not offer sharp criticisms of Critias. Rather he offers mild criticisms which serve in effect to reduce public hostility towards him and his associates, including Plato. On the surface, Plato ignores the Thirty, presenting the dialogue not as an apologetic tract but as a literary work, from whose perspective the historical events are of no great significance. He defends Socrates implicitly from the charge of failing to instill *sophrosune* in his students, acknowledging that he did not teach *sophrosune* in any conventional sense, but pointing out that no one really knows what *sophrosune* is, and that it is not a sufficient principle for political rule in any case. At the same time, he shows how Socratic interrogation can instill an awareness of ignorance which may act as a check on misguided political ambition. In this sense, Socrates did attempt to restrain Critias by inculcating this form of moderation, although he did not of course succeed.

But Plato's main effort lies elsewhere. By offering a mild critique of Critias' character and ideology, Plato shows not only that these failings were not part of the genuine Socratic heritage, but also that he himself recognizes the failings in Critias' ideology. Similarly, the emphasis on Socratic intellectual humility as a form of *sophrosune* demonstrates Plato's own freedom from politically dangerous ideologies. Moreover, the effort to

distinguish Critias' interpretations of political slogans from those of Socrates permits the promotion of a new Socratic ideology that resembles the one attributed to Critias in form, although it differs in content. By reinterpreting self-knowledge and doing one's things, and by holding forth the possibility of genuine knowledge of good and bad, Plato suggests a way of overcoming Socratic political inactivity and establishing an expert aristocracy.

It is not possible to judge which interpretation—that of Plato or that which Plato attributes to Critias—is closer to that of the historical Socrates. In truth, we have no good reason to doubt that the historical Critias had a fairly good grasp of Socrates' ideas. The young Plato did not think that Critias seriously misunderstood Socrates or that his ideas were seriously misguided, or he would not have entertained such great hopes for the revolution of 404. The disasters that befell the Thirty did not convince him that these Socratic-Critian political ideas were completely wrong, but he continued to hope for a more successful instantiation of an oligarchic regime based on the rule of the wise.⁶⁰ It would however have been extremely difficult to promote ideas which were associated with the Thirty and which failed so miserably. Plato would not have wanted to present himself as a faithful adherent of the Thirty, and he undoubtedly had some genuine reservations about their performance. But he would also not want to contribute to the continuing disparagement of ideas that he saw as essentially correct, or to unnecessarily disparage the authors and supporters of those ideas. Instead he finds a middle way. On the one hand, he offers a portrait of Critias that is only mildly critical, at once shielding himself from criticism and serving indirectly to mildly improve Critias' image. On the other hand, he investigates doctrines or slogans associated with Critias and Socrates in order to show that the two men understood them differently. By showing that Critias' interpretations of slogans

⁶⁰ So did Xenophon: see for example *Mem.* 2.6 where Socrates outlines a plan for oligarchic rule in Athens.

are misguided he reassures the audience that neither he nor Socrates is an adherent of Critias' ideology. And in a subsequent publication he is able to revive these slogans in their true interpretation.⁶¹

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