

## On Missing the Message of Plato's *Charmides*

What does it mean to make an idea or a thesis one's own? Must it originate with its author, for it to be so? If not, what distinguishes it from plagiarism? In an age of ChatGPT and generative AI, these questions have taken on a new sense of urgency.

This question is one among many to which reflection on Plato's *Charmides* give rise. The dialogue's title character is held up as a paragon of self-discipline or temperance (σωφροσύνη), and is for that reason called upon to articulate a belief (δόξα) about temperance that can withstand Socrates' scrutiny. After two abortive attempts to give his own account, Charmides tries and fails to defend an account that he has borrowed from his mother's cousin (and future leader of the Thirty), Critias: "temperance is doing one's own (τὸ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν)" (*Chrm.* 161b). Readers of the Platonic corpus will further recognize that Critias' account appears in Socrates' mouth in *Republic*, as a definition of justice (*Rep.* 433b). Thus, while in *Charmides* Critias' account of temperance comes out of Charmides' mouth, it appears to have been common property, for all that Charmides demonstrates he has not yet made it his own.

This puzzle takes on particular significance in connection with a tension between differing interpretive approaches to the dialogues. Are Plato's dialogues meant to convey certain messages, or do they do something else? If we derive certain insights from the dialogues, do they belong to Plato, or to us, or to both? Or have we missed the point, in looking for a message to make our own?

This talk explores this interpretive crux in connection with *Charmides*, specifically, by drawing on a theory of fiction that views Platonic dialogue as a literary-philosophical hybrid that requires adopting a "literary principle of charity," in order to correctly appreciate how it operates

to shape its readers critical capacities (Landy 2012). This literary principle of charity states that some ideas and arguments are designed by Plato to be false, and that we should seek to understand why, rather than attempt to redeem fallacious argumentation. Landy focuses on *Symposium* and *Gorgias*; but *Charmides* contains its own share of seemingly-sophistical whoppers (Beverluis 2000) that scholars have attempted variously to redeem (Tsouna 2022). In this vein, the question this talk asks is “What role(s) might quasi-sophistical argumentation play in making an idea one’s own?”

By way of contrast with this literary approach, a political theorist’s version of Platonic dialogue, as a purveyor of philosophical models aimed at the truth, or at least images of salutary untruths (Allen 2013, Thakkar 2018), will be invoked to ask what specific messages *Charmides* may be sending. The violent excesses of the Thirty and their deputies, for example, may cast a pall over Charmides’ and Critias’ evident confusion, twenty-five years previous, on the subject of temperance; and thereby create an impetus to find a correct message about temperance, through constructive engagement with the dialogue. If Charmides had succeeded in making Critias account of temperance his own, on the basis of material we are presented with in the dialogue, would he have been less susceptible to Critias’ influence further down the line?

Or perhaps, to find a correct message, we must adopt a unitarian approach, reading *Charmides* against *Republic* and related dialogues, to find that the object sought under the guise of temperance-as-knowledge in *Charmides* is nothing other than knowledge of the Form of the Good (Kahn 1996). Do these kinds of take-aways vitiate a literary approach that is underpinned by a literary principle of charity?

With its dazzling series of dialectical exchanges, literary flourishes, and rich historical irony, *Charmides* makes an excellent candidate to practice developing one's own approach to the messaging of Platonic dialogue.

#### Works Cited

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