

Divination in Plato's *Charmides*

Towards the end of the *Charmides* (173aff.), Socrates asks Critias to listen to his “dream” in which the human race is ruled by *sôphrosunê*, conceived as the knowledge of knowledge and ignorance. In such a world, anyone who claimed to be a ship’s captain, doctor, or general, but lacked the relevant expertise, would be exposed as a mere pretender. “In that case, wouldn’t the outcome have to be that we would have healthier bodies than we do now, and when in danger at sea or in battle we would be kept safe, and our tools, all our clothing and footwear, and all our belongings would be made for us with skill, as would so much else besides, seeing that we would be employing true craftsmen?” Socrates then mentions a further benefit that *sôphrosunê* would bring to humans, not considered in the dialogue up to this point: “And if you’d like, let’s also allow divination to be knowledge of the future, and that *sôphrosunê*, presiding over it, turns away charlatans and appoints true seers as our prophets of things to come.” Though he concludes that people thus ruled by *sôphrosunê* would live and act with knowledge, Socrates fails to grasp what specific kind of knowledge *sôphrosunê* is such that it would also make them succeed and be happy. Critias insists it is both the seer’s knowledge “and another” (174a3), but when pressed he claims it is actually knowledge of the good and the bad (174b10). Yet it appears there isn’t any good thing for the *sôphrôn* person to know that doesn’t already fall within the scope of some branch of knowledge (e.g., medicine or navigation). By the dialogue’s end the value of *sôphrosunê* is still a mystery.

The introduction of divination in this final stretch of argument is striking, but its purpose is unclear. In a recent study, Tuozzo (2011) suggests that divination serves as a placeholder for a superior kind of knowledge that is the source of the value of the various crafts. But that does not adequately explain the emphasis on divination in particular, nor why Socrates presents his vision

of a *sôphrôn* society as a “dream” for Critias to interpret (echoing *Odyssey* 19.563–67). In this paper I defend three proposals. First, I argue that the focus on divination is partly explained by the dramatic date of the *Charmides*, which is set shortly after the Athenian defeat at Spartolus in May 429 (and perhaps during the plague). Plato’s dialogue belongs to a broader debate about the status of divination as a form of expert knowledge (cf. Johnston 2008). Second, I show that the *Charmides* presents a radically different picture of the value of divination than Xenophon attributes to Socrates in *Memorabilia* I.1. The latter passage portrays divination as a necessary supplement to the exercise of craft-knowledge, if one intends to act successfully. The *Charmides*, however, puts divination on a par with the other crafts, and suggests that knowing the future would make no real contribution to our good. Finally, I argue that the dialogue casts Socratic *sôphrosunê* as the *true* mantic art, by appropriating the language and cultural role of divination for philosophy (cf. Morgan 2010; Struck 2014).

Bibliography

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