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PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | CRITICAL ESSAY

Lies like the truth: On Plato's *Lesser Hippias*

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Abstract: How is it possible that we can be so deeply affected by poetry even when we are not altogether sure what it is about? By way of interpreting a Platonic dialog, “Lies Like the Truth: On Plato’s *Lesser Hippias*” links this human capacity to our ability to lie, which, in turn, grounds our ability to tell the truth. Truth-telling requires the option of not telling the truth—it cannot simply be mechanical; it thus always involves looking at the world through multiple perspectives, being *polutropos* like Odysseus and not simple like Achilles. This *polutropia* is the source of both our multiple perspectives and our striving to unify them. We could not feel at odds with ourselves unless we sought to be whole. This is connected to the fact that we are never really in a position either simply to affirm or to deny a *logos* but are always compelled to interpret it and to how we necessarily encounter human beings as neither altogether knowable to us nor altogether unknown. Our susceptibility to poetry and our ability to lie thus reveal the structure of the human soul as a hidden unity necessarily showing itself as a multiplicity.

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The *Lesser Hippias* is by design perplexing. Plato places Socrates in conversation with a famous sophist, someone who might be thought systematically to falsify, only to have Socrates present an

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Michael Davis is Professor of Philosophy at Sarah Lawrence College. He works primarily in Greek Philosophy, Greek Tragedy, Political Philosophy, and what might be called the “poetics” of philosophy. Davis is the author of *Ancient Tragedy and the Origins of Modern Science*, *The Poetry of Philosophy: On Aristotle’s Poetics*, *The Politics of Philosophy: A Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, *The Autobiography of Philosophy: Rousseau’s The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, *Wonderlust: Ruminations on Liberal Education*, and *The Soul of the Greeks: An Inquiry*. He is a translator, with Seth Benardete, of Aristotle’s *On Poetics* and has written on a variety of philosophers from Plato to Heidegger and of literary figures ranging from Homer and the Greek tragedians to Saul Bellow and Tom Stoppard. These interests come together in “Lies Like the Truth: On Plato’s *Lesser Hippias*,” which is concerned with the human soul in its ability to lie as inseparable from our capacities for truth-telling, poetry, and interpretation.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Might the human ability to tell the truth be inseparable from our ability to lie? And isn’t it strange we can be affected by poetry even when we are not altogether sure what it is about? And might, this, in turn, have to do with the fact that we never really feel we get to the bottom even of ordinary prose—that the meaning language aims at never fully satisfies us but always pushes us to say more? “Lies Like the Truth: On Plato’s *Lesser Hippias*” is an account of how all these things—truth-telling, lying, poetry, and interpretation—are connected, and, when taken together, reveal what is distinctive about the human soul.

elaborate defense of falsifying. But how are we to trust someone who argues that lying is a virtue? Perhaps it is no accident that our dialog is frequently thought spurious—a lie in defense of lying. Further, the stage for the *Lesser Hippias* seems to be set by an earlier aporetic discussion about the beautiful in the *Greater Hippias*. Why should an inquiry into beauty be paired with a defense of lying?¹ And since, at the end of this account, our self-satisfied sophist, Hippias, is filled with resentment for having been thoroughly embarrassed, why make the dialog in defense of lying unfold in the aftermath of hostility?² Now, the *Lesser Hippias* does not move immediately to the question of lying. It begins rather with a literary question—Which is the more beautiful poem, the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*? This in turn is made to depend on the moral question—Who is the better man, Achilles or Odysseus? It is Socrates’ defense of Odysseus as *polutropos*, a man of many ways, that provides the transition to the question of falsifying. So, we are puzzled. Trusting that however much it seems a hodgepodge of problems, a Platonic dialog always has an underlying unity, we are led to wonder how poetry, morality, lying, and a certain indeterminacy of character that makes for versatility might all be connected. Finally, a curiosity, to which we will return at the end: the *Lesser Hippias* begins with the second person singular pronoun, *su*. It is the sole Platonic dialog to do so.³ Does this in some way fit into our puzzle?

Let us begin our inquiry with the beginning of the dialog and see how it takes us to this end. After exiting from Hippias’ epideictic show-off speech, Socrates is addressed by a man named Eudicus—his name means something like Righteous One—who seems intent on reigniting the fireworks of the *Greater Hippias*. He calls upon Socrates to Judge Hippias’ speech; the measure of judgment is to be the beautiful:

But you, really why are you silent, Socrates, with Hippias having exhibited such things, and why don’t you either go along with the praise of any of the things having been said or even refute, if something doesn’t seem to you beautifully to have been said. Especially since we ourselves remain, who most of all would claim (*antipoiēsametha*) there is a share for us in the pastime of philosophy. (363a1–363a5)

Eudicus, the righteous, sets the stage for our drama by suggesting there are two appropriate responses to speech—acceptance or rejection. But do these exhaust the possibilities? Socrates may not remain silent; he must be either friend to Hippias or foe.⁴ Hence the hostile setting. Now, etymologically, although not really, the verb he uses for “to claim” might be rendered “antipoetize.”⁵ Poetically put, there is something anti-poetic as well as moralistic about Eudicus’ dramatic demand. But his drama quickly proves comic, for he goes on to identify those making the claim as among those sharing the *diatribē* (it means something like grinding away or passing time) of philosophy. Apparently, he and his friends are doing something quite decisive and bold—they’re hanging out. Eudicus thus inadvertently hints at the problematic nature of philosophy, which combines the constant vigilance characteristic of utter self-awareness with being altogether in the grip of something apart from oneself. So, is philosophy being free or being utterly taken over—is it characterized by the complete and undivided absorption and simplicity of an Achilles or by the ironic and complex detachment of an Odysseus? Is philosophy habit or freedom, or, as Socrates seems to suggest in the *Phaedo*, is it somehow the habit of having no habits?

To Eudicus’ demand—“Praise Hippias or criticize him!”—Socrates responds twice by saying it would be a real pleasure for him to learn from Hippias by inquiry (*punthanomai*) how to understand what he has just said.⁶ Socrates thereby calls attention to the fact that *logos* seldom, perhaps never, simply means in a manner that is direct and unambiguous. It is not superficial, and its depth allows for, even demands, interpretation. This means that *logos* is never straightforwardly true. Or, à propos of our dialog, speech must be always in some way false. *Logos*, as mimetic, is imperfect and naturally poetic. Accordingly, poetry is not an exceptional use of language but its ordinary mode of being. That the Muses “know how to speak many lies like the truth” means not that they stubbornly avoid telling the truth directly but that truth only admits of being told indirectly.⁷ Socrates defense of

Odysseus as *polutropos* will prove a defense of a mode of philosophy that is necessarily indirect in its approach to the most important questions, a defense of Platonic philosophy.

In describing what he wishes to ask Hippias, Socrates makes reference to a view he “used to hear” from Eudicus’ father, Apemantus, that the *Iliad* is the more beautiful poem than the *Odyssey* to the extent that Achilles is the better man than Odysseus.⁸ The *Iliad* provides a beautiful experience of Achilles as good. Now Hippias will claim that Achilles is good in an altogether uncomplicated way—almost good by instinct. Our beautiful experience moves us to admire him for this and even emulate him. But because our imitation cannot be altogether unselfconscious, it must be imperfect. After all, Achilles does not emulate Achilles—he just is. This will be the model of completeness in terms of which Hippias understands himself.⁹

When pressed by Eudicus’ straightforward request that he respond to Socrates, Hippias responds both evasively (he introduces a good deal of extraneous detail) and strangely. He would, he says, do (*poioiēn*) *deina* (whether this word, which means both canny and uncanny, is an object or adverbial, it aptly describes tragic poetry) if he were to flee the questioning of Socrates when he makes himself regularly available at the Olympics both for prepared speeches and for questions. Why might answering Socrates lead to tragedy?

How have we gotten here? Hippias wants to be like Achilles, but he is a speaker not a doer. He therefore wants somehow to make his speech the greatest of deeds (in this he is not altogether unlike a college professor). Without quite realizing it, he wants to be a poet. If the speech he has just finished giving is the one promised in the *Greater Hippias* (286b–286c), in it he spoke as Nestor offering advice to Achilles’ son, Neoptolemus. This speech was designed to pass muster both in laconic deed-oriented Sparta and garrulous speech-oriented Athens. And yet according to Socrates (*Greater Hippias* 286a2) the Spartans think they are using Hippias as children use old women—to tell tales. They, who are the representatives of the simple unironic virtue to which Hippias aspires, do not really respect him. Hippias will rank Achilles above Odysseus, and yet this speech involves a doubling of himself as Nestor that is more Odysseus than Achilles. Hippias, unaware that he is at odds with himself, can only escape the trap he has unwittingly set for himself by finding a way to assimilate his own activity to that of Achilles. This is why Socrates must defend Odysseus and falsification. It is a defense of the act of analysis or interpretation. Hippias steps back from Homer to interpret—and yet his own activity is characterized as *poiein*. Homer, in turn, is a poet who makes a beautiful but reflective poem about the simple unreflective goodness of Achilles. Finally, Achilles himself, in the poem, is presented as singing—reflecting on the goodness of others. Thus, in attempting to show that Achilles too is a liar, Socrates really means to show that even the simplest man is a poet. Human action always involves reflection on action.

Hippias makes the quite extravagant claim that at Olympia he has never encountered anyone better (or perhaps stronger—*kreittoni*) than he in anything.¹⁰ To brag of invincibility is to build oneself up, but why would one do it unless one were down? The experience of having all one’s ducks in a row involves some sense of risk—in other words, there cannot really be an experience of having all one’s ducks in a row. This paradox is connected to what is perhaps the strangest feature of Hippias’ Olympian boasts. He claims always to have prevailed in his contests at the Olympics. As Hippias did not compete as an athlete, he must mean contests in speech. Now, while odes were frequently composed in honor of winners of athletic competitions in antiquity, they do not seem to have been written for poetic contests. So Hippias claims never to have been defeated in contests that were never held. We know from Pindar especially that odes composed for these occasions had their own poetic purposes that often extended well beyond honoring a specific athlete. Still, the victory was always the immediate excuse for the poem—deed gave rise to word. Hippias’ fictional contests subvert this order and make speech explicitly primary.¹¹ Hippias wishes to assimilate thought and action but his understanding of action is too simple—too perfect.¹² The wisdom akin to it—having a complete set of answers at one’s disposal—is similarly too simple.

Hippias has just given a speech on Homer about “this pair of men” (364c1)—Achilles and Odysseus.¹³ Socrates wants him to provide an interpretation of this speech, which was in turn an interpretation of Homer’s speech. Because speech always says more than it says, it must always be glossed. For this, one must stand apart from it and no longer be swept away. It is worth noting that the poem that according to Hippias means to display a man as better because he is simple, utterly immersed in his world, and no liar takes as its theme the decision of Achilles to stand apart from the Greeks.

Given that the dialog will unfold as a contest between Odysseus and Achilles, Hippias’ initial gloss of his speech comes as a great shock.

For I assert Homer to have made (*pepoiēkenai*) Achilles, on the one hand, as the best man of those arriving at Troy, but Nestor wisest, and Odysseus most *polutropos*. (364c4–364c7)

In his speech, of course, Hippias adopted the voice of Nestor. To add him to the ranking here, then, is predictable since Hippias wants to praise himself.¹⁴ By introducing wisdom as the virtue of Nestor, whom he has imitated, Hippias tacitly suggests himself as an additional possibility while at the same time turning Socrates’ failure to understand into a vice. He says it would be shameful were he not to forgive Socrates and answer gently. A generous gesture, but of course one that makes sense only if Socrates has done something needing forgiveness. For Hippias virtue is simple, and Achilles and Nestor represent its two possibilities—in the realm of action and in the realm of thought. He may not be clear about how these two will be related, but Hippias seems to have no doubt that *polutropia* is their alternative, and that Odysseus is the most *polutropos* is not meant to be a compliment.¹⁵

Socrates has a curious way of reformulating the ranking, speaking of the beauty of Hippias’ account “when” (the word is *hēnika* and is decidedly temporal) he asserted that Achilles and Nestor have been made best and wisest and then of “when” (or “since”—the word is *epeidē* and also has a causal sense) he said that the poet might have made Odysseus most *polutropos*. Achilles and Nestor are paired in a way that allows their maker to disappear and in language that deemphasizes Hippias as cause of the beauty of his speeches. When Odysseus is placed in opposition to Achilles and Nestor, the passive voice is dropped so that Homer’s agency reappears, the optative mood is introduced so as to emphasize that in his presentation of Odysseus Homer has options, and by way of Socrates’ “since,” Hippias reappears as the cause of the beauty of his speeches. Now, all of this is in the context of identifying Odysseus as most *polutropos*. Socrates will insist that whoever is best must be *polutropos* because the best is not best unless it is done by choice. We have been forewarned of the turn in the argument—agency must somehow be visible in the best man.¹⁶ Agency involves weighing options, and that in turn involves *polutropia*. Indeed, Socrates might ask Hippias “Do you mean that Achilles had no choice? Isn’t his choice what the *Iliad* is all about?”¹⁷

To Socrates question Hippias replies that Achilles was not *polutropos*, but *haplos*—simple or single. He goes on to cite Homer’s text to prove his point, but Hippias’ language betrays him.

Least indeed, Socrates, but simplest, since in “The Prayers,” when he makes (*poiei*) them conversing (*dialegoumenous*) with (*pros*) one another, Achilles says to him (or, by him—*autōi*) in reply to (or with, or with respect to—*pros*) Odysseus ... (364e7–364e10)

The first *pros* clearly means that the two talk to each other. The rest of the sentence, however, is less simple, for Hippias seems first to use the dative to indicate Achilles speaks to Odysseus and then, on the simplest reading, to use the preposition *pros*, just used to indicate that the two speak with one another, to reiterate that Achilles speaks to Odysseus. So if Hippias is not idly repeating himself, *pros* must mean something different here. It might mean Achilles speaks “about Odysseus,” or, from the other direction, the initial dative, *autōi*, might mean “with respect to him” rather than “to him.” Either way the result would be that Odysseus is in some sense both the addressee of Achilles’ speech and its subject matter. Now, in speaking to someone we must also always choose

how we will speak and what we will say, and these choices speak volumes about what we think of the person to whom we are speaking. By collapsing in Odysseus the subject of Achilles' speech with its addressee, Hippias' language unwittingly calls attention to the two aspects of speech—communication and articulation.

Socrates had admitted that he stopped understanding the ranking when Hippias made the claim that Odysseus was most *polutropos*.

For when you asserted Achilles to have been made (*pepoiēsthai*) [as] best, I, mind you, seemed to learn from you what you were saying, and when [you asserted] Nestor [to have been made] wisest, but just when/since you said that the poet might have made (*pepoiēkōs*) Odysseus most *polutropos*, with respect to this, so as to say to (or, about—*pros*) you true things, I do not at all know what you are saying. (364d7–364e3)

If, retroactively, we recognize the intentional ambiguity of *pros* as both “to” and “about,” we might wonder whether Socrates thinks this claim reveals as much about Hippias as it does about Odysseus, and specifically about Hippias as a “you.” Perhaps it is no accident that Socrates claims simultaneously to speak truly to Hippias true things about Hippias at the very moment he also announces that he has ceased to understand him. To be a “you” is not to be understood—to be essentially indeterminate. There is, of course, a discrepancy between “to” and “about.” Because communication always requires adjusting what you say to the one to whom you say it based on his predispositions, blind spots, etc., to speak perfectly to an addressee would mean to distort the content of one's speech so as to make it clearer than it would otherwise be. To maximize Odysseus' understanding of what Achilles means to say, he would have to make his speech as appropriate to Odysseus' idiosyncratic “way” as possible. On the one hand, this will make it more intelligible to Odysseus. On the other hand, as it becomes less generic, it will become less intelligible simply. In *logos* articulation and communication, meaning and action, are necessarily bound together and yet at the same time in some way always at odds. The natural aim of speech as articulation is that the difference between the two should vanish. The natural condition of speech as communication to a necessarily incompletely knowable “you” is that it never can. Hippias' denial that Achilles is *polutropos* amounts to a claim that in Achilles the union of the two has become unproblematically simple. Achilles is not a man of many ways. He is one. And, of course, Hippias thinks himself to be an Achilles.

Of the four quotations from the *Iliad* in the *Lesser Hippias*, three are from Book 9. Its structure is simple. Agamemnon first calls an assembly (he wants to return home). Then he and the Greek elders decide to send an embassy to Achilles to see if he can be convinced to return to the army. Finally we get an account of the embassy and its failure. Four-fifths of Book 9 consists of dialog—this surpasses by far any other book of the poem. The first two sections are dominated by a series of parallel distinctions: war and counsel, youth and old age, deed and word. It is old Nestor's advice in favor of counsel and word over and against the young Diomedes' advocacy of war and deed that allows Odysseus to take center stage in the debate.

Iliad, Book 9 contains another often noted curiosity. At 9.182 we are told that “the two” (the dual article) set out to meet Achilles.¹⁸ At 9.197 Achilles welcomes them as “dear men” (in the plural).¹⁹ Then at 9.649 he says to the embassy “you (plural) go and declare a message.”²⁰ So, while the embassy comes to Achilles as a pair in the dual, he sends them on their way in the plural. Now, their number includes Odysseus, Ajax, Phoenix, and two heralds. Even should we accept the change in number from entrance to exit, how are we to understand the embassy as a dual at all? There have been various attempts to resolve this difficulty—none really satisfactory.²¹ But suppose that initially the dual means to set on one side Phoenix, who is old and has the longest of the speeches in Book 9, and on the other side the remainder of the party, who are much younger and more active than Phoenix. And further suppose that this other side then divides into the two heralds, whose business is talk, and Odysseus and Ajax, who are men of action. Finally, suppose that the pair Odysseus/Ajax divides into Odysseus, who is a master of speech, and Ajax, who of all the Greek heroes is perhaps

most unambiguously to be identified with action. Parsed in this way, *Iliad*, Book 9 would be a reflection on the structure of speech and deed as an indeterminate dyad, where every attempt to separate them reveals a deeper connection. The *Lesser Hippias*, then, would be a Platonic gloss on Homer's understanding of the dyadic structure of speech.

This emerges as well in the ways in which Plato makes Hippias alter the passage he cites from Book 9. Hippias' version repeatedly undermines the distinction in Homer between what Achilles thinks and what he does, thereby concealing the fact that Achilles weighs alternatives and with it the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary.²² To accomplish this, Hippias must lie by omission, and so be *polutropos*. In addition, by omitting altogether line 311 ("so that you [plural], sitting beside me, may not mutter one after another"), Hippias makes Achilles' speech seem to be addressed only to Odysseus and so hides the fact that to succeed in appealing to a variety of people at the same time, one needs to speak in a way that is artfully ambiguous, one might say poetic.²³

In the sequel the nature of *polutropia* becomes explicitly the issue. Socrates claims now to see that the *polutropos* is false. He adds to this *hōs phainetai* (3365b7), which may mean either "as he appears" or "as it appears." One speech later Socrates wonders whether he or it seemed (*edokei*—365c3) so to Homer, and then adds as he or it seems likely (*eoiken*—365c3). When the verbs are impersonal—"it seems" or "it appears"—the result is ambiguity without intention. There is a seeming in the world, and so a falsehood that need not be a lie, for the world itself is ambiguous. If that were true of course Achilles' great virtue—telling it like it is—would involve speaking ambiguously and so being *polutropos*. When the verb is personal—"he seems" or "he appears"—whether the seeming is voluntary, a lie, or involuntary is left open. In either case though, if Hippias means that the *polutropos* himself appears false and that one man seems to be true and the other false but not the same, this still leaves open the possibility that there is one man who seems alternately to be two things.

Socrates follows these ambiguities by asking, "And it seems also to you yourself, Hippias?" or alternately "And it seems to him [namely, Homer] to you, Hippias?" Socrates will soon suggest that since Homer isn't present and they cannot converse with him, they should just leave him aside and talk to each other. He thus calls into question the possibility of interpreting any poem. The ambiguity in question points to the reason for the problem with interpretation, which always involves two levels—what the reader/auditor thinks and what the poet thinks. This last, of course, seems to resolve itself into what the reader/auditor thinks the poet thinks. On the other hand, we have the experience of having lost ourselves in a book. The line between these two is hard to draw. If one always gets only what seems, then what you get in reading the work of a poet is what seems to you to him. The ambiguous phrase thus points to the fact that interpretation is impossible without in some way collapsing the distinction between you and your poet. Full devotion to discovering what is on a poet's mind involves losing sight of the distinction between oneself and the poet. Interpretation is thus never ever simply a book report on what an author has said. It is always willy-nilly about the truth of what has been said regardless of who said it. Now, while this is most clear with regard to textual interpretation, it is also true of all conversation. Where two are talking together, they must be talking about the same thing. Hippias replies that it would be *deinos* if the true man and the false man were one. Indeed, but, for all that, perhaps not untrue. By dispensing with Homer, Socrates runs together two modes of interpretation. As the book and the reader are two, it looks as though either the book overwhelms and replaces the reader or the reader overwhelms and replaces the book. In the end neither can be true.

In order to show that the true man and the false man cannot be altogether different, Socrates states the obvious: lying requires a certain prudence. To be an ace deceiver one really must know what the world is like—otherwise one might inadvertently tell the truth (think of the unwitting revelations of Hippias). Socrates begins with the false man—the *pseudēs*. Falseness is a bad thing, but still involves capability. As itself neutral, this capability does not account for badness of the false man, and so Socrates adds that he must be *polutropos*, unpacking badness in terms of deception.

But does the deceiver deceive from foolishness (which is bad) and imprudence or from roguery (*panourgia*—doing everything) and prudence? Hippias replies that, yes, he must do so from prudence but does so most of all from roguery. In other words, the prudence is relatively neutral. As only the instrument of the doer, thinking is not to be blamed. The deed—indeed, the poem—as a public act, does not contain the thought. Yet Hippias goes on to say that the false are excessively prudent (365e8) and emphasize it with an oath. It is an interesting shift. Initially, “wise” comes into the argument an adjective indicating that the false need to know what they are talking about. By the end “wise” becomes a noun and describes a whole human being. The problem is somehow that Hippias looks at the product, the lie, and wants to identify the cause, the liar, as bad, but the power to lie seems to require wisdom, which Hippias (he has a selfish stake in this) understands to be good. Hippias cannot account for the fact the wise either lack the power to lie because they have a fixed disposition over which they have no control, or they can lie, but then their wisdom does not exhaust what they are, and wisdom is only an instrument employed by something else. But then, as being more fundamentally this elusive something else, the wise would not be simply wise.

The simplicity of the self, in which Hippias is so invested, is in peril. To be a self is to be a depth hidden beneath a surface. We see Homer’s public act—his poem, the *Iliad*. Wanting to know the meaning of this poem, we then ask ourselves what Homer was thinking about. Homer somehow becomes the subject matter. This is what happens whenever in response to someone asking what you are reading, you reply with an author’s name—not “War and Peace” but “Tolstoy.” We use Homer as a place-holder for whatever it is that his poem intends. This allows us to leave open the question of what the poem means while still assuming that it has a meaning. We assume Homer’s omniscience. Unlike his characters—Achilles, Nestor, Odysseus—Homer is not partial. In seeking his intention we seek to think through his poem as though we too were impartial. We aspire to single-mindedness, a *monotropia*, that induces us to become everybody, attributing this god’s eye view to Homer as a means of ourselves seeing through a god’s eye. Ironically, it is when we try to make Homer a definite person—really try to explain him by giving him certain fixed attributes—that we shut this process down. Reading “Homer” thus means thinking of him as having a fixed nature but one unavailable to us. This is not so different from what it means to converse. We cannot assume to know cold the “you” to whom we speak without turning him into a type and making his responses altogether mechanical and predictable. On the other hand, we cannot assume there is nothing to know in him without making conversation with him indistinguishable from conversation with anyone else. This difficulty is at the heart of Hippias’ mistake. He thinks Achilles can be simple while still being a person.

In search of the unifying principle behind the person, Socrates provides two examples for Hippias of what it means to be capable—the first handwriting, the second calculation. The first is curious, for it points to the power of poetry and in particular of drama. “Just as you are capable of writing my name whenever you want, thus I speak” suggests that Hippias can make (*poiēi*—366b7) Socrates say whatever he wants simply by writing his name down. This is Hippias as Plato but also the Hippias who took on Nestor’s voice in his speech. The second seems to appeal to something more rigorous—something in which Hippias claims to be experienced “most of all” (366c6)—mathematics. He assures Socrates that when asked to provide a sum he would say the true things “quickest and especially” (366c8–366d1). But does speed really have anything to do with mathematical competence? While the speed of a math whiz does provide a sort of temporal imitation of the all-at-once character of genuine knowing, does the one who answers quickest grasp mathematical truth best? In the context, this shows just how strange it is to speak of someone as wisest. How is wisest different from wise? When he goes on to ask Hippias to answer in a well-born way and in a manner befitting the great, Socrates applies traits of character that apply to action to answering questions in *logos*. He thereby points to the fact that there is something in thinking that is more than pure mind. This something is reflected more by the verb *phēmi*—to say or assert—than the verb *legō*—to speak or to mean. At 366a2ff. Socrates makes a series of remarks in which he seems to couple *phēmi* with questions about the false and the verb *legō* whenever the true is part of his question. This seems to have to do with the fact that *phēmi* is more charged with assertion or denial and so always brings along

with it agency, will, and an “I.” This distinction between the two verbs is paralleled by a distinction within the verb *pseudomai*, which may mean “to lie” or simply “to make a mistake,” where one case is willful, the other not. What it means that *phēmi* points to speech as deed is highlighted by a series of dramatic details in the action of the argument—recollecting, summing up, and a series of emphatic responses, none of which are really appropriate to thinking understood as pure thinking. What does it mean when someone asks you whether something is true to say that it is really true? These emphases refer more to the idiosyncratic psychic state of an agent than to the content of what is said. They point to *logos* as communication; *logos* as articulation needs no emphasis, repetition, or persuasion. It is what it is.

The issue of the *Lesser Hippias* is the goodness of *polutropia*. Eudicus began the dialog by demanding of Socrates a yes or no answer to the question of whether Hippias seemed to speak beautifully or at least whether it had seemed beautifully to Socrates. Then Socrates reorients the conversation so that it is no longer about Hippias’ speech but about whether the *Iliad* is more beautiful than the *Odyssey* because Achilles is better than Odysseus. The measure of the poem is the beautiful, of the person the good. Hippias then introduces *polutropia* as the sign of the badness of the person Odysseus; thereafter, the issue of the dialog becomes the goodness of *polutropia*.²⁴

As beauty is reasonably thought to have something to do with bringing a unity to a multiplicity, it is not unreasonable to wonder what the relation is between *polutropia* and beauty.²⁵ Does *polutropia* simply involve variety and changeableness, or might there be a single positive character of soul that underlies this variety and makes it possible? And, if so, might the real *polutropos* be the philosopher and involve the fixed disposition to have no fixed disposition? But what would that look like? Could a poet ever make a beautiful poem in which the main character was essentially *polutropos*? In some way this must indeed be the case, for otherwise poetry would be rather easy, and great poems would be cartoons about superheroes. But *khalepa ta kala*—the beautiful things are hard. On the one hand, the Hippias, who will shortly show that he thinks it possible utterly to reveal himself on the outside so as to say “I am what I am,” is the appropriate interlocutor for this question. For Hippias there seems to be no tension between inner goodness and external beauty. Character and poem are measured by the same standard. On the other hand, Socrates seems to present soul as having, or being, something that can never become manifest so that the *polutropos* will always appear as either bravest or most wise or as something else, but never as what it is. Hippias, however, believes it is possible for Achilles to appear as simple and for him to appear as Achilles. He does not understand that Achilles is a tragic character. It is therefore oddly appropriate that Hippias should claim the Olympic prize in a contest that never could have occurred.

That the *Lesser Hippias* should turn on the question of beauty is not surprising; the beautiful was what was at issue between Socrates and Hippias in the *Greater Hippias*. In our dialog Hippias is somehow moved by a longing to be whole—of a piece with himself.²⁶ Let us generalize and suppose that it is a feature of soul always to want to be one and whole. Accordingly, while I can lie to others, I cannot in any ordinary sense lie to myself. The “I” that conceals cannot be the same as the “I” from which things are to be concealed. On the other hand, to experience myself as a whole means to have a single coherent vision of the world. As long as I have multiple views, I do not fit together or cohere. In this sense *polutropia* seems genuinely bad. This gives me an incentive to make a whole of things, which, in turn, has something to do with my experience of things as *kalon*—as having a self-justifying wholeness. And yet this wholeness is always partly a lie, for the beautiful things not only leave us with a sense of their sufficiency, they also always point beyond themselves, indicating their insufficiency. Thus, the very longing that moves me toward oneness must make me suspicious of any oneness I encounter—in this sense I always wonder whether I might be lying to myself.²⁷ It looks then as though my one genuine moment of experiencing the absolute certainty of my own unity or wholeness might be my inability to accept disparity. Or, the real experience of wholeness is the experience of the inability to accept any wholeness that is offered—it is knowledge of ignorance. This shows up in the character of the *kalon* as at odds with itself, simultaneously altogether satisfying and deeply unsettling.

Socrates is in the midst of what appears a fairly straightforward argument to show that the man capable of lying and the man capable of telling the truth are the same. Hippias, they have agreed, is most capable of saying both false and true things about calculations, and so, Socrates goes on to ask, “Isn’t then the same [man] (*ho autos*) most capable of speaking false things and true things about calculations?” (367c2–367c3). Now, *ho autos* clearly means the same man here. It would not be good Greek to read it as “the self.” Still, Plato does use it in this way elsewhere.²⁸ With a little poetic license, then, we might argue that the self is what is most capable of both speaking false things and true things, whether about calculations or about anything else. Socrates wants to show that to be a man at all is to have this capacity. Accordingly, by showing that Achilles too is *polutropos* Socrates means to praise him. This is not the end of the ambiguity, however, for, while *ho autos* could mean “the same man,” it could also mean “the same *logos*.” We call this *logos*, which tells the truth by lying, poetry.²⁹

The self experienced in geometry or astronomy, which is of course the self most capable of saying true things about geometry or astronomy, will also be most capable of saying false things. But, while it may be correct to call one experienced in geometry a geometer, he is not exactly a *geometrikos*, for any practitioner of an art is something in addition to and apart from his practice.³⁰ He is a person—an agent. A *geometrikos* in the precise sense would lack agency, for he, or perhaps one should more accurately say “it,” would in principle do nothing other than geometry—and do it perfectly, with neither possibility to err nor motive to falsify. A *geometrikos* would call a right angle a right angle and mean it; it does not speak the language of “seems,” “is likely,” or “appears.” People, however, cannot speak this way. Plato provides a beautiful example of the way *logos* requires ambiguity (368a1). Having worked through the case of geometry, Socrates asks Hippias,

Aren’t these things the same, then also in astronomy (*oukoun kai en astronomia tauta tauta estin*)?

For us, the first *tauta*, a contraction of *ta auta*, is accented (a smooth breathing mark over the *upsilon* and a grave accent over the final *alpha*) differently from the second and means “the same,” and the second *tauta* has a circumflex over the *upsilon* and means “these things.” In the Greek of Plato’s time, however, the two would have been written identically. So the assertion that “these things” are “the same” is made in such a way that the two written words are indeed the same. This is poetic justice. Yet it is also an assertion that can only be made if in meaning the two words are different. This is Plato’s way of indicating that telling the truth in *logos* is not possible without falsifying—taking things to be the same that are not.

Socrates’ argument has moved on two fronts simultaneously; they are related, but different. On the one hand, as impersonal, verbs like *phainetai*, *dokei*, or *eoiken* (“it appears,” “it seems,” or “it seems likely”) point to *logoi* that seem to indicate one thing but may well, upon reflection, indicate something else. On the other hand, as personal—“he appears”—they indicate that a person may not be what he seems and thereby announce the agent behind the *logos*. The ambiguity continues when Socrates concludes that “the same (*ho autos*) ... will be both true and false” (368a7–368a8). These two are different. One describes agency—that the self capable of telling the truth is the same as the self capable of telling a lie. The other describes poetry—that to be true *logos* must be false. But there is something more; it is the teaching of the *Lesser Hippias* that they are also somehow the same—agency and poetry go together.

How this is the case begins to unfold in the sequel—Socrates’ wonderfully colorful account of Hippias’ self-description. It is worth quoting in full.

Come, then, Hippias, look into it freely in just this way whether in regard to all the sciences/ knowledges, somewhere [*pou*] it is holding/able otherwise than thus. But you are wisest in every way in the most arts of all human beings, as I once heard you boasting, when you yourself went through your extensive and enviable wisdom in the marketplace beside the

banking tables. You claimed to arrive at one time at Olympia having everything altogether which you had around your body as your works (*erga*—also deeds or products); first, on the one hand, a ring—for you began from there—which you had on, to have/contain the work (*ergon*) of yourself (as one knowing how to carve rings), and another signet—your work—and a scraper (tiara), and an oil-flask which you yourself worked. After that you claimed that you yourself cut the leather for [the] sandals which you had on, and wove the cloak and the tunic. And what seemed to all indeed most absurd/unusual/placeless and a specimen of [the] most wisdom was when you claimed the belt of the tunic, which you had on, was such as the Persian ones in being very expensive, and you yourself braided this. And in addition to these, [you claimed] you came having poems (*poiēmata*), both epics/verses and tragedies and dithyramps, and many speeches of every kind being composed in prose: and about the arts, indeed, of which I was just now speaking [you claimed] you arrived knowing differently from the rest, both about rhythms and harmonies and rightness of letters (writings), and in addition to these others quite many besides, as I seem to remember. And further I forgot indeed your remembering thing, as seems likely, in regard to which you suppose [yourself] to be most brilliant. And I suppose I have forgotten many other things. But what I say, looking at the arts of yourself—and [they are] sufficient—and at those of the rest, tell me, if you find somewhere in the things being agreed upon by both me and you, where the true [man] is, and the false, separate and not the same (self). Be willing to consider this in whatever wisdom or roguery or whatever you are pleased to name; but you will not find [it], comrade—for it does not exist—[when you] speak. (368a8–369b2)

The ostensible purpose of the account is to establish Hippias' credentials as a universal artisan and knower so that if Hippias cannot find an art in which the true man and the false man are not the same, it will be reasonable to conclude that no such art exists. In fact, the speech seems designed to make fun of Hippias' claim in advance that there is in him no discrepancy between inside and outside—that nothing covers him up because he is identical to his covering. This claim is *prima facie* problematic, however, for were it so transparent that he shines forth from his works, Hippias would not have to boast of his transparency.

Socrates' list of Hippias' *erga* divides first into deeds and speeches. Hippias makes and has on a ring and a signet ring, makes and has a scraper for the purpose of cleaning skin, a flask to carry oil to rub into the skin, and makes and has on sandals, a cloak, a tunic, and an elaborate belt. The arts in question move from metal work to leather work (which involve cutting pieces and fitting them together into a larger whole) to weaving and plaiting. Hippias has also memorized for immediate use poetry (epic, tragic, and dithyrambic) and prose speeches. And he has knowledge of rhythms, harmonies, and rightness of letters—the elements out of which these speeches are composed. Finally, Hippias seems to be in possession of a mysterious “remembering thing” (*to mnēmotikon*), never described, which assists him in remembering all of these things.

While the list gives the impression of being structured, it is at first hard to make out its principle of unity. The key to unraveling this puzzle seems to be the verb *echein*, which is used sometimes in the sense of “to have on” (e.g. 368b7, c3, c6) and sometimes as “to have” or “to possess” (e.g. 368b6, c8) and sometimes perhaps as “to be able” (e.g. 368b6). Socrates presents Hippias as believing that his products (*erga*) perfectly reveal the deeds (*erga*) involved in making them, and that these in turn perfectly reveal him—the cause of their having been made. Hippias aspires to wear himself on his sleeve. The signet ring is a particularly important *ergon* in this regard, for it collapses the distinction between Hippias, whom it serves to identify, the act of production, and it as object. The scraper and oil flask are made by Hippias to be used in cleaning so as to remove all otherness from the body. They are instruments employed to give us Hippias naked, which in turn in and by themselves are meant to reveal who he is. The articles of clothing in the list are meant to cover his body but to do so in such an idiosyncratic way as to reveal who is within by the way they cover him up. They culminate in a belt by which, in so artfully appropriating what is foreign, Hippias shows himself as what he truly is.

The greatest change in the list comes with the movement to poetry. We suspect that here Socrates means to smuggle in the problem of Hippias' boastfulness. Hippias as a master of multiple arts

shows his power, who he is, in his artful productions. He wishes to reveal the power of his being in the multiplicity of beings in which he appears. But a being that reveals itself in appearances, because it needs must “only” appear in these appearances, never fully shows itself. Being is concealed in the very appearance in which it is revealed. This of course must lead us to wonder whether it is possible for that master of appearances, the poet, ever to reveal himself in his poems. This problem is what underlies the shift in the list from artifacts to poems.

Hippias boasts that he is the universal artisan. This is his version of being the poet. But he wants more; he wants to be the acknowledged legislator of the world so as to combine the virtue of Homer with that of Achilles.³¹ To do so he must clothe himself in artifacts that fully reveal him, and this, in turn, would require collapsing the distinction between what is had and what generates it so that every object created is a perfect signet. Hippias thus prefers Achilles to Odysseus even though Odysseus is *the* ancient example of the poet in the poem. But Hippias wants not the poet in the poem as a problem; he wants a poem that fully reveals the poet.

Socrates concludes the list in a peculiar way, claiming to seem to remember that Hippias has many other things and to have forgotten his remembering thing—whatever it is that enables Hippias, unlike Socrates, to remember so much. Socrates thus calls attention to the fact that Hippias does not make the poems he recites. He just pulls them out of his mental file. This looks at first like a distinction between genuine knowing and the mere parroting characteristic of memory. And this, in turn, recalls the ambiguity of the verb *echein*. “Having” as “being able” allows for falsifying because it does not involve having a truth in your pocket that can only be shown as what it is, “having” as “possessing.” Hippias, however, seems to think the two are the same. If remembering is retrieving something one has from storage, then a memory is something already thought. If, on the other hand, memory is power to think, fetching something from storage involves a rethinking it each time it is fetched.³² Socrates’ whole argument depends on turning “having” into “being able.” He introduces Hippias’ “remembering thing” as an indeterminate sign that memory cannot be simply pulling stuff out from a storehouse of data, for even should we think of memory in such spatial terms, we would still have to account for what does the pulling, when, and how. And this act of selection involves agency. It is no accident that Hippias’ “remembering thing” has gone missing.

All of this comes just before an extended expression of frustration by Hippias (369b8–369c8). Socrates has just shown him that the data in his memory bank are not isolated atoms. How did the data, Achilles, the true, and Odysseus, the false, become false and true? Hippias replies that Socrates should stop focusing on isolated pieces and plaiting them together into a problem, but instead should keep an eye on the whole. He forgets that Socrates had used this very verb, “plait,” to describe the most ingenious work of Hippias—his faux Persian belt. He thus forgets that knowledge is not just showing off one’s wares but also weaving them together. Listening to a speech is not simply getting an impression of it as a whole, a matter of registering how it moves me not a matter of assessing its truth.

Socrates reveals what this means in his reply. Hippias had offered a challenge to determine “which of the two is better” (369c7). This should have meant which sort of speech is better, but Socrates takes it to mean who is better—he or Hippias. When we take in a speech as a whole and either approve or disapprove of it, since we are not thinking it through, we cannot really understand our own preference. Accordingly, when we say a poem is great, since we do not actually grasp what the poet has done, we really mean the poet in his indeterminacy as cause of our pleasure is great. Hippias’ unwitting motive is therefore praise of the author—the creator or cause of the argument. Socrates is thus really talking about two ways of taking in poetry. We are initially in awe—“blown away.” But this isn’t enough, for it only amounts to noting and pointing to the power of a poem. To articulate how this occurs, we shift the emphasis from the “who” to the “what,” and the person recedes from view. This is what Socrates means to indicate in the first of two extended accounts of his behavior towards those who are wise.³³

Hippias, mark you, I do not dispute that you are wiser than I; but rather, I am always accustomed, whenever someone says something, to apply my mind/pay attention, especially (*allos te kai*) when the one speaking seems to me to be wise, and desiring to learn what he says I seek to learn by inquiry and look at it yet again and put together the things being said so that I may learn. (369d1–369d5)

Socrates honors the wise by plaguing them with questions. Here, this procedure is coupled with their investigation into the meaning of a wise poem—the *Iliad*. Socrates treats men as he treats poetry—suitable awe followed by merciless questioning. Now, the specific question he asks of the *Iliad* is whether Achilles or Odysseus is the better man. The criterion of judgment is falsifying, and specifically the distinction between knowingly falsifying—lying—and unwittingly falsifying. Hippias believes Achilles superior because he unwittingly falsifies, which in a way means that he lies to himself. The *Lesser Hippias* thus gradually focuses on the question of whether it is possible to lie to oneself, and it does so within the context of poetry. Lying to oneself is a version of knowing and not knowing at the same time. And this duplicity is what makes it possible to be affected by poetry. It turns out as well to be the condition for the possibility of learning anything at all, and so of philosophy. Lying to oneself requires a split in the soul allowing a part of us that knows to deceive a part of us that does not. But this same duplicity enables us, without knowing, to employ an interpretive context through which we see the world. Finally, it is the reason we are able to be affected so powerfully by a poem without knowing how or why.

However ironically, Socrates claims to use his conversation with Hippias as an example of how he talks to the wise.³⁴ His initial impression of a person leads him to pay attention not to the person but to the *logos*. This is the first step in learning by inquiry, which involves noticing when someone makes two claims, forcing the two together, and seeing what happens. Socrates learns not from setting person against person but by setting *pragma* against *pragma*. So, we are initially attracted to a person, but then we move away from the person so as to get at a meaning we assume to be present because of the kind of person with whom we are dealing—he is, after all, *sophos* and not *phaulos*—but which is hidden from us so that we do not yet grasp it. With people as with poems, we are only dimly aware of what attracts us. *Logos* has an outer exoteric meaning, but there is also always something within—esoteric.³⁵ So, for example, Achilles, on the most obvious level (Hippias' level) accuses Odysseus of being a pretender, but the language of Socrates' account also supports the interpretation that Achilles speaks as a pretender to Odysseus. Socrates knows that Homer too knows of this ambiguity, for in his act of belittling Odysseus as a “many wiled”—i.e. as a pretender—Achilles is pretending to himself to be perfectly open and frank.³⁶

Socrates quotes three passages from *Iliad*. In the first (9.313–9.314), Achilles claims to hate those who say one thing and do another. In the second (9.357–9.363), he says that “tomorrow” he will drag his ships to the sea and leave for home. In the third (1.169–1.171), he says that he is about to return home to Phthia. And yet nowhere, says Socrates, does he make any attempt to make good on his speeches. Achilles is a liar; at the very moment he criticizes Odysseus' *polutropia*, he reveals himself as *polutropos*.

Still, like Hippias, Socrates changes some things, and the details are revealing. Socrates' version has Achilles say that he is leaving and that it will please him because Agamemnon will suffer.³⁷ The essence of Achilles' position is “I won't fight, and you will regret it.” “Going home,” then could be literal—one of the true things (*alēthē*), or it could be figurative, and Achilles could speak quite sincerely (*alēthē*). While the words Achilles utters may not mean what they mean, he nevertheless means what he says.

This is true as well of the other quotation from *Iliad*, Book 9 (357–363). It is as though to express his inner state, his famous *mēnis*, Achilles needs to write himself into a story so as to give himself an external manifestation. It is what we do when we say “If I died, then you'd be sorry.” His description

of “going home” is an accurate representation of his psychic condition by way of a poetic fiction. Poetry, then, is how we lie to ourselves to tell the truth to ourselves.³⁸

Hippias comes to Achilles’ defense by claiming that he may indeed contradict himself, but he never attempts to conceal anything. When he falsifies, there is no plotting, for he falsifies unwillingly. A true man is an *honnête homme* who acts on his impulses—he does not carry his reasons around with him in his pocket. He may therefore do and say contradictory things, but he is himself and, well “If I contradict myself, then I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.”³⁹ Odysseus’ *polutropia* is not of this sort, for he is constantly thinking about the connection between what he will do and what he has done before. And of course, in order to write a poem one would have to be like Odysseus. Odysseus always seeks to understand himself as consistent, and, oddly enough, striving to have a consistent character looks like plotting.

Hippias, as we have seen, thinks of himself as an Achilles—wearing his wares on the outside and so “letting it all hang out.” He is therefore taken aback when Socrates says, “You are deceiving me, dearest Hippias, and you yourself imitate Odysseus” (370e10–370e11). In his curious way, Hippias has tried to think Achilles together as a whole, to give a unitary account of what makes Achilles Achilles. But the impulsive man does not say “I live for the moment.” This is a claim not for Achilles but for the Odysseus whom Hippias has unwittingly imitated.⁴⁰

Hippias claims that Odysseus is a deceiver and Achilles is altogether open. Socrates replies that Achilles is actually a greater deceiver because he says one thing in *Iliad*, Book 1 and another thing in Book 9.⁴¹ Even in Book 9 he says contradictory things within 10 minutes time and escapes Odysseus’ notice. In the course of making this charge against Achilles, Socrates must quote lines from the *Iliad* to provide evidence. But he alters the lines. So for example, where Homer has Achilles tell Ajax not to worry because he will be held back at the huts and ships of his Myrmidons, Socrates changes the language, substituting *min* (him) for *toi* (mark you), so as to suggest that Hector will not be stopped but rather will stop himself. Socrates’ change makes Achilles even more clever, for he actually avoids a straightforward contradiction. Hippias does not see (nor does Achilles) that “huts and ships” is poetry. Hector will stay away out of fear of Achilles. Now, Socrates’ change serves to bring out something that is in the *Iliad*, but buried. At the beginning of Book 16 (36–50) Patroklos asks permission to go into battle against the Trojans in Achilles’ stead. He asks explicitly whether Achilles draws back from this course because he knows of some prophecy. Achilles answers that he does not. At the beginning of Book 18 (8–11) Achilles laments that he allowed Patroklos to take his place given that his mother had once prophesied to him that while he was still alive, the best of the Myrmidons would leave the light of the sun at the hands of the Trojans. He also claims to have warned Patroklos not to engage Hector (18.13–18.14), when in fact he did not (16.83–16.95). Obviously Achilles in some sense knows that Patroklos will die if he goes into battle but lets him anyway.⁴² And yet in some sense he does not know. By highlighting this contradiction, Socrates leads us to the real issue. Because Achilles is self-deceived, he is more a falsifier than Odysseus. Were Achilles as self-aware as Socrates portrays him, he would be Homer. Still, the portrayal is necessary to reveal the contradiction at the heart of Achilles. In the process, Socrates also reveals Hippias to himself.

Hippias defends Achilles by saying that his deception is unwilling, and cites the laws as harsher on willing transgressors but forgiving of the unwilling—unless they do so knowingly. This last is interesting, for it suggests that it is possible for someone to be unwilling yet knowing, someone not so easy to forgive—we think we recognize Achilles.⁴³ Then Socrates responds in the longest speech of the dialog with a description of his inner self by way of an account of what he always has on a back burner in what one might call his subconscious mind. When he learns something, he tells us, he never denies having gotten it from elsewhere. He doesn’t claim credit for what he finds. Socrates takes things from the basement level of his mind to examine but never makes the mistake of identifying himself in an unqualified way with this level. And yet, in general, he knows that this constant awareness of himself as other than himself is what he is. And so Socrates disagrees with Hippias that the unwilling are better than the willing doers of bad things. They are worse. Sometimes, he says, he

doesn't generally think this to be the case, but at the moment he does because it has hit him out of nowhere and involuntarily as though he has suffered a fit and fallen down in a swoon. He is all the more surprised then to discover that the thought that has forced itself on him is a consequence of their previous *logoi*, which, he says, he holds "responsible for being responsible for the current, present experience" (372e3–372e4). Socrates is moved to proclaim his own agency in naming these *logoi* the agents that have moved him. What can this mean? On the one hand, when we find what we think is the correct interpretation of a *logos*, we are "struck by it" "out of the blue." Still, as an outgrowth of everything prior to it, the interpretation leaves the impression that it "had to be." Interpreting *logoi* thus both celebrates and deprives us of a sense of being in control. It makes simultaneously everything and nothing of us. Everything is already there in the poem, yet the significance is dark. In unearthing it, we feel elated. It is we who put things together, and this is an affirmation of our own agency. The act of interpretation seems to be the crucial moment when we experience ourselves simultaneously as cause and as caused—and for the very same reason.⁴⁴

And so we finally come back to "you"—the first word of the *Lesser Hippias*. Eudicus approaches the silent Socrates, who, he thinks, must either endorse or gainsay what Hippias has just said. But he does not know which. Even while Eudicus assumes that Socrates' silence manifests some agency, there is a certain hiddenness to this "you." Hippias both admires and emulates Achilles precisely because Achilles lacks this hiddenness—he is an altogether open book. But then the great actor Achilles necessarily also lacks agency, for if agency always shows itself perfectly by way of what it does on the outside, there can be no such thing as *diatribē* as action. This puzzle of the necessarily hidden nature of the self in the very first word of the dialog is what is at issue in the question of whether Odysseus' *polutropia* can be visible as anything apart from its particular manifestations. This is also the issue that emerges at the end of Socrates' long speech at 372e6–373a8.

Socrates claims to have "one wondrous good, which saves [him]" (372c1–372c2). It is his ability to learn by inquiry without worrying about where what he learns comes from. It is his lack of vanity with regard to wisdom. He does not claim agency. Things just hit him. And yet this, his distinguishing feature, is what enables him always to make trouble in *logoi*. This gift presumably applies not only to conversation with the "wise" but also with texts—interpretation. It has to do with whatever it is in us that makes us susceptible to being unwittingly led along by a *logos*, a poem, or a person. In the act of interpretation, the soul is simultaneously both mover and moved. The verb *euriskein* means "to find," both as "to discover" and as "to invent."

Socrates has argued that those who will to falsify are better than those who unwillingly do so. Hippias invokes the authority of the law to claim the opposite—that those doing bad things unwillingly as better than those doing them willingly are to be forgiven. At the end of his long speech, Socrates assumes without evidence that Hippias will be unwilling to pursue the conversation and appeals to Eudicus as a go-between to urge Hippias to live up to his initial boast that he will answer any question. The interlude echoes the beginning (363b–363c), where Socrates talks about (*pros*) Hippias to Eudicus but is actually talking to (*pros*) Hippias to get him to answer. In both cases the device allows Plato to reveal something true of all *logos*. By speaking to Hippias through Eudicus, Socrates can speak about Hippias in a way that shows what constrains him when he speaks to Hippias. He shows how speaking *pros* someone always necessarily means speaking both to him and about him.⁴⁵ By showing that he must appeal to what he knows about Hippias (his pride) in order to get him to speak, Socrates indicates that to address Hippias is to address an inner, hidden "you." Even though Hippias is supposed to be the man who wears his "you" on his Persian belt, Socrates shows that there must be more to him—there is at the very least the pride he takes in having made his Persian belt.⁴⁶

Hippias is reluctant to go on. He prefers to place *logoi* alongside one another and then opt for one as better than another (369b8–369c8). He is uninclined to ask whether they are compatible, for this would imply the possibility of a hidden unity beneath their apparent discrepancy. Hippias prefers to measure speeches on the basis of their initial power to wow. By insisting on pushing deeper, Socrates

becomes “just like a doer of bad things” (373b5). For Hippias the way (*tropos*) of the *polutropos* is evil—he is a bad guy. His condemnation of the pair, Socrates and Odysseus, suggests that for him *polutropia* only shows itself as a flaw, perhaps because the cause hidden behind an effect shows up only when the effect is not altogether effective. Accordingly, the beginning of all interpretation is some problem, *aporia*, or contradiction that leads us to be puzzled. At this point in the dialog, the puzzle shows itself in the discomfort we feel when we make the claim that willing falsification is better than unwilling. Socrates owns up to this discomfort when he announces that he has pressed this claim unwillingly. Oddly enough, he asks for Hippias’ forgiveness on this ground—even though according to the claim he has made his action is worse than willing falsification. Socrates thereby points out that according to Hippias, who has just blamed him, Hippias is required to forgive him, and so in his very denial that he willingly causes trouble in *logoi*, he causes trouble.⁴⁷

Socrates’ concluding argument proceeds by way of a series of examples. The first is the racer. A good racer runs well. Running quickly is running well; running slowly is running badly. But slow running is either willing or unwilling. Because of the two the former is better, the good racer accomplishes something bad willingly.⁴⁸ The issue hidden beneath the surface argument here is “you.”⁴⁹ When Socrates introduces the possibility of throwing a race (373d4), and with it the possibility an alternative motive for racing, he makes running a multipurpose tool, behind which lies an unused user—a hidden “you.”⁵⁰

This is clearer still in the sequel, where Socrates uses a new example—wrestling.⁵¹ Socrates seems to have in mind a kind of feinting—giving ground when the opponent pushes to lull him into a sense of false superiority only to push back at the right moment. Here, one uses the body as a tool in such a way that an apparent weakness is a strength and an apparent imperfection a virtue. This is what Socrates has in mind when he speaks of being capable of things both strong and weak (374a8–374b1), and so of a capacity to be both capable and incapable. *Logos*, like wrestling, involves a push and a pull. We are in charge, strong, and invent; we are led along willy-nilly, weak, and discover. Poetry is a paradigm for the togetherness of the two. For Hippias, Achilles is the man who so says what he means that in him the “you” and its products are one. He is his surface. Odysseus, on the other hand, is bad, for he says one thing and thinks another. Hippias is oblivious to how we sometimes only discover what we really mean when we say it. And so Socrates is moved to push an alternative understanding of what it means to be good—one according to which people are better, or stronger, by dint of excelling in this very process of discovering what it is that they mean, and so in whom the relative weakness of not saying it like it is may be found to be a strength.

Socrates moves through several other examples of things possessed that may be willingly or unwillingly ill-used—carriage (374b5–374c2), sound or voice (374c2–374c5), feet, eyes, and all the bodily organs of perception (374c5–375a5). Each by itself has its idiosyncratic importance.⁵² Together, his many examples about body pose this question: Do we wish to be in control of our bodies as instruments or do we wish to be controlled by our bodies? And this, in turn, leads to the question of soul.⁵³ If I am in control of the soul, whether of a horse, of an archer, of a doctor, or of a flutist, I am in control of something more potent if I am in control of someone who willingly errs than if I am in control of someone who unwillingly errs. Accordingly, Socrates’ series of examples culminates in the question of what sort of slave is to be preferred.

But surely, I suppose [*pou*], with respect to the souls of slaves at least we would rather (*dexaimetha*) rather (*mallon*) possess the ones who willingly than unwillingly both err and do evils, since they are better in/for/with respect to these things. (375c3–375c6)

It is not just that we prefer to possess the slaves of souls who err willingly—we prefer to prefer them. And we prefer to prefer them because they prefer to do what they do and do not simply do it mechanically. And this is our preference because these souls are better; they are preferable because they prefer. My own soul prefers my soul as preferring to prefer a slave soul that prefers. The good soul is the preferring soul, which shows what it is by doing what it does willingly and not because

possessed. But how is it possible to characterize the excellence of a soul of this sort? What is the virtue of the preferring soul? How does one show one's power of preferring other than by way of the litany of one's preferences, which litany can never reveal the power of which it is the expression? Or, how is it possible to characterize a soul at all while preserving its agency? This is the problem of Odysseus, the man of many ways who can therefore never be recognized as what he really is. Its modern version: How is it possible to characterize the unconditional freedom of soul without conditioning it and so rendering it unfree? With Achilles as his model, Hippias boasted of being perfect. He is now troubled because Socrates has shown him that the perfect soul is not a soul.

At the end of the dialog, Socrates moves from the souls of horses, archers, doctors, and slaves to the state of "our soul" in the singular.⁵⁴ He has in mind not any particular soul but the power in any soul that renders it particular. Hippias has grudgingly agreed at each stage of the argument since the interlude. Now he balks: "It would be terrible (*deinos*) indeed, Socrates, if the ones willing doing injustice will be better than those unwilling" (375d3–375d34). With this stubborn return to his previous position, Hippias willfully renounces the will. He thinks he prefers not to prefer, but, ironically, in so doing, he prefers to prefer. He would rather rather than not. From the point of view of the *logos*, which seems to require that Hippias relent, this is a mistake—but one that artfully reveals what the *logos* has been about.

Hippias had thought himself to be the perfect man, and, as perfect, to have both a capability/*dunamis* and knowledge. He had thought to put Nestor and Achilles together. By repeatedly forcing him to the conclusion that one willingly doing bad is better than one unwillingly doing it, Socrates has revealed that this attempt to combine Nestor and Achilles leads us inevitably to Odysseus. The best human soul is not to be made visible. To externalize it is to make it disappear in the various appearances of its *polutropia*.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his protestation of weakness at the end, Socrates pushes Hippias to a conclusion that he cannot, and yet somehow has, accepted. Socrates then admits that he too does not agree with himself. From the outset Hippias boasted of effortlessly answering every question. And Socrates reported him to have claimed to show himself fully in his products. Here at the end Hippias is forced to say "I do not have a way/am not able to agree with you, Socrates" (376b7). Does Hippias finally come to experience his soul, his own *polutropia*, in this expression of frustration—of being without power? If so, then when Socrates identifies himself with Hippias at the end of the dialog (in the spirit of his long speech at 372b), does he mean to show his own habitual knowledge of ignorance to be the truest experience of the underlying unity of the human soul? If so, this is Plato's poetic and indirect way of finally making visible the "you" to whom Eudicus addresses his initial question.

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Notes

1. See *Greater Hippias* 286b–286c.
2. See *Greater Hippias* 301b–301c and 304a–304b.
3. The dialog, *Demodocus*, which also begins with *su*, has been considered spurious since antiquity. The argument of *Demodocus* means to call into question the very possibility of those mental states in between knowing and not knowing that seem to be neces-

sary to make possible such things as deliberation and learning. As we shall see, this is not unconnected to the theme of the *Lesser Hippias*. Perhaps it is also not accidental that the author of the *Demodocus* should have borrowed the name of the most famous bard in Homer for his title.

4. Eudicus seems to assume that if something has been said beautifully by Hippias it must seem beautifully to Socrates (*kalōs*, is beautifully placed in the sentence so as to modify either verb). The process of transmission is for him altogether unproblematic.
5. *Antipoiēin* means something like "to do in return" or "to contend with." In the middle voice this turns into "to exert oneself" or "to claim."
6. Eudicus speaks of Hippias speech in the perfect tense, asking Socrates to judge Hippias "having exhibited such things"—to praise or condemn any of the "things having been said." The perfect, the least verbal of the tenses, renders action as already having been completed. Socrates' response suggests that speech never really warrants the perfect, for action is always

- ongoing—never really complete. Because Hippias unwittingly says more than he thinks he says, his speech demands interpretation—learning by inquiry. As unfinished it is not to be praised as beautiful; it is a poem to be mined for meaning. Accordingly, Socrates changes the tense. “What Hippias was just now saying” is in the imperfect.
7. The line is from Hesiod, *Theogony* 27.
 8. If this were tacitly the subject of Hippias’ speech, then it would have said nothing new but something that is always being said. Speech not only has no perfect end; it also has no proper beginning. Furthermore, the righteous Eudicus, without realizing it, has encouraged Socrates to interrogate his father. Apparently, like speeches, human beings, even dead human beings, are never simply laid to rest.
 9. He does not see that Achilles’ innocence is not possible once one puts him in a speech. Still, it is interesting that when Hippias finally gets around to quoting from the *Iliad*, it is from Book 9 just after Achilles has been singing songs in praise of others. So, in Homer, even Achilles self-consciously admires. And, on the other hand, sometimes when reading or hearing the *Iliad*, the musical character of the poem takes over and one feels like Achilles in a way that is not altogether self-conscious. Apparently the alternative Achilles/Odysseus is not perfectly exclusive. Perhaps it is not an accident that in Greek one verb *poiein* means both to do and to make poetry (Should the model for Hippias be not Achilles but Homer?). There is a hint of this ambiguity at 363c6, where Eudicus asks Hippias what he will do (*poiēseis*) in response to Socrates’ request.
 10. His belief in his own invincibility reminds us of *Iliad*, Book 23 where it looks as though Achilles does not compete in the funeral games because, should he do so, he would surely prevail in every event, and there would be no contest should one of the contestants be unable to lose. This is perhaps why Socrates (364a1) and then Hippias (364a7) use the perfect tense to describe what Hippias experiences on such occasions. The action of the contest is treated, once again, as though it is completed.
 11. Socrates gives voice to this difficulty when he expresses wonder that any athlete should come to a contest so utterly without fear. What would the point be? And where he had at first set up an analogy according to which Hippias stood to the athlete as soul stood to body, he now substitutes thought (*dianoia*) for soul. There seems to be some connection between Hippias’ total confidence and his failure to realize that because there is more to soul than mind, the virtue of soul must be more than wisdom. Hippias does not understand what it might mean for wisdom to involve character.
 12. Socrates goes on to say “You say a beautiful thing indeed, Hippias, and [you say that] for the city of the Eleians your reputation [or, opinion—*doxa*] of wisdom is a monument/votive offering and also for your parents.” As Socrates cites Hippias in indirect discourse it is unclear whether the monument (*anathēma*—with a slight change of vowel to *anathema* it could mean curse) is Hippias’ reputation or the beautiful thing he has said—which, of course, would not necessarily be a true thing. Socrates thus indirectly acknowledges central problem of the section—Hippias’ attempt to celebrate his speeches as deeds.
 13. Socrates was loath to question him when they were inside because he did not want to interrupt the flow of the speech. Now that they are outside (strangely although they were many inside and are few outside, Socrates collapses the two groups into one “we”), Socrates will press him on what he did not understand in the speech.
 14. Still it confuses things considerably since we were to have ranked the two poems on the basis of the relative goodness of their two heroes. Since there are now three heroes, it is less clear how we are to judge the two poems. Also, once Nestor has been introduced as “wisest,” our attention is called to the fact that the description of Achilles as *aristos* certainly may mean “best” but in Homeric Greek it may simply mean bravest. If that were the case it would not be clear that Hippias means to claim that Achilles is superior to Nestor. Socrates’ previous pairing of Achilles and Odysseus suggests that the two, however problematically, represent the full range of the human.
 15. In Homer, Odysseus is far more frequently called *polumētis* (of much mind), a word occurring 68 times in the *Odyssey* and 18 times (all in reference to Odysseus) in the *Iliad*. *Polumētis* is Odysseus’ customary epithet, but Hippias cannot use it here without risk of calling into question Nestor’s role as the wisest of the Greeks. *Polutropos*, on the other hand, occurs only twice in Homer. One is in the first line of the *Odyssey*. The other is in Book 10, line 330, when Odysseus sees through Circe’s devices because Hermes has shown him the nature of the moly plant. This scene marks the first occurrence in Greek literature of the word “nature.” Nature is thus marked from outset by a kind of duplicity. Hippias means to criticize Odysseus as someone who lacks the single-mindedness, simplicity, and authenticity of Achilles. His praise of Nestor suggests that he thinks it possible to reproduce this single-mindedness on the level of wisdom. Socrates, on the other hand, seems to see that if *polumētis* and *polutropia* are necessarily connected, there will be no non-detached wisdom that is simply in the flow of things.
 16. It is of some interest that while Socrates objects to the notion that the best can be best and not be *polutropos*, it does not seem to bother him here that the wisest is not *polutropos*. Does he not argue about Nestor because agency somehow does disappear in wisdom so that to be wise is to discover what is necessary, and this essentially makes the one who is wise recede from view?
 17. Notice that Socrates was initially fine with the claims about Achilles and Nestor—he “seemed to learn [from Hippias] what [he] was saying” (364d8–364e1). Then Odysseus came up, and Socrates was no longer so sure; he realized that his first understanding was only “seeming.” A contradiction in Hippias’ *logos* made him reevaluate. He was forced to look at the matter in multiple ways—to be *polutropos*.
 18. The dual reappears at 9.183,185,192,196,197, and 198. A plural at 9.186 interrupts this string of duals.
 19. This is confirmed at 9.204.
 20. The plural is confirmed at 9.657 where “they (plural) making a libation went beside the ships” and at 9.669 “they (plural) came to be at the huts of the son of Atreus.”
 21. See Hainsworth (1993).
 22. Where Hippias says “just as I am going to both accomplish it and as I suppose it will be fulfilled,” Homer has “as indeed I think and how it will have been accomplished.” In the last line cited (314), Hippias replaces Homer’s “I will speak as it seems best to me” with “I will speak as it will also be fulfilled.” Because he collapses the distinction between thinking and doing, Hippias can place the two in any order with no necessity that thought be prior to action. For Hippias here thought is identical to the accomplishment of the action.
 23. One must be *polutropos* in yet another way. Hippias, again unwittingly, reveals that Achilles is *polutropos*,

when Plato makes him say,

In these words [*epesin* may also mean “epics”], he [Homer] makes clear the way [*tropos*] of each man, how Achilles, on the one hand, would be both true and simple, while Odysseus both *polutropos* and false. For he makes [*poiein*] Achilles speaking these words (*epē*) to/at Odysseus. (365b3–365b6)

The *tropos* of Achilles is to be both true and simple; it is not so clear that the two are really one.

24. This is especially interesting given the *polutropia* of Hippias’ speech (see 363c1–363c3).
25. At *On Poetics* 1450b34ff., for example, Aristotle identifies it with the maximum diversity within a unity.
26. This shows up in his outburst at 369b where he chides Socrates for always pursuing needless complexity.
27. This is reminiscent of the way Socrates splits himself at *Greater Hippias* 286c–291c.
28. Consider, for example, *Alcibiades I* 129b1 and 130d4.
29. Furthermore, the false things (*pseudē*) and true things (*alēthē*) spoken are neuter plurals and so can also be adverbial—falsely and truly. It is therefore left unclear what falsity and truth attach to here—the things spoken or the speakers speaking them.
30. In connection with this, consider *Republic* 340c–341a as well as Aristotle, *Metaphysics A* 980b26–981b26.
31. If one posits a parallel between the two parts of the list so that epic:rings::tragedy:cutting and scraping::dithyr ambs:leather::prose:weaving::“many others”:the belt, the most striking pair seems to be tragedy and cutting. Tragedy is a distinct kind of poetry. It does not generate so much as cut away an exterior image. The poets may be the unacknowledged legislators of the world—they produce the powerful images that form our world by which we live—but tragedy is the anti-poetic poetry that exposes these images to an excruciating critique. Through powerful images it reveals to us that we inhabit a world of images.
32. Accordingly, in response to Socrates request for an example of an art in which the true man and the false man are not the same, Hippias says *ouk echo*—“I am not able or I do not have [it]” (369a3) and then two lines later says “I don’t quite have in mind what you say, Socrates.” Hippias cancels the ambiguity of his first answer by interpreting himself to mean that he does not have this learning in storage.
33. At 369d1–369e2 and 372a6–373a8.
34. Although this is prefaced with the claim that this is his way “whenever anyone says something” (369d2). Presumably then, Socrates also learns from those opposite to the wise, whom he calls here interestingly not *amatheis*, foolish or stupid, but *phauloi*, trivial or low. Surprisingly, the wise seem to be not the learned, but those of a certain character.
35. “Since also now, with you speaking, I have in mind that in the words/verses which you were just now speaking, indicating [emphases mine] Achilles saying to Odysseus that he is a pretender, it seems to me to be out-of-place/absurd, if you speak truly (true things), because/that Odysseus never appears to have falsified, [he who is] *polutropos*, while Achilles appears as someone *polutropos* according to our *logos*. At any rate, he falsifies.” (369e2–370a2).
36. To support this, Socrates requotes the passage previously cited by Hippias from *Iliad*, Book 9, but he does so only in part, even though his case would have been stronger had he quoted the passage in its entirety. However, that would have meant either correcting Hippias’ misquotation or repeating it. So he quotes Homer accurately and so says true things, but by truncating the quotation and thereby concealing the fact that Hippias had falsified Homer, Socrates lies. Similarly by adding the caveat to his claim that Hippias’ interpretation is absurd “if you speak truly (or, true things),” Socrates leaves open whether he means that Hippias says things that are true or speaks sincerely, which is, of course perfectly compatible with not speaking true things.
37. At *Iliad* 1.169, Homer says that it is *pheteron* to go home; it means better, especially in the sense of braver. Socrates substitutes *lōion*; this means better in a much more subjective way—something like pleasanter.
38. Achilles literally gives himself a deadline. This is what we do when we tell ourselves we simply have to get something finished by Monday or face the most dire consequences. But is this ever really true? This hard deadline is a poetic fiction, a lie that we tell ourselves and believe so that we may live up to our self-image. It is also the structure of morality. Remember this argument is about whom Homer made *better*—Achilles or Odysseus.
39. Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, Part 51.
40. His shocked response is double. He first asks Socrates what he is saying—he looks for the concealed meaning (articulation) in Socrates’ speech. Then he adds “To what [end]?” and so looks for the concealed motive (communication).
41. Socrates contends that Achilles was not only a plotter; he was an enchanter, who fooled Odysseus, the master plotter. As usual, his language is interestingly ambiguous. Does Achilles’ falsifying escape Odysseus’ notice or his own notice (371a5)? The evidence for either is that Achilles spoke opposite him (whether Odysseus or himself is not clear, nor whether spatially opposite or intellectually) opposite things (or oppositely) and escaped Odysseus notice. What does all of this opposition amount to? Objectively, in terms of the content of his speech, Achilles is utterly opposed to himself. Subjectively, this is not the case because he is so complete that he never experiences internal opposition. Being physically opposite or facing Odysseus externalizes the issue and makes it clear that he must be aware that he is opposing Odysseus. Still, he need not be aware that he is opposing himself. Socrates, however, is intent on interpreting Achilles as in some measure self-aware, withdrawing from the war only to get the Greeks to beg him to return. It is all an elaborate plot—Achilles never intended to go home at all. He thus seems more clever even than Odysseus, for his plot depends on the illusion that he is so much less clever. By accusing Hippias of imitating Odysseus, then, Socrates suggests that he is no Achilles, for he does not escape Socrates’ notice (although he does escape his own).
42. It is for him the perfect solution to his problem. He can both show how important he is to the Greeks in battle and at the same time continue to stay out of the battle on principle. For this argument (see Benardete, 2005).
43. He describes the activity at issue first as plotting and accomplishing bad things (372a1), then as doing injustice or falsifying (372a3), and finally as doing (*poiein*) something else bad (372a3). Hippias’ speech reveals that one can lie “poetically.” Of course he does not know what is buried in his speech. He unwittingly reveals that one can unwittingly reveal.
44. This is the necessary condition for being a moral agent, and of course the initial disagreement between Socrates and Hippias turned on who was the better man—Achilles or Odysseus. We cannot simply be caused, and yet we must be in a world where causality operates for our actions to be in any way effectual.

45. In addition, Eudicus is an audience, and by speaking to him, Socrates pressures Hippias to continue out of shame. He calls on the righteous one “justly” by his patronymic (373a5–373a6), which, in turn means something like “unharmful.” So, to be just and avoid harm Hippias must speak?
46. Eudicus responds that Hippias does not “require our requiring” and would “flee the questioning of no man” (373a9–373ab1). This is the generic boast that had led Hippias to say that it would be *deinos* to flee the questions of Socrates (363d4). The language here is suggestive however, for that Hippias would flee the questioning of *oudenos andros* sounds suspiciously like a claim that he might well flee the questioning of Odysseus. And, of course, if Odysseus is the *polutropos*, then, while Hippias would not flee a generic question—i.e. a question from anyone as a sort of variable—he would flee the questions of a no one as a person, that is a power or agent qua agent. This is borne out by Hippias’ response. He is frustrated because Socrates is *always* causing trouble, confusion, and unpredictability in *logos*. Like Odysseus, Socrates takes on multiple forms, and it is his singular form to do so. He is the man with the habit of having no habits.
47. At this point Eudicus urges Hippias to relent “both for our sake and for the sake of the *logoi* being said previously” (373c1–373c2), in this way once again coupling the hiddenness of *logos* with the hiddenness of soul. Hippias replies, “I will answer, since you at least require it. But ask whatever you want.” (373c4–373c5). The first “you” is directed to Eudicus, the second “you” to Socrates. The hiddenness of the “you” is made apparent by way of its variable content.
48. The argument turns on Socrates’ slide from “good” to “better.” It is better to do bad willingly but presumably best not to do it at all. So Socrates shifts the goodness at issue from the accomplishment to the will or ability to accomplish. His example only really works if the first alternative—simply doing the good—is not really possible for human beings. So, for example, in the case of falsification, this would mean that it is not simply possible to tell the truth.
49. Consider Socrates’ excessively subjective response when Hippias agrees to continue: “And really I desire extremely indeed, Hippias, to examine thoroughly the thing just now being said ...” (373c6), as well as by the movement from “ask what you wish” to “I desire” and by Hippias’ later *Alla ti mellei*; (373d5)—which may mean either “But what does it intend?” in the active voice or “But what do you intend?” in the middle.
50. Initially, we are concerned with the *dromeus*, the racer. Socrates then switches to a form of the verb to run, its nominative masculine present participle, *theōn*, which, with the change of an accent (that would not have been written in Plato’s time in any case), is also the genitive plural of the noun *theos*, god. If, once more on the authority of poetic license, we read it both ways—which, of course, one cannot really do—Socrates’ remark at 273d2 would run as follows: “Isn’t the one of the gods running well good, but bad running badly?” Similarly 273d4 (here because the very can be elided, it is actually possible) would read: “Doesn’t the one of the gods running slowly run badly?” (similar ambiguities exist at 273e1 and e3). This clever punning reveals an alternate model for the gods as like Odysseus, contrivers whose souls are characterized by *polutropia*, who are what they are in faking slowness, weakness, and defect—humanity. Their exemplar, then, would be the limping god of wondrous devices, Hephaestus.
51. The guileful Odysseus, of course, is famous for having defeated the much stronger Ajax in the contest for Achilles’ arms. Hippias, like the dull Ajax before him and unlike Socrates and Odysseus, is confident that the stronger prevail (374a7–374b4).
52. Carriage is somehow symbolic—a bodily representation of soul. Accordingly, it is here where Socrates first speaks of the capability as “virtue.” In describing voice Socrates substitutes for the adjectives “willing” and “unwilling” the adverbs “willingly” and “unwillingly.” This, and the ambiguity of the word *phonē* (which may mean either “voice” or “sound”), is a sign that the argument is moving progressively inside to speak not of the action but the actor. Now, to be capable of controlling one’s voice and one’s carriage so as to seem bad is the skill of an actor on the stage. The power of these capacities makes them better fakes, and, as George Burns once said “The most important thing about acting is honesty.” If you can fake that you’ve got it made.” When, after voice, Socrates introduces feet, we are at first taken aback, for he had been moving progressively inward toward the subject, and feet and eyes, his next example, while parts of body that do finally point to what unites them as tools or organs in the service of a large whole, are also closer to the surface. Then we realize that the man who feigns defective feet and eyes is the actor who plays Oedipus.
53. The question of soul comes to the fore when Socrates asks about whether it would be better to ride badly willing or unwilling while possessing the soul of a horse. Now, this can be understood in two ways. To possess the soul of a horse may mean that the horse is totally under my control; the horse and I are of one mind, and it is my mind. Or Socrates may mean that I possess a horse’s soul, that I am somehow possessed, that I am the sort of rider who is one with the horse because the horse has possessed me. If I am in control of the soul, whether of a horse, of an archer, of a doctor, or of a flutist, I am in control of something more potent if I am in control of someone who willingly errs than if I am in control of someone who unwillingly errs. The issue comes to a head in a sentence grammatically difficult to untangle at 375b7–375c3.
- The [soul] more skilled at cithara and more skilled at flute playing, and all the rest of the things with respect to both the arts and knowledges (sciences), isn’t the one better who accomplishes the bad things and the shameful things and errs willingly, but the more wicked [is] unwilling?
- On the one hand, “the more skilled” are feminine adjectival modifications of the unmentioned soul. On the other hand they may be neuter plural. So either the unmentioned soul is itself more flutelike, or it is itself better with respect to the more flutelike. That “soul” is elided here is significant because it is not clear whether Socrates is talking about a characteristic of soul or a power of soul. The ambiguity of the sentence thus mirrors the ambiguity of soul. In doing so, the sentence is itself an example of the power of poetry to use *logos* badly in order to use it well.
54. “But what? Would we not want to acquire our own [soul] in as good a condition as possible (*beltiston*)?” (375c6–375c7).

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