

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 1995

Volume 23 Number 1

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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,  
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905 U.S.A.  
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,  
Lancaster, PA 17603 U.S.A.

Inquiries: (Mrs.) Guadalupe S. Angeles, Assistant to the Editor,  
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11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542

# The Sage and the Sophist: A Commentary on Plato's *Lesser Hippias*

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## GENERAL TREATMENTS OF THE *LESSER HIPPIAS*

### *Introduction to the Problem*

Plato's *Lesser Hippias* has intrigued scholars since antiquity. In the modern era, interest has taken many forms, including doubts as to the authenticity of Plato's authorship. For example, F.E.D. Schleiermacher (pp. 152–57) ascribes the authorship to an unknown composer. Indeed he writes that at first glance the ideas in the *Lesser Hippias* do seem to relate rather well to those found in other Platonic dialogues, such as the *Protagoras* and *Ion*. In this regard, he suggests that chronologically the dialogue should be placed before the *Protagoras*. Upon closer inspection, however, Schleiermacher insists that many parts of the *Lesser Hippias* are not written in Platonic style after all, while other parts bear an all-too-close resemblance to passages from the *Protagoras*. He finally concludes that the *Lesser Hippias* was plagiarized, hence bearing only an approximation to authentic Platonic dialogues.

Yet the authenticity of Plato's authorship of the *Lesser Hippias* has generally been accepted by more recent scholars, despite the prestige of skeptics like Schleiermacher. Many point out that, although he fails to mention Plato by name, even Aristotle refers to this dialogue in one of his writings (*Metaphysics* 1025a6). George Grote (pp. 387–88) considers this reference to be partial yet significant support for the authenticity of Plato's authorship, since Aristotle surely would have mentioned the author's name had it been someone other than Plato. In fact, A.E. Taylor (p. 35) emphasizes that although Aristotle surely had read "Socratic" discourses—e.g., by Aeschines and Antisthenes—he never would have referred explicitly to dialogues not written by Plato. Also noting Aristotle's reference to the *Lesser Hippias*, Paul Shorey (p. 89) claims that the dialogue provided the source for Aristotle's distinction between faculty (*du-nagis*) and habit (*exis*), which distinction in turn provided the basis for his definition of virtue. And other scholars of classical literature (Grube, Gould, Sprague, Hoerber, O'Brien, Kraut, Leake, and Saunders) have also continued

to accept the *Lesser Hippias* as an authentic dialogue of Plato and to include it among discussions and interpretations of other Platonic dialogues. Nevertheless, interpretations of the *Lesser Hippias* have varied in their analyses, and commentaries have been brief and incomplete.

Michael J. O'Brien (pp. 96–99), for example, presents only a summary of the argument between the dialogue's primary antagonists, Hippias and Socrates, concerning the question: Who is the better man, he who does wrong intentionally or he who does wrong unintentionally? In addressing this question, O'Brien points out that Plato combines in a novel way two important topics generally treated separately elsewhere, "whether virtue is knowledge and ability, and whether wrongdoing is ever intentional." The dialogue consists of two parts and two paradoxes, according to O'Brien. The first paradox in the first part concludes that "the wisest man is the biggest liar"; the second paradox in the second part concludes that "the good man is the one who errs on purpose." O'Brien notes that in ostensibly comparing Achilles to Odysseus throughout the dialogue, Plato is really comparing Hippias to Socrates. This parallel, he says, highlights the weaknesses of the Sophist's position while only alluding to established Platonic doctrine, for at the end of the dialogue Socrates concludes that he who does wrong intentionally is the better man, *if such a man exists*. As O'Brien remarks, this qualification in the *Lesser Hippias* alludes to a major Platonic doctrine openly discussed elsewhere: No man errs voluntarily. But despite these statements regarding the dialogue, O'Brien spends very little time in analyzing how the *Lesser Hippias* arrives at paradoxical conclusions. Furthermore, he maintains that Socrates "leaves the pretensions of the proud Sophist in a shambles," but he says nothing of what happens to Socrates in the process.

Another approach, by Rosamond Kent Sprague (pp. 65–79), focuses on the theme of "ambiguity and equivocation." In her study of Platonic fallacies, Sprague devotes one of four chapters to the *Lesser Hippias*. According to Sprague, the fallacies in this dialogue consist of Socrates' equivocal use of "good" and "voluntary." By using unfair means to defeat Hippias, Socrates draws attention to the meaning of good and voluntary, implying that the terms must not have ambiguous meanings. Sprague concludes that "the equivocation therefore serves to show that the whole question of error is tied to the question of knowledge, which in turn, of course, is tied to the question of virtue." In the discussion between Socrates and Hippias, says Sprague, Plato simply wants to call attention to his distinctive ethical doctrines.

Shorey (pp. 89–90) also discusses the use of fallacies and claims that their use was made consciously. Plato attempts to point out the necessity of distinguishing between virtue and the arts and sciences, says Shorey. Hence when this distinction is not recognized, then, by induction, the man who does wrong voluntarily is in fact better than the man who does wrong involuntarily. And continuing with this theme of equivocation and ambiguity, John Gould (pp. 42–44) looks at the *Lesser Hippias* with regard to the traditionally equivalent

terms of *episteme* and *techne*. He analyzes how Plato deals with these terms in his attempt to develop a technical skill. Gould notes that the uncomfortable paradoxes reached in the dialogue are attributed by Socrates to the argument (*logos*) itself, not to moral ambiguity. But Gould claims that if Plato wants to construct a technique of morality, then the ambiguities of the *Lesser Hippias* must include the moral aspects as well.

Still, Grote (pp. 387–95) notices a reversal of Socrates' attitude in the *Lesser Hippias*. Although he normally challenges the logic of the Sophists in other dialogues, in this dialogue Socrates uses the logic of the Sophists against Hippias, the most renowned Sophist of Athens. Grote understands this approach not so much as a ploy to support indirectly Platonic doctrines, however, but more importantly to highlight the weaknesses of typical Sophist positions. Similarly, James Leake (pp. 300–306) attempts to unravel the psychology underlying Socrates' approach by looking at the Homeric references in the *Lesser Hippias*. Leake argues that each reference has a particular meaning of its own. Once these meanings are grasped in conjunction with other references, the underlying pattern of Socrates' intention can be known, and thus the logic of his argument revealed.

But are either paradoxes or hidden intentions really the outcome of Socrates' discussion with Hippias? Taylor (pp. 35–38) is not so certain, preferring to take Socrates at his word. To do so may be to find Socrates arguing from a Sophist position, as Grote suggests. But if this were the case, then Socrates would be arguing against a basic Platonic doctrine propounded in, among other dialogues, the *Republic*: Virtue is knowledge. Yet if this is true, says Taylor, why does Socrates use another Platonic staple, the analogy from the arts, to refute this doctrine? It seems, then, that Socrates is using both Platonic and Sophistic approaches to refute Platonic and Sophistic doctrines. Hence the dialogue would appear to be engulfed not only in ambiguity and equivocation but in confusion as well. The key passage to understanding Socrates' apparent confusion, according to Taylor, can be found in his final position in the dialogue: "the man who does wrong on purpose, *if there is such a person*, is the good man" (p. 37). As mentioned above, the phrase "if there is such a person" implicitly refers to the Platonic doctrine that no man voluntarily commits an error; hence no such man exists. Thus Taylor concludes that the apparent paradox which engulfs the energies of Hippias and Socrates really never exists.

Yet despite these serious analyses, are paradoxes, ambiguities, and equivocations the only philosophical aspects of the *Lesser Hippias* to be considered? While most of the interpretative discussions of the *Lesser Hippias* include two or more central themes, no commentary presently exists in the style of Jacob Klein on the *Meno* or Thomas G. West on the *Apology*. Only Robert C. Hoerber approximates such a commentary in his article on a certain structural idiosyncrasy found in the dialogue. He explains the use of "doublets" throughout the *Lesser Hippias*, such as the discussion concerning two famous propositions

of Plato and the appearance of Eudicus at the beginning and at the middle of the dialogue to divide it into two parts.

All of the treatments mentioned above focus on certain issues and aspects of the *Lesser Hippias*. Their lack of a more comprehensive approach, however, fails to reveal certain themes heretofore either ignored or unrecognized. Many aspects of the discussion between Hippias and Socrates appear unrelated—e.g., Hippias refuses to admit defeat in the face of overwhelming counterarguments; Socrates repeats his position differently each time; moral discourse appears interspersed randomly with nonmoral discourse. Yet a more complete interpretation would emerge were the dialogue considered in its entirety. The following commentary, then, strives to accommodate the need for a more comprehensive approach to Plato's *Lesser Hippias* as a foundation for further speculation.

### *Introduction to the Commentary*

This commentary reveals three different yet related levels for analysis in the *Lesser Hippias*. First, at the *structural level* of the dialogue's own schema, Plato divides the *Lesser Hippias* into three distinct parts, each part containing two subdivisions or sections. In Part I, Section 1 (363a1–367d4), the initial argument is set forth, and Socrates attempts to settle it quickly; Hippias demurs. In Section 2 (367d5–369b7), Socrates uses particular examples to prove his general claim; again, Hippias refuses to yield. In Part II, Section 1 (369b8–372a7), Hippias moves to restructure the nature of the debate as well as the claims of the discussants. Socrates adroitly sidesteps Hippias' counterthrust. In Section 2 (372b1–373c4), Socrates states more emphatically the original problem for discussion and demands that Hippias come to terms with it. In Part III, Section 1 (373c5–375d8), the two engage in a more expanded argument ending in no agreement. In Section 2 (375d9–376c6), the moral implications of leaving Socrates' original question with no satisfactory resolution leave both interlocutors disillusioned.

Second, at the *personal level* and following the structure of the dialogue, a change in attitude transpires in each of the antagonists. Initially, Hippias appears arrogant and conceited, the Sophist fully confident of his ability to answer any and all challenges. By contrast, Socrates exemplifies the humble and reticent observer, the Sage troubled only by his lack of comprehension of the full import of Hippias' lecture. Yet pointed and telling questions emerge from the Sage's curious mind as the Sophist struggles to retain and, in the end, regain his superior social standing. Throughout the dialogue this conflictual relationship persists. But interestingly, while the conflict persists, their attitudes undergo a revision. That is, by the end of the dialogue, Hippias no longer exudes arrogance and confidence in his confrontation with Socrates but emerges subdued and acquiescent. Conversely, Socrates increasingly puts Hip-

pias on the defensive throughout the dialogue. His humble appeal gives way to strident and impatient demands on Hippias' position, terminating in sardonic ridicule of the Sophist himself.

And finally, in addition to the structural and personal levels, the *Lesser Hippias* must be considered from *the moral level*. In arguing over the proper interpretation of Homer's original intentions concerning the moral merits of Achilles and Odysseus, the implications for universal morality occupy the discussants' central concerns. Movements from arguments over particulars to assertions concerning universal claims occur throughout the dialogue. Yet a steady development of thought evolves in the progression of the dialogue as a whole, a progression from initial concerns over a few passages in Homer to unsettling conclusions about the universal nature of morality.

At a minimum, then, the following commentary attempts to highlight these three analytical approaches to understanding the *Lesser Hippias*. But, indeed, the real value of the commentary will reside in a successful demonstration that these approaches are not unrelated, but in fact complement each other in a way that reflects the unity and the genius of the dialogue itself.

## THE COMMENTARY<sup>1</sup>

### *Part I: The Initial Argument*

*Section 1: Toward a Quick Solution (363a1–367d4)*. Attending a speech by Hippias on paramount themes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Socrates remains silent after an evidently successful performance. While the more astute part of the audience then enthusiastically engages in philosophical discussion with Hippias, Eudicus approaches the solitary Socrates to explore the reasons for the Sage's uncharacteristic restraint from debate. "Why do you not either join in praising any of the things that were said, or even refute something, if it does not seem to you to have been finely spoken?" probes Eudicus (363a2–4).

Socrates admits to Eudicus his dissatisfaction with Hippias' discussion of Homer. He recalls Eudicus' father, Apemantus, once defending the *Iliad's* poetry as superior to that of the *Odyssey* and Achilles as morally superior to Odysseus. Of these two heroes, Socrates wonders, whom would Hippias find morally superior? This question seems to have escaped Hippias during his reflective survey of Homer and other poets.

Eudicus then inquires as to Hippias' willingness to field a query from Socrates. With his typical air of arrogance, the Sophist responds that indeed he would be inconsistent not to accept a question from a single individual like Socrates, when by comparison in previous Olympic festivals he has faced en masse even all the Hellenes at the temple of Olympia. Socrates, noting this prideful tone, further aids Hippias' conceit by alluding to the apparent invin-

cibility of the Sophist's mind. And Hippias goes a step further when he maintains that "since I began contending for victory at Olympia, I've never yet met anyone better than I am in anything" (364a7–8). As if realizing the floodgate of vanity he has jarred loose, Socrates quickly commends Hippias for the honor his reputation must bring to family and country, and then proceeds with his question.

During the speech the size of the audience had prevented Socrates from following Hippias' treatment of Achilles and Odysseus. Not wishing to interrupt the great Sophist then, the modest Socrates, at the prompting of Eudicus, now begs Hippias to repeat his assessment of these two heroes. Hippias enthusiastically responds to an opportunity to demonstrate his superior knowledge in any and all subjects by providing an even clearer explanation of Achilles and Odysseus than a public address could have allowed. The Sophist then states that "Homer represented Achilles as the best man of those who came to Troy, Nestor as the wisest, and Odysseus as the most versatile" (364c5–7). But this statement confuses the Sage. Perhaps the problem Socrates had earlier in following Hippias' argument was not due solely to the size of the audience in attendance after all. To avoid the anger of Hippias, Socrates humbly petitions him for patience while admitting his continuing uncertainty as to the Sophist's claim. Predictably, Hippias concedes to possessing the ability to "be indulgent and answer gently when questioned" (364d5).

The Sage then challenges the Sophist as to his evaluation of Odysseus. While agreeing with Hippias' assessment of Homer's description of Achilles and Nestor, Socrates is not certain about the interpretation of Odysseus that Hippias attributes to Homer. "Has Achilles not been represented by Homer as versatile?" (364e5–6), of whom this attribute "versatile" had been reserved by Hippias for Odysseus? Citing a passage from the *Iliad*, Hippias demonstrates that Achilles dealt honestly with Odysseus, thus disproving the likelihood that Achilles could have been "versatile."

The discussion between the most learned of teachers and the wisest of seekers then shifts to the meaning of "versatile" and the character of one who possesses such a trait. The Sage questions Hippias, "you are saying that the versatile man is a liar, at least as it appears" (365b7–8). In his affirmation, the Sophist refers Socrates to many such descriptions offered by Homer. But, points out Socrates, Homer must then have distinguished between the truthful and the liar. Hippias agrees with Socrates that both the conclusion the Sage has drawn concerning Homer is correct and the distinction to be made among men is appropriate and personally acceptable. The Sage notes, however, since Homer cannot be interrogated as to his original intention concerning the efficacy of a dichotomy between truthful or honest men and liars with regard to being versatile, Hippias must be willing to defend it and to respond to further interrogation by Socrates. Hippias readily consents.

Socrates then asks whether liars are "capable of doing something" (365d8).



Hippias agrees and responds that, of the many capabilities possessed by liars, one is that of deception. Socrates then concludes, and Hippias concurs, that liars are both capable and versatile. But if liars are deceptive as well as versatile, Socrates wonders if their deception can be attributed merely to “foolishness and impudence” or if “unscrupulous wickedness and a certain prudence” inhere (365e4–5). Hippias emphatically asserts the latter. But, notes Socrates, if false men are prudent, they know what they are doing; and if they have knowledge of the intent of their acts, they cannot be ignorant but must be wise. Hippias quickly assents to this line of reasoning.

At this point, Socrates wishes Hippias to pause and recall the positions to which the learned teacher has agreed, and to observe the nature of his argument emerging from their dialogue. First, asks Socrates, “you assert that liars are capable, prudent, knowing, and wise in those things in which they are liars” (366a1–3). And yet “the truthful and the liars are different and most opposite to one another” (366a5–6). Hippias accepts both assertions. As if to be certain of the Sophist’s commitment, the Sage rephrases the statements by simply asking if liars should be included among “the capable and wise”; and, again, Hippias agrees.

As Hippias has not seen the contradiction in his own argument—i.e., the assertion that the liar can be as wise as can the truthful negates the previous assumption of the dichotomy between the liars and the truth tellers—Socrates then pursues further the characteristics of the liar. Hippias agrees that since the liar is capable and wise, he is capable of lying at will. And conversely, points out Socrates, a man who is incapable of lying and ignorant cannot therefore be a liar. Hippias agrees.

Socrates pushes further by maintaining that for a man to be “capable” indicates that he can do what he wishes, when he wishes. Such is the case, for example, with regard to Hippias’ own ability in “calculations and in the art of calculating” (366c8–9). The Sophist has the capability, by virtue of his ability to calculate, to provide a correct answer to a problem of multiplication whenever posed to him. Hippias agrees that this is so since he is the “most capable and wisest in these matters” (366d2–3). And, as Socrates points out, since he is the most capable and wisest, he is also the best. And by being the best, Hippias is most properly suited to tell the truth concerning calculations. So far, no dissent has surfaced from the Sophist.

Now Socrates quickly poses the crucial question to undermine Hippias’ initial argument. But concurrently with the question—“But what of lies about these same matters [i.e., regarding calculating]?” (366e4)—the Sage appears fearful that the proud and arrogant teacher, the best known of all the Sophists, the most-learned Hippias will lie to avoid admitting the error in his position. For, after asking the question, Socrates immediately implores Hippias to answer “in a well-born and magnificent way” (366e5). And before Hippias has a chance to answer the crucial question, Socrates softens the forthrightness of it

by rephrasing and embedding it within a simple example. Suppose Hippias were asked the solution to the problem of 700 multiplied by 3. Would not he, in his position as the most capable to deal with problems of calculations, be able to answer falsely as well as correctly? In fact, continues Socrates, would not Hippias be more capable of answering such problems falsely and consistently by virtue of his knowledge of calculations than a man ignorant of calculations who in his attempts to answer falsely occasionally stumbles upon a correct answer?

When contrasted with the ignorant man concerning calculations, the flattered Sophist consents that he is more capable of answering such problems falsely by virtue of his superior intellectual status than those ignorant of the discipline. Then, wonders Socrates, if a man can answer falsely about calculations, can he not answer falsely about other areas as well? Hippias readily agrees.

Perhaps not wishing to upset the apparently emotionally insecure Hippias by impugning his character with the allusion to his capability of lying about solutions to mathematical problems, one of his fields of expertise, Socrates adroitly asks whether it is possible for an individual to be "a liar about calculation and number" (367a12). Hippias simply responds, "Yes." At this point, Hippias' acknowledgments are now curt and quick, lacking the self-assured flamboyance of earlier responses, suggesting that the Sophist may be sensing impending entrapment. Perhaps Hippias pauses to muse over Socrates' trail of apparently sensible questions with obvious answers which must be drawing to a particular conclusion (that, after all, has been the nature of the Sage's conversations in the past). Yet it cannot be a conclusion that both can accept, since each began with a different position while each agreed to the ensuing series of questions. Presumably, Hippias recognizes that the argument has strayed from the correct path and that he must be careful to avoid a detour or pitfall that would elicit the concession of his own position. Under pressure from Socrates' relentless questioning, Hippias must find the error in Socrates' argument before any snare suddenly appears and quickly draws to a close.

Since Hippias agrees that an individual may be a liar with respect to calculations, "who would this be?" (367b2), asks Socrates. For, as the Sophist earlier admitted, to lie one must have the capability. And both have agreed, as Socrates quickly adds, that Hippias is most capable of lying concerning calculations. Hippias brusquely admits that both statements had been agreed to earlier.

Now Socrates stridently poses the fatal question once more to Hippias: "Are you, therefore, also most capable of speaking truth about calculations" (367c1–2)? Amazingly, Hippias merely answers, "Surely." Either buoyed by this apparent victory or wishing to confirm the Sophist's comprehension of the Sage's revelation, Socrates then directly asks if Hippias really understands the conclusion to their dialogue that "the same man [is] most capable of speaking lies and truths about calculations? And this is the one who is good at these things, the expert calculator" (367c4–6)? "Yes," responds Hippias. If this holds for the

expert calculator, then it must hold for all men, infers Socrates; for the man who can lie about calculations must be the most capable man, and the most capable man is the good man who is also truthful. Hippias agrees.

Socrates then concludes with the statement that should have ended the conversation, for it should have been obvious by now that “the same one is a liar and truthful about these things” (367c12–d1). For when it comes to capability, the man who tells the truth and the man who lies are “the same man,” not opposites, as Hippias had contended. Socrates now inquires if Hippias does not comprehend this. But alas, the Sophist answers obliquely, “He does not appear to [be the same man], at least there” (367d4).

*Section 2: Analogies for Support of the Argument (367d5–369b7).* Perhaps the Sophist has not seen clearly the logic of the argument that leads to the unacceptable conclusion that he who is a liar must also be capable of telling the truth. Perhaps a few more examples by the Sage may prove beneficial. Socrates suggests analyzing more examples, and Hippias concurs. Alluding to the previous example wherein Hippias, as the most capable calculator, is the best at both veracity and deception with regard to calculation, Socrates asks if the analogy does not hold also with regard to the Sophist’s ability in geometry. Hippias agrees. And if “the good and wise geometer” (367e3) can do both, then, as suggested earlier, only the good man can be false, given his ability, “while the bad one was incapable of it, so that he would not become a liar who is unable to lie, as has been agreed” (367e6–7). Hippias admits as much.

Yet the Sophist apparently has failed to see the relationship between this second analogy and the larger argument. For again Socrates attempts to demonstrate the greater argument through a third capability of Hippias: astronomy. The Sophist immediately agrees that the same relationship holds for astronomy as it did for calculating and geometry. That is, “the same one will be truthful and a liar” (368a10–11). Only the good astronomer can speak both truthfully and falsely concerning celestial matters, since he alone possesses the required knowledge to know when he is speaking either truthfully or falsely.

Building on these insights concerning the sciences, Socrates attempts to broaden the argument to include the practical arts as well. “You are altogether the wisest of all human beings in the greatest number of arts” (368b3–4), asserts the Sage. He notes that Hippias has often proclaimed his superior talent in the art of designing and his ability to produce any item of wearing apparel. In fact, on one occasion at the Olympic games the Sophist boasted that his entire wardrobe was homemade, from his ring, a signet, a scraper, and an unguent bottle to his footwear, clothing, and tunic. Furthermore, he claimed that his extraordinary workmanship on the belt of the tunic “was like the very expensive Persian ones” (368c7–8). In addition, recalls Socrates, Hippias’ considerable abilities do not stop at weaving and engraving. Indeed, the Sophist’s talents extend into the letters; he has boasted of possessing original poems—

epic verses, tragedies, and dithyrambs—and a variety of speeches in prose as well. The Sophist’s abilities and talents clearly establish him as the leading practitioner of the arts and letters. So ebullient is the Sage’s accounting of the Sophist’s braggadocio that he nearly forgets Hippias’ “most splendid” capability (368e1) which the humble Socrates surely lacks: the art of memory.

Given the Sophist’s excellence in the sciences, the practical arts, the letters, and numerous other areas, would not the same argument that both he and the Sage had accepted for the sciences apply to all aspects of intellectual ability? Socrates boldly challenges Hippias to name some field “where one is truthful and another—a separate one, not the same—is a liar” (368e5–6). In fact, bullies Socrates, the Sophist cannot do so. Buying time, Hippias defensively maintains the need for further consideration.

Clearly on the attack, the Sage insists that additional consideration will not save the Sophist’s position; that if Socrates is correct, Hippias will suffer the consequences, to which the Sophist pleads ignorance. Chiding him for his arrogance in not employing his fantastic memory and thus failing to recall his original assertion, Socrates reminds Hippias of the Sophist’s claim that “Achilles was truthful, while Odysseus was a liar and versatile” (369b1). Yet, claims Socrates, their discussion has revealed, as demonstrated by Hippias’ own example of excellence, that “the same man has come to light as being both truthful and a liar” (369b3–4).

Socrates built the argument in steps, beginning with Hippias’ capability as a calculator, then including his capability in the arts, and eventually encompassing all of Hippias’ professed wonders. To the particular arguments of these examples Hippias had agreed. In moving from the “particulars” of the Sophist’s life to the “unity” of all the particulars, the same logical progression permitted the Sage to generalize the conclusion concerning a particular individual, Hippias, to all men, including Achilles and Odysseus. Hence as in the example of Hippias, Socrates concludes that “if Odysseus was a liar, he becomes also truthful, and if Achilles was truthful, he becomes also a liar, and these men are not different from one another or opposite but similar” (369b4–7).

## *Part II: Restructuring the Argument*

*Section 1: Lack of Agreement (369b8–372a7).* It is not clear whether Hippias actually remains unconvinced or merely wishes to save face. Perhaps the Sophist really misunderstood the logical movement from the part to the whole, from particular instances to a universal claim, in the Sage’s argument. For he complains that, as a result of Socrates’ concentration on the most difficult aspect of the argument and his contention over various details, the Sage misses the real value to be gained by only looking at the argument as a whole! Hippias proposes a different tack: first, the Sophist will present an argument supporting his

position that Homer intended Achilles to be morally superior to Odysseus, then the Sage “may counter argument with argument” (369c6–7) supporting the claim that Homer intended Odysseus to be morally superior, and the onlookers will then settle the issue by deciding which is the more persuasive argument.

Notice that Hippias has suggested two radical changes in the nature of their conversation. First, he attempts to shift their discussion away from the informal dialogue of the dialectical approach to discovering truth to that of a more formal debate. With the debate format, the winner is to be selected by the audience as to who “more fully speaks better” (369c8), thus introducing majority rule as a criterion for what is to be accepted as truth. Second, and perhaps more important, in line with the formal debate structure, Socrates is asked to state a position at the beginning, not at the end of a discussion as is his wont. Moreover, his position would be counter to the conclusion of their discussion thus far. Again, the logic of their discussion has indicated that neither Achilles nor Odysseus was morally superior to the other. Hence, Hippias is asking Socrates to forgo both his method for discovering truth and the truth they had already discovered! With his reputation suffering for lack of a quick and final solution favorable to his own position, Hippias seems to want to restructure the entire discussion to regain the upper hand with Socrates before their peers.

So as not to offend the Sophist, Socrates pays homage to Hippias as “wiser than I” (369d1). In fact, it is precisely because Hippias is so wise, explains Socrates, that the Sage wishes to have the opportunity to question and examine the Sophist’s statements and positions. After all, the Sage would not waste time with men of lesser capability. Furthermore, cajoles Socrates, a measure of those who fit the former category can be known by simply observing who interests him the most. This flattery apparently subdues the Sophist’s attempt to restructure their discussion, which would surely have aborted the entire enterprise.

To avoid further the issue of a formal debate, Socrates immediately claims that Hippias’ reading of Homer contains a contradiction. The very passage that Hippias has recently quoted indicates “that Odysseus, the versatile, is nowhere shown to be a liar, while Achilles is shown to be someone versatile, according to your argument” (370a1–3). The Sage then quotes the passage from Homer to demonstrate that Achilles clearly had lied. Socrates reminds Hippias of the original question concerning whom Homer intended to be morally superior; the Sage understands Homer to have intended neither one to be superior to the other with regard to truth and falsehood as well as virtue.

With disregard for their earlier discussion about the capability of the wise man to act falsely, Hippias quickly denies the validity of Socrates’ position and claims that Achilles involuntarily lies, since he had no choice given his situation; “but the lies of Odysseus are voluntary and from design” (370e8–9). But the Sage, in imitation of their earlier discussion, accuses “dearest Hippias” of deception. The Sophist emphatically denies the charge, while the Sage presses

his accusation by pointing out the obvious—Hippias to the contrary—that Homer obviously describes Achilles not only as a deceiver and a braggart but so superior at lying that by all accounts he outwits even Odysseus. Perplexed, Hippias asks for further clarification on this point. Socrates reminds him that Achilles, when faced with fighting at Troy, tells Odysseus “that he would sail away at dawn, he does not again assert that he will sail away when he speaks to Ajax but says something else” (371b4–6). The Sage then cites verses from the *Iliad* to support his claim. Such obvious statements by Achilles, concludes Socrates, can only indicate that he was “a designing plotter who believed Odysseus was someone of primitive simplicity whom he could get the better of precisely by such artful contriving and lying” (371d5–7). But Hippias repeats his belief that in those passages Achilles acts ignorantly, since he has no real alternative given the exigencies of the situations; “when, however, Odysseus speaks the truth he always speaks by design, and whenever he lies it is the same” (371e2–4).

Perhaps stunned by Hippias’ lack of perception of the implications of his own statements, Socrates utters the obvious conclusion to the Sophist’s position: “Then it looks as if Odysseus is, after all, better than Achilles” (371e5). The silence must have been deafening before Hippias finally and defiantly objects. Socrates asks if in the first part of their discussion did they not show voluntary liars to be better than involuntary liars (cf. 367a2–7). Hippias notes that excuses are generally made for those who do harm out of ignorance even to the point where the laws are written to punish more severely those who do evil voluntarily than those who do not. But the indignant Sophist, disregarding their earlier conclusions, responds commonsensically to the Sage’s query by asking the moral question around which the entire dialogue revolves: “And how, Socrates, can those who are voluntarily unjust, who have voluntarily plotted and done evil, be better than those who do so involuntarily” (372a1–3)?

*Section 2: Attempt to Return to the Original Argument (372b1–373c4).* It appears that Socrates’ patience is nearing its end, having been sorely tried by Hippias’ obstinacy. The Sage now carefully explains to the Sophist his method of discourse: to pose questions continually to those recognized for their wisdom, to discover better insights than previously existed. But often in this process of seeking knowledge, the Sage, too, reveals what he knows: “it is evident that I know nothing” (372b7–8). This conclusion of admitting ignorance must be the only one possible, Socrates ironically notes, since he nearly always disagrees with the wise Hippias. However, the Sage’s saving grace is his desire to learn, to ask, to inquire; and to those who respond, he is always grateful. In fact, he never claims as his own that which he learns from another. He is careful to acknowledge those who have discerned a valuable truth and passed it on to him.

But with regard to Hippias’ argument, Socrates strongly disagrees. In a

veiled reference to Hippias' untenable position and obstinate attitude, as a challenge to the Sophist's integrity, Socrates admits that his own character must be flawed, since he cannot "say anything greater of myself" (372d4). The Sage's opinion in this matter of the nature of him who speaks truthfully and him who lies contradicts that of the Sophist. Socrates maintains that "those who harm human beings, who do injustice, lie, deceive, and go wrong voluntarily rather than involuntarily are better than those who do so involuntarily" (372d6–8).

Socrates admits, however, that he has not always held this position: "I vacillate about these things—clearly because I do not know" (372d9–e1). And at the moment the Sage is going through a crisis; he admits intellectually that "a sort of seizure has overtaken me, and those who voluntarily go wrong about something seem to me to be better than those who do so involuntarily" (372e1–4). In fact, confesses the Sage, his confused state of mind resulted from the earlier part of their conversation where they found that "those who do each of these things involuntarily are more good-for-nothing than those who do so voluntarily" (372e5–7; see Part I above).

Does Socrates realize the larger implications for understanding moral behavior that their previous conclusion, which centered on the capability to deceive being predicated only on the ability and talent to perform generally commendable deeds, had when combined with the tales by Homer concerning the attitudes of Achilles and Odysseus? Does he realize that if their earlier conclusions are correct, as well as their extensions by implication, then the contemporary structure of society, both legally and politically, based on morals which judge individuals according to their intentions, may be jeopardized? For if morals really are simply an aspect of superior intellectual and physical ability, then only the intelligent and strong will be moral, since they are also the superior and better men. The dull and weak will be unable to act morally independently of reliance on or imitation of the intelligent and strong as a result of their deficient characters measured in terms only of ability, talents, and skills.

This possible conclusion suggests that the moral basis of society may well be determined by only one set of individuals over and against another. If this is so, the center of the moral universe may well be found in man, and the center of the social universe only in a particular class of men. The origin of any concept of moral good will no longer be seen to transcend human perception of that concept; the search for universals of the good, the true, and the beautiful will no longer be conducted in the realm of men's ideas and particular perceptions, but in the realm of men only; man will truly become the ultimate measure of that which is good; and the dominance of any conception of moral standards over any other will result ultimately from the power of compromise or force, not from consensus through reasoned argumentation. The contemplation of ethics as a necessary aspect for providing guidance toward the good life will be replaced by the ethics of contemplating the good life, good for those best able to define and secure it.

Were these the thoughts troubling Socrates' mind, the source of his intellectual crisis? Perhaps feeling his soul to be in danger of perdition, the Sage pleads with the Sophist to "heal my soul" (372e7–373a1) of this moral heresy. But he warns Hippias to choose proper healing methods; "a long speech" (373a3) will not succeed, since Socrates would have difficulty following him. Only through continuing their dialectical approach can they both succeed in improving each other's welfare.

Possibly afraid that he has alienated Hippias with his own speech, Socrates turns to Eudicus, accusing him of having started the entire discussion. He orders the son of Apemantus to prod Hippias into answering, should the Sophist refuse to respond further. Eudicus sarcastically reminds Socrates that his help will not be needed, since Hippias has already stated that "he would flee the questioning of no man" (373b2–3; cf. 363c–d). But the Sophist, although admitting such a position, is hesitant to continue; Hippias remarks that "Socrates always causes confusion in the argument and seems to want to make trouble" (373b5–6).

Feeling the increasing peer pressure on the Sophist to continue the dialogue and gleefully seizing on this latest statement which denigrates the Sage's moral integrity, Socrates wittingly shows that Hippias cannot fairly accuse him of "wanting to make trouble," given the Sophist's own position throughout the discussion. Socrates can never intend to be troublesome, since, according to conclusions both agreed to earlier, only one who is "wise and tricky" (373b8) could do so intentionally; such a description does not apply to the Sage. Hence, Socrates must be forgiven, since "you assert that whoever makes trouble involuntarily ought to have forgiveness" (373b9–10). Eudicus feverishly implores Hippias to continue with the discussion, both for the curiosity of those listening as well as for the sake of the honor of his profession. A reluctant Hippias relents, maintaining he will proceed as requested and answer all questions put to him.

### *Part III: Expansion of the Argument*

*Section 1: No Agreement (373c5–375d8).* With this final commitment from Hippias, Socrates, in his characteristic manner, is ready to pursue the question concerning "whether those are better who go wrong voluntarily or those who do so involuntarily" (373c6–7). The Sage begins his interrogation with particular examples from the discipline of sports: running and wrestling. With regard to running, the Sophist agrees that both good runners and bad runners exist; that good runners run well and bad runners run poorly; that running slowly is to run poorly and running quickly is to run well; and that, therefore, in a race "quickness [is] good and slowness bad" (373d10–11).

But notice that both interlocutors have conflated two distinct purposes that



an adjective can serve. An adjective ordinarily describes an item; that item may be a physical object, an event or action, or an idea. But descriptions may have two connotations: one evaluative, the other objective. Furthermore, evaluative descriptions may be of two forms: intrinsically moral and extrinsically amoral. Intrinsically moral evaluations refer to intentions of will vis-a-vis a standard of justice. Extrinsically amoral evaluations refer to completed and nearly completed acts of behavior or processes vis-a-vis a set of criteria of excellence. Depending on the process, the individual's intentions may or may not be important. For example, Socrates asks which of two slow runners is the better runner, "he who voluntarily runs slowly or he who does so involuntarily" (373d13–14)? Hippias answers that the runner who runs slowly voluntarily is the better of the two. Both interlocutors are using the word "better" in an evaluative or intrinsically moral sense as well as in an objective or extrinsically amoral sense.

Yet whether a runner runs well or not in terms of capability is not a moral issue. To stipulate that excellence in physical ability confers moral approbation as well confuses the distinction between "is" and "ought." Such a confusion may be legitimate only if there is a presumption that one is morally obliged to perform as well as possible in a race. But such a presumption is clearly subjective, owing to those who establish the rules of the race and the supporting cultural context. To assert otherwise, one must ascribe to some form of natural theology or an overcrowded universe of natural laws. This confusion of both Socrates and Hippias—conflating "better" in terms of natural ability with "better" in terms of moral intentions—persists to the end of the dialogue.

Socrates then asks if running is "doing something," and if so, "is it not also effecting something" (373d18)? To both questions, Hippias replies in the affirmative. Socrates concludes and Hippias strongly agrees that "he who runs badly [effects] what is bad and shameful in a race" (373e2–3). Furthermore, both agree that the slow runner runs badly. And from here they make inferences that if a good runner runs slowly, he voluntarily acts badly, while the bad runner who involuntarily does badly in a race is worse than the runner who does so voluntarily.

Following the same line of reasoning as with the runner, Socrates then asks who is the better wrestler at a wrestling match, "he who voluntarily falls, or he who does so involuntarily" (374a3–4)? Of course, the Sophist agrees with the Sage that the one who falls voluntarily is superior to the one who falls involuntarily; and that, given the choice, it is more shameful to fall than to throw the opponent down. Hence they arrive at the same conclusion, with respect to the wrestlers as with the runners, that he who voluntarily does shameful actions is better than he who does so involuntarily.

Moving from the particulars to the unity of the whole, Socrates asks if this conclusion does not hold for all sports. Because of their ability to perform both well and poorly, the physically stronger athletes do poorly voluntarily, while

the weaker athletes do so involuntarily. Hippias agrees that this is so concerning physical strength. Socrates extends this concept to other physical abilities as he asks Hippias if the conclusion does not hold, as well, for those who have graceful movements. The Sophist agrees with the Sage that those who are able “to assume voluntarily the shameful and good-for-nothing postures” (374b7–8) are better than those who do so involuntarily as a result of physical limitations. And Socrates poses the same consideration and receives the same reaction from Hippias concerning those with musical ability and those without, and those who sing out of tune voluntarily and those who do so involuntarily.

As if to underscore his insistence on conflating the two separate concepts of the term “better” as “good,” as mentioned above, Socrates abruptly asks Hippias if he would “prefer to possess what is good or what is bad,” and the Sophist replies, “What is good” (374c11–12).

The Sage then asks similar questions concerning limping of feet, to which the Sophist agrees that he would rather have feet which are voluntarily limping. And dullness of sight is a defect like limping of feet, Socrates notes. Hippias also agrees that he would rather have eyes which are voluntarily dull and see incorrectly than to have eyes which are involuntarily dull. To reemphasize this point while moving from particulars to the whole, Socrates asks Hippias if he believes “that those of your own things that voluntarily effect what is good-for-nothing are better than those that do so involuntarily” (374d12–14). Again, Hippias undramatically affirms this to be so. And they both agree that this holds true for all the senses of the human body.

Now Socrates expands this assumption concerning that which is good or evil voluntarily and involuntarily to inanimate objects and instruments used by man. The Sage offers the example of a rudder, noting that it would appear that a man would prefer a rudder with which he could steer poorly voluntarily rather than involuntarily. Socrates and Hippias both agree that this holds true not only for a rudder but also for “a bow, a lyre, auloi, and all other things” (374e11). Hence the better instrument is that which can serve to perform both well and poorly, rather than that which can only serve to perform poorly.

From instruments, Socrates now moves to include animals as he broadens the supporting foundation for his final argument. He wonders if a horse which can be ridden badly voluntarily or involuntarily would be preferred over those of more limited possibilities. Hippias prefers such a horse as the better of the two. And it would seem, then, notes the Sage, that the better horse’s soul does so voluntarily. The Sophist affirms this observation. (Hippias apparently does not recognize the subtle implication of Socrates’ shifting of the discussion from that of an inanimate instrument in the hands of a man acting poorly voluntarily or involuntarily, to that of an autonomous creature acting the same.) And, they conclude, if this is true for the horse then it must be true “in the case of a dog and all other animals” (375a11).

At this point, Socrates has received agreement from Hippias that the argument concerning doing good or ill voluntarily and involuntarily encompasses

human physical ability, inanimate objects, and animals. Now Socrates is ready to convince the Sophist of the final element in the Sage's position by extending the logic of the argument to human mental ability, including morals. He begins by asking if, "for a human being who is an archer, is it better to possess a soul which voluntarily goes wrong and misses the target or one which does so involuntarily" (375a13–b1)? Predictably, Hippias asserts that for the purpose of archery, the better soul belongs to him who misses voluntarily. Socrates asks, "a soul which involuntarily goes wrong is, therefore, more good-for-nothing than one which does so voluntarily" (375b5–6)? Hippias affirms this to be so with regard to archery, not admitting of the parallel between archery and life, wherein both settings require the individual to aim always at a particular "target."

The Sage now moves to the art of medicine and asks the Sophist if he who harms the body voluntarily is not "more skilled in medicine" (375b9) than he who harms involuntarily? Hippias agrees with Socrates that he "is accordingly better in this art than one not skilled in medicine" (375b11–12). And if this is the case, maintains Socrates, then in all the arts, e.g., playing the cithara and the aulos, and the sciences, that soul is better which does that which is evil, shameful, and wrong voluntarily than that soul which does the same involuntarily. Hippias readily agrees.

To move the analysis of mental ability further from the realm of the arts and sciences and closer to the realm of morals, Socrates carefully chooses the case of "the souls of slaves" (375c5) as his penultimate example. The Sage asks if those slaves who do wrong voluntarily and effect evil are to be preferred to those who do so involuntarily. The Sophist simply answers in the affirmative.

Now the Sage is prepared to move to the final matter for consideration: moral attitudes in themselves, for themselves. At this point Socrates has succeeded in garnering Hippias' agreement that doing wrong voluntarily is superior to doing wrong involuntarily with reference to sports, medicine, arts, and science. He also cryptically generalized this argument to the essence of the soul via the examples of animals and slaves. On the verge of victory, the Sage then asks, "Would we not wish to possess our own soul in as good a condition as possible for these matters" (375c9–10)? The Sophist agrees. And if this is true, Socrates triumphantly concludes, then our soul will be better when it does wrong voluntarily than when it does wrong involuntarily!

Startled at such a repugnant conclusion, Hippias quickly disavows complicity in asserting such a "terrible thing," that "those doing injustice voluntarily are to be better than those doing so involuntarily" (375d4–6). Socrates steadfastly maintains this conclusion as the only possible inference, while Hippias yet refuses to accept it.

*Section 2: Moral Implications and Disillusionment (375d9–376c6).* Assuming that Hippias would have capitulated by now, Socrates considers moral behavior directly in his last attempt to convince the Sophist of his errant position, yet hoping to cure himself of his own state of intellectual crisis. When justice is

found to be present in any situation, the Sage asks, “is not justice either (1) a certain capacity or knowledge or (2) both” (375d10–11)? And if it is a certain capacity, then that soul which is more capable must be more just, since the capable individual is also the better, as proven earlier. To both assertions Hippias agrees. With regard to justice as knowledge, the wise soul is more just than the ignorant, notes the Sage; the Sophist assents. Now if justice is both capacity and knowledge, states Socrates, then the just soul will have both capacity and knowledge, and the unjust soul will belong to the ignorant. And, again, that soul is the better which has more capacity and wisdom than another, and hence “better and as more capable of doing both what is noble and what is shameful with regard to all that it effects” (375e11–376a2). As usual, prior to the actual stating of the conclusion of an argument, Hippias is in accordance with both claims.

Paralleling earlier arguments, the Sage maintains that such a soul acts ill voluntarily “through capacity and art” (376a5), both of which are characteristics of justice. He reminds the Sophist that “to do injustice at least is to do what is bad, while not to do injustice is to do what is noble” (376a8–9). Consequently, the more capable and better soul does injustice voluntarily, while the bad soul does injustice involuntarily. Hippias agrees with Socrates on these points.

Now that Socrates has once again started Hippias down the path toward the unacceptable, he can ask the question that will complete the Sophist’s journey to the undeniable conclusion he has continually denied. The good man, asserts Socrates, is “the one who has the good soul, while the bad is the one who has the bad soul” (376b1–2). And this means that the good man, assuming that he has the good soul, can do wrong voluntarily, while the opposite is true for the bad man with the bad soul. At this point Hippias is in full agreement, perhaps finally convinced of the logical conclusions of the Sage’s argument. Socrates now completes the discussion by concluding, given the premises above, that “he who voluntarily goes wrong and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias, if indeed there is any such person, would be no other than the good man” (376b8–10). Despite the forgoing debate with its many logical points of agreement, Hippias adamantly refuses to accept this conclusion: “I cannot agree with you in this, Socrates” (376b11).

Socrates, too, confesses that the conclusion is personally distasteful, but sees no possible alternative given the arguments of their discussion. He again indicates the state of disarray presently occupying his mind concerning this matter; such a condition is to be expected of an “ordinary man” (376c4) like himself (cf. 372b–d). Such mental vacillation is not to be expected from Sophists such as Hippias, however, chastises the strident Sage. If the enlightened abilities of the learned Hippias, the last refuge of sanity, cannot provide a sense of stability for the perplexed, the weary yet satirical Sage despairingly laments, the human condition is in a morally precarious position, for “we shall not cease from our vacillation even after we have come to you” (376c5–6).

## EPILOGUE

From three levels of analysis—structural, personal, and moral—the *Lesser Hippias* offers readers an intriguing glimpse into some of the ethical issues troubling Plato. What is, what can be, and what ought to be the relationship between the good and proper behavior? Indeed, how are we to understand the nature of the good and morality?

In the guise of Socrates Plato eloquently gives voice to responses to these questions as he engages in careful introspection of the nature and implications of select moral arguments. The dialogue's transition of personalities and arguments reveals the depth of Plato's thinking and the intrinsic complexity of his moral reasoning: from Hippias' arrogant conceit to his silent acquiescence; from Socrates' humble petitioning to his frustrated demands; from arguments revealing particular instances of reasonable claims to holistic but unacceptable conclusions. But to what end?

Perhaps Socrates' own final conclusion in the *Lesser Hippias* contains one necessary condition for accurately addressing Plato's arguments in his other dialogues. At the dialogue's close, Hippias and Socrates face uneasily the stark realization that the better man is he who can do injustice voluntarily rather than only doing so involuntarily. But this is only true, says Socrates, "if indeed there is any such person"!

## NOTE

1. The relatively recent translation of the *Lesser Hippias* by James Leake provided the text for this study. See James Leake, trans., "Lesser Hippias: [or, On the Lie]," in *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 281–99. Also, my appreciation to Charles E. Butterworth for his helpful comments and suggestions.

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