

CHAPTER I

Introduction
Content, Methodology, Structure

1.1 An Outline of the *Charmides*

The *Charmides* is a short dialogue but a rich and intricate one. Its interpretation, like that of any Platonic work, is bound to a greater or lesser degree to be controversial. So I begin this first chapter by setting out, as neutrally as I can, an outline of the dialogue's content. In the remaining sections of the chapter I turn to more substantive issues concerning my own methodological approach to interpreting the *Charmides*, and the rather complex way in which the work is structured.

The outline that follows attempts to cover the main contours of the narrative of the work and some of the detail, but it does not aspire to be exhaustive. For the purposes of exposition, and with no intent to beg any interpretive questions, I divide the work into three main sections, which I label respectively the 'Charmides section', the 'Critias section' and the 'Final section'.

Outline of the Charmides section (153a1–162e6):

- Socrates returns to Athens from encampment at Potidaea and a recent battle there. He recounts the battle to his companions in the palaestra before asking how philosophy is going and which of the young are outstanding in wisdom, beauty, or both (153a1–d5).
- Critias says that regarding the beautiful ones it is Charmides who stands out; the latter enters causing much consternation (153d5–154d6).
- Socrates says he would prefer to look at Charmides' soul rather than his body; Critias suggests to Socrates a plan to lure Charmides over by Socrates claiming to know a cure for Charmides' headache (154d7–155b8).
- Charmides comes over; Socrates is dumbstruck by his beauty, but recovers to tell Charmides that according to one of the Thracian doctors of Zalmoxis whom he met on campaign the good condition of

the body depends on that of the soul, which must be treated first (155b9–157a3).

- The soul is treated with a ‘charm’ of beautiful words that instil temperance. If Charmides does not have temperance, the charm must be administered before the headache remedy can be applied (157a3–c6).
- Critias interjects that Charmides is the most temperate of his contemporaries. Socrates replies that he should be, given that he comes from such a distinguished family; he asks Charmides whether he agrees that he does have temperance (157c7–158c4).
- Charmides replies that he does not know what to say. Socrates proposes that if Charmides has temperance then he will have a perception of it from which he will be able to form a belief about its nature and report that belief. They agree to proceed by Charmides reporting what temperance strikes him as being (158c5–159a10).
- Charmides proposes that temperance is a kind of quietness; Socrates refutes the account and bids Charmides examine himself and try once more (159b1–160e1).
- Charmides proposes that temperance is the same thing as shame; Socrates refutes the account (160e2–161b2).
- Charmides asks Socrates what he thinks of a proposal that he heard from someone else, that temperance is doing one’s own things; Socrates says that he finds the proposal puzzling and explains why (161b3–162b8).
- Charmides implies that he heard it from Critias, who expresses anger at Charmides’ handling of it and agrees to Socrates’ suggestion that he take over discussion of it from Charmides (162b9–e6).

Outline of the Critias section (162e7–175d5):

- Socrates reiterates his critique of the proposal that temperance is doing one’s own things; Critias defends it, but agrees at Socrates’ urging that he means by it that temperance is the doing of good things (162e7–163e11).
- Socrates points out that this would mean one can be temperate while unaware that one is temperate; Critias proposes instead that temperance is knowing oneself (164a1–165b4).
- Socrates asks what the object of this knowledge is that, as with other branches of knowledge, is distinct from it; Critias accuses Socrates of mischievously treating knowledge of oneself on a par with other branches of knowledge, in order to refute him. He says that temperance is in fact knowledge of itself and of the other branches of knowledge (165b5–166c6).

1.1 *An Outline of the Charmides*

3

- Socrates says he is just seeking to find out how things are; Critias is assuaged and returns to his proposal that temperance is knowledge of itself and of the other branches of knowledge, but agrees, at Socrates' bidding, that it is knowledge of lack of knowledge too (166c7–e9).
- Critias agrees with Socrates that this means that one with temperance will know what one knows and does not know and can examine what others do and do not know; and that they should investigate if such a thing is possible, and if it is beneficial (167a1–b5).
- On its being possible, Socrates argues that it is at best anomalous, at worst impossible, for something to have itself as its own object (167b6–169d5).
- On its being beneficial, Socrates argues that having knowledge of knowledge will mean not that one knows what one knows and does not know, but only that one knows that oneself and others have some knowledge or not, without knowing what the knowledge is of (169d5–171c10).
- And what is the benefit of that? Knowing what oneself and others do and do not know seems highly beneficial, whereas merely knowing that oneself and others have some knowledge seems less so (171d1–172c3).
- But is even the former so beneficial? It seems as if being able to ensure, through knowing what people do and do not know, that only people with knowledge are allowed to practise must be beneficial (172c4–173d7).
- But what knowledge is it exactly that would bring a good life about? Surely knowledge of good and bad. So it is not temperance if temperance is merely knowledge of knowledge and of lack of knowledge, even if one allows that to mean knowledge of what one does and does not know (173d8–175a8).
- Socrates sums up how the enquiry has failed, concluding that it has made temperance turn out to be of no benefit (175a9–d5).

Outline of the Final section (175d5–176d5):

- Socrates tells Charmides that he is sorry about the outcome on the latter's behalf but remains convinced that temperance is a great good and that Charmides is blessed if he has it. He asks Charmides again to see if he does have it and so does not need the charm (175d5–176a5).
- Charmides says he does not know but thinks he does need it and is free to be charmed by Socrates for as long as Socrates deems sufficient. Charmides gains Critias' approval for this plan and indicates that Socrates must not oppose it; Socrates says he will not (176a6–d5).

1.2 Two Methodological Principles

Once one moves from a description of content, however cryptic that may seem in bare outline, to the challenge of interpreting a Platonic work, there are not many uncontroversial statements one can make. But let me try one nonetheless: Plato's works are extremely difficult to interpret. Why they are so is itself not a straightforward question, but one reason, I take it, is the following: Plato does not use his works to give us direct access to his own views. He never speaks in his own name within them.¹ All the talking is done by characters who are not Plato, largely though not wholly through the medium of conversation. We are thus immediately faced with the problem of how (or perhaps even whether) to try to figure out what Plato himself means to convey in a given work.

There are, moreover, quite a large number of works – nearly thirty in all – that are considered authentically Platonic.² This raises an additional hard problem: how to interpret a given work in relation to other works in the corpus. Needless to say, in focussing here on the *Charmides*, I shall not attempt to address, let alone resolve, these interpretive problems in any remotely comprehensive way. Nonetheless, given the distinctive challenges raised by the interpretation of a Platonic work, it seems to me important to set out as explicitly as one can, in relation to any particular work, the basic principles one uses in interpreting it.

What follows therefore is a sketch of two methodological principles that I shall attempt (no doubt imperfectly) to cleave to in my reading of the *Charmides*. These principles correspond roughly, albeit in reverse order, to the two interpretive problems I identified above, namely Plato's indirectness and the relation of his works to one another. I do not claim, even with regard to the *Charmides*, that the two principles are the only or best that could be adopted. I set them out in the hope that they may provide a perspicuous framework for constructing a reading of this compact but enigmatic dialogue. Readers should feel free to contest both the principles themselves and the consistency with which I adhere to them. In the end their selection must be judged by the extent to which they help illuminate the structure and meaning of the work to which they are applied.

¹ I exclude for these purposes the Letters, which if authentic would promise more direct access to Plato's thoughts. However, all but one, the Seventh, whose authenticity remains doubtful, are now generally regarded as spurious.

² A rather larger number than this has come down to us as comprising the Platonic corpus. In addition to those deemed genuine, there remains debate about the authenticity of several further works, with the rest agreed to be spurious.

1.3 The Principle of Agnosticism

The first principle I dub *the principle of agnosticism*. This principle states that one should not assume, in advance of reading the *Charmides*, that one has knowledge of the aims and methods at work therein of either Plato or his main character Socrates. Now in a sense this might seem uncontentious. For is it not obvious that in advance of reading a work one cannot know the aims and methods of its author, let alone, where applicable, its characters? But perhaps this is not so obvious. Maybe the author has other writings that describe, explicitly or implicitly, various aims or methods to be followed, by the author or by one or more of the characters, that need not be taken as restricted to the particular work in which such descriptions appear. In the case of Plato, one character in particular – namely Socrates – plays a leading role in a number of different works. Thus one might, in advance of reading the *Charmides*, either have read, or look to read, other works of Plato in which Socrates says and does various things. These sayings and doings could then, arguably, be used to help figure out what Socrates' aims and methods are in the *Charmides*.

It is this idea that the principle of agnosticism resists,³ and for two main reasons. The first is the danger of question-begging. Let us say that we are trying to determine Socrates' aims and methods in the *Charmides*. In order to help with this, one might read a variety of other Platonic works, draw certain conclusions about the nature of Socrates' aims and methods in those works, and allow such conclusions to help us decide what Socrates is up to in the *Charmides*. To the extent that one's readings of those other dialogues influence our reading of the *Charmides*, there is a risk that we come to see in the *Charmides* what we (think we) have seen elsewhere in Plato, and that as a result we do not determine with sufficient independence what is in the *Charmides* itself.

This can result, further, in a kind of circularity, whereby our conclusions about the *Charmides*, read in part through the lens of other dialogues, then serve to reinforce our conclusions about those other dialogues. I do not claim that such a circle is necessarily vicious. Nor do I wish to deny that any comprehensive treatment of a particular work of Plato should take into account, albeit with care, the content of other works. Since no

³ Herein, I think, lies a substantial difference between the methodological approach adopted here and that to be found in Thomas Tuozzo's fine study of the *Charmides*. Tuozzo's first chapter, 'Methodological Preliminaries' (2011, 3–51), focusses mainly on appeal to other works in the Platonic corpus to help illuminate the *Charmides*.

individual reading of a Platonic work can aspire to be comprehensive, however, I content myself, in regard to the *Charmides*, with adopting an agnostic approach, in order to try to reach a view about what is going on in that work that is as independent as possible of what is to be found in other works of Plato. The subsequent drawing of comparisons and connections with other works has, it seems to me, the best chance of achieving mutual illumination rather than unhelpful circularity if such an approach is adopted.⁴

This does not mean that I shall wear a hair shirt and never mention any other Platonic work. Occasionally I shall cite other works in order to corroborate, or qualify, findings about the *Charmides* that (I hope) have been arrived at independently. And it is important to emphasise that the principle of agnosticism is a *methodological* one. I have myself read the other Platonic dialogues and naturally, in some cases a least, have formed a view about what is going on in them. No doubt interpreters cannot but be influenced, even if unconsciously, by what they have read in other parts of the corpus when they come to read the *Charmides*, or any other individual work of Plato. What is more, some of the dialogues seem written to encourage their being read in conjunction with others (a point I return to below). But it seems to me that even here, in order to minimise the risk of begging questions about the nature and scope of such interrelations, it is a matter of good method at least to attempt, as an element of an overall interpretive strategy, to form a view of a given work that does not rest, or rests minimally, on one's readings of other works.

One might seek to deflate the value of the agnostic approach by, for example, insisting that, in terms of a charitable reading of Plato's literary art, one should expect to find some sort of reasonably unified account of the character Socrates across the various dialogues in which he appears, though here too some qualifications are needed. The Socrates who is portrayed in the Platonic corpus ranges from a youth (*Parmenides*) to a septuagenarian on the day of his death (*Phaedo*) and his interlocutors range from close associates to hostile opponents and differ variously in age, opinion, social status and intellectual attainment. In view of these factors,

⁴ The principle is thus not an example of what Rowe (2007, 3) somewhat tendentiously calls 'retreat into interpreting each dialogue on its own', which he connects with a stance whereby one 'decides in advance that he [Plato] is (e.g.) a dramatist rather than a philosopher' (ibid., n. 5). While it hardly needs saying that one should not decide *in advance* (of reading his works?) that Plato is dramatist, philosopher, or both, consideration of the structure of the *Charmides* reveals it to have the form of a drama regardless of how one chooses to classify Plato; see further Section 1.4.

1.3 *The Principle of Agnosticism*

7

one might expect a correspondingly broad variety of engagement and approaches from Socrates across the dialogues.⁵

In relation to the hypothesis of a unified character, I am, certainly, unsympathetic to the view championed most influentially by Vlastos,⁶ who argues that one group of Platonic works contains a Socrates intended to represent more or less faithfully the views of the historical figure, another group a Socrates who has mutated into a mouthpiece for Platonic doctrine. But while I agree that the idea of a less fragmented Socrates is appealing,⁷ the most robust way of substantiating (or refuting) the idea is by careful examination of how Socrates is presented in each of the individual works in which he appears. Attempting the latter task with respect to the *Charmides* is one of the motives for this book.

My second reason for deploying the principle of agnosticism is related more specifically than the first to the *Charmides* itself (though no doubt it may apply to other works too). Many Platonic dialogues, as I noted above, are written in a way that invites their readers to consider them in conjunction with others.⁸ Among a number of examples, one might cite the sequence *Theaetetus–Sophist–Statesman*, which is explicitly written as continuous stages of a discussion, albeit with different permutations of discussants. Or there is the sequence *Apology–Crito–Phaedo*, covering respectively the periods of Socrates' trial, imprisonment and death.⁹ Whatever one is supposed to do with such sequencing, it would certainly seem intended to allow or even encourage the reading of one member of a given sequence in the light of others. Again, there are passages within the dialogues that seem to involve clear reference to other works. A notable example is *Phaedo* 73a–b with its apparent recollection of the Theory of Recollection in the *Meno*.

The *Charmides* is not, it seems to me, of this sort on either count. It is not part of any obvious dialogical sequence. Nor does it contain references to the content of other works of the same overt character as that of the

⁵ On the challenge of reading what she calls the 'many figures of Sokrates', see Blondell (2002, 8–11).

⁶ The fullest statement is Vlastos (1991, 45–80).

⁷ Socrates emphasises his own consistency in a number of places. See e.g. *Gorgias* 482a–c, *Phaedo* 100b1–3, and, in the *Charmides* itself, 170a2.

⁸ I would not therefore say quite so starkly, with Press (1993, 110), that 'each of the genuine [Platonic] dialogues can be read sensibly without knowing anything about the content or action of any other dialogue'. *Timaeus* 17c–19b, for example, would be rather mysterious without the *Republic* in mind (whether or not it is intended as a summary of the latter work).

⁹ These are of course just examples that can be extended and connected in further ways. Thus, the main action of the *Theaetetus* is set on the day on which Socrates is to attend the preliminary hearing of the charges against him; the *Euthyphro* is set later that same day, just before the hearing.

Phaedo to the *Meno*.¹⁰ That being so, there is correspondingly less encouragement for us to read the *Charmides* by reference to other works in the corpus. This is not to deny that allusions within the *Charmides* to other dialogues can be teased out. It seems plausible, for example, that Critias' reference at 164d–e to the Delphic inscription 'Know thyself' may be intended by Plato to put us in mind of the story of Chaerephon's trip to the Oracle recounted by Socrates at *Apology* 21a,¹¹ though what such an allusion amounts to is of course a further question.¹²

Another example that has been suggested, by David Sedley, is of an 'authorial self-allusion' in Socrates' reference at *Charmides* 169a1–2 to 'some great man' (*megalou tinou andros*) being needed to adjudicate which reflexive relations (if any) are possible, 'significantly including', as Sedley puts it, "self-moving motion" – a forward allusion to Plato's metaphysics of soul in *Phaedrus* and *Laws X*,¹³ where the soul is characterised as self-moving.¹⁴ In a work as concerned with reflexive relations as the *Charmides*, it seems a happy thought that in one of its key passages on the topic may be found an example of authorial self-reference. Moreover, the allusion can be read also as backward-facing (here I go beyond Sedley). For, according to Socrates earlier in the dialogue, no one is said to have been a 'greater man' (*meizōn anēr*, 158a3) than Charmides' uncle Pyrilampes, which brings the family of Plato, historically Charmides' nephew, directly into the 'great man' equation and offers a tempting picture of Plato congratulating himself on having taken over the mantle of greatest in family from his uncle's uncle.

¹⁰ The Homeric line 'the presence of shame is no good for a man in need' is cited by Socrates both at *Charmides* 161a4 (discussed in Sections 2.1 and 3.9) and *Laches* 201b2–3. On possible affinities between the two works, see Dieterle (1966), Altman (2010); and on thematic relations between the *Charmides* and other Platonic works more broadly, Tsouna (2022, 40–51).

¹¹ One might further compare, on testing for self-knowledge, the wording at *Charmides* 167a1–5 with that of *Apology* 21c2–d8, though the latter excerpt classifies self-knowledge as belonging to wisdom, the former to temperance. Nor is there any sign in the *Apology* of the *Charmides*'s intense critique of the concept of self-knowledge, a difference that can be accounted for by, if nothing else, the fact that in the *Apology* Socrates is defending himself before a jury of ordinary Athenian citizens, not conversing with a close associate. For an argument that the *Charmides* critique marks only a limited undermining of the *Apology* claims, see Benson (2003). Mahoney (1996) is an example of a reading of Socrates' main discussion with Critias in the *Charmides* viewed substantially through the lens of the *Apology*. See also Rasmussen (2008).

¹² See Section 4.3.

¹³ Sedley (2019, 48 n. 8). Notwithstanding Sedley's reference to 'forward' allusion, I take no view for the purposes of this book on the chronology of Plato's works, except to note that their order of composition need not reflect the order, if any, in which Plato might have expected them to be read.

¹⁴ See *Phaedrus* 245c–e; *Laws* 10.894a–896b. I leave aside for present purposes the question of whether these texts offer a *solution* to the problem of how (in at least one case) reflexive relations are possible or proceed by not raising the problem.

1.3 *The Principle of Agnosticism*

9

In a dialogue that is also, at least on the surface, thoroughlygoingly aporetic, it seems fair to point out, however, that were we to take Socrates' plea for a great man as a case of anticipatory Platonic boastfulness in the way Sedley urges, it would fall significantly short on its own terms. The *Phaedrus* and *Laws* discuss self-motion specifically, whereas Socrates' stated need in the *Charmides* is for one who will 'in all cases' (*kata pantōn*, 169a2) – including presumably the many that Socrates discusses at 167–8 in addition to self-motion – determine where reflexivity is possible and where it is not. If there is forward allusion here, it looks as if the great man ends up delivering substantially less than Socrates was seeking.

A further possible candidate for allusion to other works is to be found in the concept of 'doing one's own things' (*prattein ta heautou*), which serves in the *Charmides* as a (problematised) proposal, which includes an example in a civic context (161e–162a), for what temperance (*sōphrosunē*) is,¹⁵ but also surfaces in *Republic* 4 as the official characterisation there of justice. Insofar as problems are identifiable independently of their solutions, the principle of agnosticism as applied to the *Charmides* is compatible with, but does not entail, a 'proleptic' reading of the dialogue whereby it is seen as anticipatory of other dialogues in raising problems to be addressed in those works – though it should be noted that Charles Kahn, the leading proponent of a proleptic reading of Plato, rejects the presence of 'doing one's own' as a case of prolepsis in the *Charmides*.¹⁶

Let us in any event grant that allusions from the *Charmides* to other Platonic works can be argued for. In the nature of the case it is hard to say whether their presence either demands, or makes desirable, that the dialogue be read in the light of them.¹⁷ Indeed, to the extent that one

¹⁵ I adopt, without wishing to beg any questions about the substance of its referent, 'temperance' as what is still a fairly standard translation of this key term. On the substance see esp. Section 3.12 and Chapter 5; and, on further issues concerning its rendition, Section 5.6.

¹⁶ See Kahn (1988, 542), which instead opts for the work's discussion of knowledge of good and bad as proleptically significant in relation to the *Republic*. For the proleptic reading of Plato more generally see Kahn (1996). On elements of the *Charmides* anticipatory of the *Statesman*, see Schofield (2006, 146).

¹⁷ In terms of specific allusions to the *Charmides* in other Platonic works, there seems to me only one that is close to indubitable: *Symposium* 222b, which I discuss in Section 5.8. At *Timaeus* 72a4–6, 'doing one's own things' reappears, together with 'knowing oneself, as features that Timaeus calls 'well and venerably said' (*eu kai palai legetai*, a4) to belong to the temperate person alone; but since this wording seems designed to frame the features as stock attributions long in currency, I am not sure whether the claim of Sedley (2019, 62 n. 30; cf. Solère-Queval 1993, 62) that the passage represents 'qualified approval ... [of] two of the *Charmides*' rejected definitions of *sōphrosunē* establishes conscious allusion to that work. On references to temperance elsewhere in the corpus, of varying degrees of closeness to elements found in the *Charmides*, see Vorwerk (2001, 36–9); and for a case study of issues in determining in which direction intertextual allusions in Plato flow, McCabe (2002).

finds their status elusive or contestable, as I have argued with regard to the 'great man' case, that only serves to highlight a feature of the *Charmides* that comes across with great vividness: its presentation of a self-contained world, lovingly detailed and richly characterised. Set several decades before its composition, its most pointed allusions seem to be not 'sideways' to other works of Plato but, as we shall see, backwards and forwards to significant historical events before and after the goings-on depicted in the work itself.¹⁸ This aspect of the way the work is written offers further incentive to investigate it on its own terms.

The *Charmides* is, of course, fiction not history. So before turning to my second principle of interpretation, let me pause briefly to situate the principle of agnosticism in relation to the historical context of the work. Set around the time of Plato's birth, the *Charmides* is a product of Plato's creative imagination, not reportage. However, its status as fiction needs an important qualification. Its four speaking characters are not simply fictional but fictionalised. The lives of Socrates, Critias, Charmides and Chaerephon are all independently attested.¹⁹ The historical Charmides was, as mentioned above, Plato's uncle – a lineage that the dialogue's references to Charmides' family allow us to trace. Charmides was also, as the work tells us, the younger cousin of Critias as well as his ward. Moreover Critias, like Plato, was an author of whose works a number of fragments survive.²⁰

Plato's choice to populate the work with fictionalised characters rather than wholly fictional ones means, I think, that we are expected to have in mind at least some basic features of their historical counterparts' lives:²¹ above all, perhaps, given the apparent allusions at the end of the dialogue to the short-lived but bloody rule of the oligarchic regime known as the Thirty (or Thirty Tyrants) – established at Athens in 404 BCE after the latter's defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War – the participation of Critias and Charmides in that regime. Critias was one of its leading figures, while Charmides served it as a member of the so-called Ten who

¹⁸ The apparent symmetry of this will need some qualification; see Section 2.5.

¹⁹ On the historical evidence see Nails (2002).

²⁰ On the historical Critias as author of both prose and verse, and possible resonances of his writings in the *Charmides*, see Tuozzo (2011, 70–85); cf. Gottesman (2020).

²¹ While one must certainly avoid assimilating the historical figure with the fictionalised character, I doubt that Kahn (1996, 202) can quite be right to say that the [Platonic] '*persona* of Socrates enjoys an independent life, free from any historical or chronological limitations'. If that were literally true, it is hard to see why Plato would have selected a character with such historical resonances in the first place. On Plato's use of the relation between fiction and history, see McCabe (2019a, 109).