

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The *Charmides* is a strangely attractive and unsettling work.¹ Narrated by Socrates to a 'noble friend' whose identity remains undisclosed, it unfolds as both a powerful drama of characters and a complex philosophical argument assessed in vastly different ways by interpreters of the dialogue. According, for instance, to T. Godfrey Tuckey, author of the first analytic monograph on the *Charmides*,

no better introduction to Plato's thought could be devised. The *Charmides* forces the reader to study the historical background of the early dialogues. It shows us Plato's political and educational thought in formation. It helps us to see the origins of those logical and metaphysical theories which Plato later constructed to provide a framework for his ethical doctrine. Above all, it forces us to think hard and analyse meanings with care and precision, compelling clear thought by the form of its argument as well as advocating it by its content.²

Paul Shorey, however, provides a check to such enthusiasm: 'the dialogue involves so much metaphysical subtlety that some critics have pronounced it late, some spurious, and many feel the same distaste for it that they do for the subtlest parts of the *Theaetetus*'.³

Both statements are outdated by over half a century and neither is entirely defensible. But, taken together, they convey an idea of the range of readings that the *Charmides* is susceptible to and also indicate what I take to be a peculiarity of this dialogue: perhaps more than any other Platonic composition, everything about the *Charmides* has been debated, all of it at once: not merely this or that aspect of the drama or the argument, but the nature and purpose of the work taken as a whole. The present monograph

¹ Gould 1955, 36, groups together the *Charmides*, *Hippias Minor*, and the first book of the *Republic* on the grounds that they have at least one thing in common: they may all be called Plato's 'problem plays' in the sense that they have all caused controversy regarding their real significance.

² Tuckey 1951, 105. ³ Shorey 1933, 103.

is no exception. It has the form of a running commentary that closely follows Plato's text and gradually develops a new and integral reading of the dialogue. I hope to be able to defend that reading thoroughly and, as far as possible, convincingly. Nonetheless, I believe that the dialogue is deliberately open-ended and, at times, deliberately ambiguous. Partly for that reason it remains open to diverging approaches and multiple viewpoints. We may gain a preliminary understanding of why or how this happens by surveying the dialogue's salient features: the story, the characters, the subject, the argument, the interplay between the dramatic and the philosophical elements of the dialogue, the intertextual connections that it evokes, and its declared objectives.

1 An Interpretative Summary of the Dialogue

The *Charmides* is a narrated dialogue, artfully crafted and masterfully executed. Drama and philosophical argument are interwoven in a story whose external frame is drawn by Socrates as narrator at the beginning of the dialogue but not at its end. He is represented as relaying to an anonymous friend an encounter that he has had some time in the past with two fellow Athenians, the young Charmides and the guardian and relative of this latter, Critias. Socrates' narrative consists of the particulars of that encounter and exactly coincides with the dialogue's content.

In the unusually long prologue, Socrates relates that, upon his return to Athens from the battle of Potidaea, he went to the palaestra of Taureas where he found many of his acquaintances, including Chaerephon and Critias, son of Callaeschrus. In the ensuing narrative, after giving them news from the camp, he enquires about his own concerns, namely what is the present state of philosophy and whether there are any young men distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both. Critias answers that his cousin and ward, Charmides, is notable for both and, indeed, Charmides' entrance confirms that the young man has a splendid stature and appearance. Socrates proposes to examine whether his soul is just as perfect as his body and Critias volunteers to facilitate the undertaking by summoning Charmides on the pretext that Socrates has a cure for the morning headaches bothering the young man. Charmides' approach causes a stir in the male company and sexual arousal in Socrates who, however, shows himself capable of mastering himself. He answers affirmatively Charmides' question whether he knows the headache's remedy, claims that the remedy consists in a leaf and a charm, and appeals to the authority of Zalmoxis, a divinity of the Getae in Thrace, to convince the youth that the part

cannot be treated independently of the whole and, therefore, Charmides' head and body cannot be cured unless his soul is first treated by means of charms consisting in 'beautiful words'. He stresses the paramount role of *sôphrosynê*, temperance,⁴ as the cause of everything good for a person, and underscores the importance of finding out whether temperance is present in one's soul. For his own part, Charmides agrees to submit his soul to the charm before being given the remedy for the headache and, after a short speech in which Socrates traces Charmides' noble lineage, he agrees to investigate together with Socrates the question of whether or not he possesses *sôphrosynê*, temperance – a cardinal virtue of Greek culture, literally associated with the possession of a sound and healthy mind, widely believed to involve self-control and a sort of self-knowledge, and carrying civic and political connotations as well.⁵

Sôphrosynê, temperance, and the successive attempts to define it turn out to be the main subject of the conversation, first between Socrates and young Charmides, and then between Socrates and the mature and experienced Critias. According to Charmides' first definition, 'temperance is to do everything in an orderly and quiet way'; it is, in other words, a sort of quietness (159b2–5). Working from Charmides' own set of beliefs, Socrates brings counterexamples to show that, in fact, temperance is only contingently related to quietness and occasionally is more closely related to the opposite of quietness. Charmides then proposes a second definition, that temperance is modesty or a sense of shame (160e3–5), which is also refuted. Charmides owns himself convinced by the argument, at which point he proposes a third definition which he says he has heard from someone else, namely that temperance is 'doing one's own' (161b5–6). It becomes clear that the author of the definition is Critias who gets increasingly angry because Charmides accepts the naïve assumption that 'doing one's own' is equivalent to 'making one's own' and hence is unable to defend the definition. So, Critias jumps into the discussion and takes over the argument. On the authority of Hesiod, he draws a distinction between *doing* a thing and *making* something and he modifies accordingly the claim advanced earlier by Charmides: now temperance is defined as the doing

⁴ There is no English word that can fully capture the meaning of σωφροσύνη (translit. *sôphrosynê*) and all its connotations and nuances. Following most translators (e.g. Lamb, Sprague, Jowett), I render 'σωφροσύνη' by 'temperance' and 'σώφρων' by 'the temperate person' or 'the temperate man'. Other translations include 'modesty', which, however, lies closer to the meaning of αἰδώς (a sense of shame), and 'discipline' (Moore and Raymond 2019), which, nonetheless, carries strong behavioural connotations and, moreover, does not adequately capture the epistemic aspects of the Greek notion of σωφροσύνη.

⁵ See, notably, the classic study by North 1966.

of good things or the performance of useful and beneficial actions (cf. 163e1–3). This variant too gets refuted when Socrates points out that, assuming that this definition is true, it would seem to follow that the experts in various fields may be temperate and yet ignorant of their temperance (163e3–164d3).

Rather than accept this implication, Critias appeals to Apollo and the Delphic oracle to propose another, altogether new definition: that temperance is knowing oneself (165b4). It is the *epistêmê* of oneself (165c4–7). The meaning of '*epistêmê*' in this and other Platonic contexts is controversial. Up to a certain point in the dialogue, the interlocutors of the *Charmides* use the term interchangeably with '*technê*'⁶ to refer to all sorts of arts and crafts, and also sciences or disciplines. Insofar as each of these latter presupposes the mastery of interrelations and rules within its own domain, the most accurate translation of '*epistêmê*' and '*technê*' is 'scientific or expert understanding'. As a shorthand, I follow the scholarly convention of rendering '*epistêmê*' by 'science' or (expert) 'knowledge', and '*technê*' by 'art', 'craft', or 'expertise'. But it should be borne in mind that these expressions are intended to entail the ideas of causal explanation and complete understanding.⁷ (This point will become clearer in the later chapters of the book.)

To continue with the summary of the *Charmides*: Critias appears to expect that his definition of temperance in terms of knowing oneself would be acceptable to Socrates (165b3–4). And indeed it evokes in the reader's mind Socrates' own quest for self-knowledge in the *Apology*, the terms in which he develops his conception of this latter, the connection that he draws between self-examination and self-knowledge, and his claim that the unexamined life is not worth living (*Ap.* 38a). Nonetheless, Socrates declares that he cannot accept Critias' definition without submitting it to examination (165b5–c4). On my reading of the text, he thus makes clear that the argument to follow principally regards not his own beliefs about self-knowledge, but Critias' conception of temperance as self-knowledge, whatever that turns out to be.

To begin this enquiry, Socrates uses analogies from specific sciences or arts (*epistêmai* or *technai*) such as medicine and house-building to press the idea that temperance as an *epistêmê* must have an object distinct from itself, and he asks what that object might be (165c4–166b6). Critias argues that, on the contrary, the *epistêmê* equivalent to temperance differs from all

⁶ I shall say more about this both at the end of the Introduction and in later chapters.

⁷ See the argument by Nehamas 1984, which, nonetheless, focuses on Plato's later dialogues.

other *epistēmai* or *technai* precisely because it does not have an object distinct from itself (166b7–c3). From this point onwards, the interlocutors favour the use of ‘*epistēmē*’ over that of ‘*technē*’, presumably because they are focusing primarily on the cognitive aspects of the virtue under discussion.⁸ Eventually, with the help of Socrates, Critias articulates his final definition of temperance as follows: temperance is the only *epistēmē* which is of itself and the other *epistēmai* and the privation of *epistēmē*,⁹ but of no other object (166e4–167a8). As Socrates phrases it, temperance is an ‘*epistēmē epistēmēs*’ (usually rendered as ‘knowledge of knowledge’ or ‘science of science’),¹⁰ but not an *epistēmē* of some distinct object or subject-matter (as well).¹¹ As we ourselves might put it, Critias contends that temperance is the only knowledge or science which is both strictly reflexive and higher-order: it governs everything that qualifies as an *epistēmē* just insofar as it is an *epistēmē*¹² in addition to being of itself.

Now Socrates wants to know, first, whether such an *epistēmē* could be conceivable or credible and, second, even assuming that it were possible, whether it would be appropriately beneficial (167a9–b4). The elenchus that follows addresses these two questions in turn. Initially, Socrates develops an analogical argument (I call it the Argument from Relatives: 167c8–169c2) which examines different groups of relatives that Socrates takes to be analogous to *epistēmē*: perceptual relatives such as sight and hearing, other psychological relatives such as desire and belief, quantitative relatives such as half and double or larger and smaller, and, finally, cases such as motion and heat. Critias comes to accept that, in some of these cases, strictly reflexive constructions appear very odd and that, in other cases, such constructions seem entirely incoherent. Hence, he reluctantly accepts the tentative conclusion drawn by Socrates that a strictly reflexive *epistēmē* likewise seems incredible if not altogether impossible.

In the next phase of the elenchus, Socrates proposes that they concede for the sake of the argument the possibility of reflexive knowledge in order to address the issue of benefit: assuming that temperance can be an *epistēmē*

⁸ Compare Plt. 292b: ‘we have said that the kingly art is one of the *epistēmai*, I think’. First, the expertise of the statesman is called a *technē* but then it is called an *epistēmē* to emphasise the cognitive aspects of statesmanship, in particular the capacity to form accurate judgements and issue commands accordingly. On Plato’s use of synecdoche, see Hulme Kozey 2018 and the remarks in Chapter 8, 172 and note 7.

⁹ This exactly corresponds to the text and gets articulated in terms of knowing what one knows and what one does not know (167a5–7).

¹⁰ See notes 5 and 6 in this chapter. ¹¹ This point is controversial and shall be discussed later.

¹² Hence reflexivity is preserved all the way through. On this point, see Chapters 9 and 10, *passim*, and also Chapter 11, 271 and *passim*.

of *epistêmê* itself but of no other object, what good might it bring? On the basis of this assumption, Socrates develops the last, very impressive argument of the *Charmides* (I dub it the Argument from Benefit: 169c3–175a8). On the reading that I shall defend, this is a cumulative argument which advances in successive stages. First, conceding for the sake of the investigation that an ‘*epistêmê epistêmês*’ may be possible, Socrates questions whether it entails knowledge-what as well as knowledge-that: can its possessor tell *what things* one knows or doesn’t know, in addition to being able to judge *that* one person possesses some knowledge but another person doesn’t? As the elenchus suggests, since, according to Critias, temperance is an *epistêmê* of itself but of no distinct object or subject-matter, and assuming (as Socrates does) that the content of an *epistêmê* is determined by its proprietary object, i.e. what the *epistêmê* is of, it seems to follow that temperance cannot be substantive knowledge of content (knowledge-what) but only discriminatory knowledge (knowledge-that). Namely, it is a knowledge that enables the temperate person to distinguish knowers from non-knowers, without being able to tell, however, what these knowers are knowers *of*. Second, Socrates points out, counterfactually, the great benefits that temperance would yield if it were substantive knowledge. Then, he briefly suggests that, since temperance is not in fact substantive knowledge and cannot offer great benefits, perhaps it may offer certain lesser benefits. Both interlocutors, however, dismiss this possibility, for it seems absurd.

Third, to help the argument, Socrates proposes another major concession. Let us assume, he says, that temperance is, in fact, substantive understanding entailing knowledge-what: it is knowledge of *what things* one knows and doesn’t, as well as knowledge *that* one has some knowledge but another person doesn’t. To consider this hypothesis, Socrates proposes a thought-experiment about an imaginary society ruled by temperate rulers endowed with *epistêmê epistêmês*. And although he grants that such a society would function efficiently under the rule of the ‘science of science’, nonetheless he questions that the city would do well and the citizens be happy. Fourth, continuing with the argument, Socrates extracts from Critias the admission that, in truth, happiness is not the proprietary object of temperance or the ‘science of science’, but the proprietary object of another *epistêmê*, namely the *epistêmê* of good and evil. Finally, he completes the elenchus by refuting Critias’ last suggestion, namely that since the ‘science of science’ is supposed to be higher-order on account of its reflexivity and hence govern all the other sciences, it governs the science of good and evil as well and can appropriate the peculiar object of this latter. However, Socrates retorts, since the ‘science of science’ is supposed

to have no object other than *epistēmē* simpliciter, it cannot appropriate the proprietary object of any particular *epistēmē*, including, of course, the science of good and evil. Nor can it appropriate the latter's peculiar function and the benefits it brings. The absurd outcome of the investigation is that temperance as Critias defined it would be completely useless.

In his brilliant assessment of the argument (175a9–d5), Socrates registers its major flaws and takes responsibility for having conducted the search in the wrong way. The epilogue of the work points back to the themes of the prologue, but also adds a dark shade of its own. Socrates again addresses young Charmides (175d5–176a5). He restates his own belief that temperance is one of the greatest goods for a human being and suggests that the youth must do everything to cultivate it in his soul. He expresses regret for failing to deliver the 'beautiful words' necessary for applying Zalmoxis' remedy. And he urges Charmides to keep examining and re-examining himself (176a1). The youth appears eager to place himself under Socrates' care. Critias instructs him to do so. And both of them together warn Socrates that he must not oppose their plan, for they are prepared to use force to execute it (175a6–d5).

2 The Historical Subtext

This is what Aristotle might call the plot of the play. It is a very Athenian drama. The action takes place in the early days of the Peloponnesian war, in a wrestling-school in Athens overlooked by one of the city's temples. In the opening scene, Plato's marvellous representation of the ambiance in the gymnasium and of Socrates' entrance evokes the idealised description of Athens and the Athenian way of life in the Funeral Oration that, according to Thucydides, was delivered by Pericles in 431 BCE (approximately two years before the dramatic date of the *Charmides*), in honour of the citizens who fell in battle in the first summer of the Peloponnesian war: courage in war and enjoyment in the hours of peace, strength as well as grace, simplicity of manner and the love of beauty, the importance of leisure and the love of philosophy, and a city unafraid of the enemy, whose greatest adornments derive from the virtue of its citizens and whose values are 'a school for all Greece' (Thucydides, *Hist.* II 37.1–41.4).

The opening scene of the *Charmides* seems an emblematic illustration of these attitudes. Socrates has just returned from a destructive battle but shows no fear or sorrow. His concern is beauty and philosophy and the presence of both in the city. He appears eager to contemplate the former and engage in the latter as soon as he is given the opportunity to do so. As

for the other men surrounding the palaestra, their easy manner and pleasantries might make it difficult to believe that they are living in wartime. The same holds for the youths training in the palaestra, for Charmides' admirers, and for Charmides himself. Thus, in these early days of the Great War, Plato depicts Athens full of confidence and hope. The representation has verisimilitude, for Athens could still rely on its army and navy and the fighting spirit of its men. Also, it could still look forward to a new generation of leaders steeped in the values of the city, living the Athenian way of life, and ready to defend Athens and everything it stood for.

Both as narrator and as character, Socrates underscores that prospect.¹³ Notably, the description of Charmides' entrance conveys the impression that the young man is vested with a sort of divinity: superbly handsome, impassive like a god, followed by a train of admirers, astonishing and bewildering to everyone who sees him. If only his physical perfection corresponds to perfection in his soul, there is much that he could achieve. Evidently, the concern about Charmides' *kalokagathia*, excellence of body and soul, is not merely a private matter. For given his social lineage and standing, he is expected to someday play a dominant role in Athenian politics. Within the frame of the dialogue, then, Charmides represents a great hope for Athens. This remark applies to Critias as well. He comes from the same stock as Charmides, is worldly, educated, and formidably intelligent, and, therefore, has the credentials to get involved in high-level politics. The narration stresses that Critias is Charmides' guardian and suggests that he exercises considerable influence on his younger cousin. He appears to serve as a model for Charmides and have authority over the youth's education. From within the framework of the dialogue, then, it might seem that Charmides will turn out right, not least because both he and his guardian acknowledge the value of dialectical discussion and Socrates' pedagogical gifts. One might think that the future is open and hopeful for the two cousins, for Socrates, and for Athens as well.

Plato and his audience, however, have the privilege of hindsight and can tell a different tale: of unfulfilled promise and frustrated hope, of foolishness and loss, of ugliness and violence and destruction. Approximately twenty-five years after the fictional encounter narrated in the *Charmides*, Athens lost the war to the Spartan coalition (404 BCE). The Long Walls

¹³ There is complex irony here. Plato's audiences know that Critias and Charmides do not uphold the democratic values of Athens but are prominent defendants of oligarchy, and eventually will side with Sparta and join the Thirty.

3 *The Protagonists of the Charmides*

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were destroyed, the population was decimated, and the city itself ran the risk of being razed to the ground. The Athenian way of life was lost forever, together with the tolerance and joyful privacy that the Athenians used to enjoy. Democracy was abolished, a military junta commonly called the Thirty and headed by Critias assumed power in Athens, and a similar tyranny was installed in Piraeus under Charmides (404 BCE). Both juntas proceeded to 'purge' the city by summarily executing hundreds of Athenians, and both were overthrown and their leaders killed a few months later (403 BCE). The restored democracy shared only superficial similarities with the polity exalted by Thucydides' Pericles in the Funeral Oration. The confidence, tolerance, and goodwill that the latter attributed to Athenian democracy were replaced by insecurity, intolerance, and the blind determination to eliminate every possible threat to the recently re-established democratic regime. Socrates was perceived as such a threat, and his earlier acquaintance with Critias became one of the liabilities on account of which he was brought to trial and condemned to death (399 BCE).

In outline, these are the historical facts that constitute the background to the *Charmides*. Since Critias and Charmides were Plato's close relatives,¹⁴ their crimes, disgrace, and ignominious death must have affected him deeply, all the more because they also contributed to Socrates' condemnation and execution. Nonetheless, the dramatic date of the dialogue precludes any direct reference by the narrator to those events. It is natural to wonder why Plato chose to set the dialogue so far back in time, and it is also natural to ask why he chose Charmides and Critias as its protagonists. These issues are interrelated and controversial. Also, they bear on another cluster of questions even more difficult to answer; notably, what is the true subject of the dialogue and what is the ultimate purpose for which it was written? An entry point to the discussion of these matters is the dramatic portraits of Socrates' two interlocutors.

3 **The Protagonists of the *Charmides***

While the *Charmides* is mostly considered an apologetic work, there is no consensus regarding the nature or the beneficiary of the defence that it is supposed to offer. According to some interpreters, Plato wishes to redress the reputation of his relatives by showing them in a favourable light. On

¹⁴ Plato's family tree is complicated. It seems that Plato was Charmides' first cousin through Pyrilampes, the husband of Plato's mother Perictione, and also Charmides' nephew through Perictione herself. Critias was Plato's cousin once removed.

the contrary, according to others, Plato wants to defend Socrates from the taint of association with the Thirty by showing how he disassociates himself from Charmides and Critias and by contrasting the virtues of Socrates with the obvious flaws of the two cousins. Yet other interpreters maintain that Plato's portrait of Charmides is relatively positive but that of Critias negative, and they draw different inferences from that contrast. There are other interpretations as well, covering a broad range of possibilities. All of them, however, share in common the assumption that the date and protagonists of the *Charmides* are determined by quasi-biographical motives: Plato aims to either contribute to Socrates' hagiography or restore his own family pride or, conceivably, both.

In my view, however, Plato's portraits of Charmides and Critias are far more nuanced than they have been taken to be. They are depicted neither as villains nor as flawless characters, but rather are surrounded by ambiguity throughout the dialogue. Dramatically, the appearance of ambiguity is cultivated by the fact that the dialogue can be read from different perspectives. The reader follows the development of Charmides and Critias within the dialogue, and also can look upon them telescopically, from a vantage point resembling Plato's own. The narrator's frame offers a third viewpoint for the reader's use. In relaying the episode, Socrates steps back from the action and occasionally comments on it.¹⁵ In the following chapters, I shall try to keep alive these different perspectives as I develop my analysis and interpretation of the dialogue. Here, I should like to briefly defend a claim that I hope to substantiate in the main body of this monograph, namely that the portraits of Charmides and Critias are ambiguous: e.g. no clear picture emerges regarding their emotional and ethical texture, their dedication to philosophy, or the extent to which they are really willing to submit to Socrates' scrutiny and conduct a philosophical investigation jointly with him.

Beginning with Charmides, on the one hand, he is depicted as a youth of great beauty and distinguished ancestry, inclined towards poetry, gifted at dialectic, and endowed with a sense of decorum and with commendable natural modesty. His guardian extolls his *sôphrosynê* and, indeed, as we shall see, the exchange between Socrates and Charmides establishes that the latter possesses certain aspects of temperance in an ordinary sense. He shows proper deference to his guardian, addresses Socrates respectfully and

¹⁵ This could raise the issue of Socrates' reliability as a narrator. Even though Socrates gives us no reason to question his sincerity, we may consider the possibility that Socrates has his own interests and motives for presenting the episode in a certain way.