

An Examination of the Tyrannical Nature of the Soul in  
Plato's *Charmides*:  
The Political Importance of Recognizing our Ignorance

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## **Abstract**

In this work I argue that recognizing our limitations as human beings is essential to maintaining a healthy political order. In order to execute this, I examine the political significance of the role of Charmides, Critias, and Chaerephon in Plato's *Charmides*. My study of these characters reveals that the will to control others through the possession of knowledge is a dangerous and violent force, a force that continues to influence modern political life. The pursuit of any form of perfection, even perfect knowledge, hinders our understanding of ourselves and leads to the dissolution of politics.

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## Introduction:

In Plato's *Charmides*<sup>1</sup>, Socrates engages in dialectical inquiry in hopes of articulating the meaning of *sophrosune*<sup>2</sup>. Rather ironically, this discussion about *sophrosune*, or moderation, takes place between Socrates and his main interlocutors Charmides and Critias – two men who the reader knows will eventually partake in the violent reign of the Thirty Tyrants<sup>3</sup>. The pertinent nature of this inquiry is compounded by the fact that Charmides and Critias are members of Plato's own family. Surely, these historical factors incite interest in the perplex nature of this dialogue, as well as illuminate its importance to Platonic scholarship. Yet, if the historical significance is not enough to incite interest in this dialogue, there lies also the fact that the complex epistemological examination in this dialogue is even said to parallel or foreshadow some of the arguments made in Plato's later works such as the *Republic*<sup>4</sup>.

The *Charmides* is a relevant dialogue to modern time; it addresses ideas

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For textual references I use the Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West translation (1986), except in a few indicated passages where I found either the Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb (1927) translation or the Rosamond Kent Sprague (1973) translation more suitable.

<sup>2</sup> There is no direct translation of *sophrosune* into a single English expression. *Sophrosune* is composed of the roots *sô* (sound, safe, saving), and *phro* (mind, thought, sense, heart), and thus lends itself to a myriad of meanings. The following are the most common translations in regards to this text: moderation, temperance, sound-mindedness, self-control, prudence, quietness, modesty, and discretion. I will use the original Greek word in order to retain the richness of meaning held in this single term. For an excellent examination of this term see Helen North, "Sophrosyne," (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> The Thirty seized power in Athens from 403-404 BC.

<sup>4</sup> Consider the opening few paragraphs of each dialogue: Socrates is the narrator of both dialogues and he retells a past occurrence to an absent third person. In both instances Socrates is held back from his own pursuits, in the *Republic* by Thasymachus's servant, in the *Charmides* by Chaerephon's questioning for detail about the war. Accordingly, in the *Republic* Socrates compares the festival put on by the Athenians to that put on by the Thracians, suggesting it was no less fitting a show. In the *Charmides*, Socrates compares Greek medicine to Thracian medicine. In both prologues, Thrace acts as a measure by which Athenian cultural practice is evaluated.

For a more concise review of the parallels in the argument and structure of the *Republic* and the *Charmides* two see Thomas W. Schmid, "Plato's *Charmides* and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality" (University of New York Press, Albany: 1998) See Appendix B.

and concepts in theory that seem to be issues that we have, in some respects, come to experience as moderns. While Plato's *Republic* outlines the soul of a tyrant who is captive to his insatiable desires and lacks self-control, the *Charmides* outlines a different form of tyranny. It begins as Socrates returns from the battle of Poltidea in the Peloponnesian war and ends with the bloody reign of Critias and Charmides. The exploration of the nature of violence starts at the level of international war and moves towards the domestic violence played out by the Thirty. Grasping a brief moment of calm, this dialogue reveals the violent nature of the individual soul in Socrates' examination of Critias, who's tyrannical soul holds the insatiable desire for absolute knowledge. Critias reveals to us a thirst for error-free knowledge and exerts a willingness to pursue this knowledge no matter what the cost to human beings.

The tyrannical rule of absolute knowledge is best illustrated in Socrates' dream. In this dream, absolute knowledge of all that *is* rules over everything, ensuring all crafts and sciences operate as they should. No person can deceive another about the extent of his or her abilities, nor can they pretend to know something they do not know. In modern language, this would mean complete transparency within political and social life; those who ruled would have absolute knowledge of the operation of all segments of society. With a city ordered according to knowledge, Socrates surmises that human beings would possess greater bodily health, for we would possess knowledge of what *is* for health. Accordingly, this city would possess the highest level of safety in face of external dangers; those who rule possess the ability to predict future dangers, such as catastrophic natural disasters or invasion by external enemies.

Furthermore, this city would allow for the best material possessions: from dishes to clothing, each item would be made skillfully, as only true craftsmen would be employed.

In this utopian city, the true 'mantic' art is knowledge of what is to be. Absolute knowledge rules to keep away deceivers and keep in place the true prophets of the future. Socrates purports that if this were to be the case, then human beings would indeed live in a scientific way. Yet, he is doubtful that the capacity to know the future would ultimately be good for human beings or lead to human happiness. Socrates brings into question whether having knowledge about the future – be it the ability to predict a future event, or to practice crafts without error – would ultimately be of any benefit to human life. In other words, Socrates brings into question the extent to which the possession of knowledge is related to human good and happiness.

Socrates' dream alludes to a tyrannical attitude towards knowledge. The dream city is based on the presumption that absolute knowledge is power. Knowledge has the power to better our lives by affording us better security, better health, and better possessions. The belief that knowledge is something we possess and can use to better our own lives is certainly reflected in our modern conception of knowledge. We bow to the presumption that the more knowledge we possess, the greater control and power we obtain over our lives. The ability to predict events of the future is not absurd to us, really. For, instance we can forecast the weather and use this information for a variety of purposes, from the mundanity of what to wear that day, to mitigating the catastrophic effects of natural disasters. Accordingly, just as Socrates' dream city was ran by experts,

most fields of modern life appear to espouse experts that have supreme knowledge of their particular field. This tendency extends to most walks of life: For the natural world there are expert biologists, chemists, and physicists that possess knowledge of the processes of the natural world. For the care of the human body there are expert doctors, surgeons, nutritionist and so forth who have expert knowledge of how the body functions. We even possess expert knowledge of the human soul, in the realms of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. Additionally, there are experts in the social sciences who claim to have knowledge of how human beings behave when in concert.

Socrates' main interlocutor, Critias, finds the dream city incredibly attractive because in this imaginary place knowledge allows and enables human control – something Critias desperately lusts after. The appeal of this sort of control does not pertain to Critias alone; us moderns share the underlying presumption that knowledge works to the benefit of our health, our safety and for our own material comforts. Indeed, we partake in Critias' nature insofar as we have an insatiable desire to possess more and more knowledge and we see this as an unquestionable Good. Critias denies any limits to the knowledge one should possess, again drawing a parallel to our modern attitude.

Socrates, conversely, is weary of the fact that a city run by knowledge would actually succeed in making us happy. He calls into question whether or not it would it actually be good for human beings to live in a political community dominated by expert knowledge. This question is one that modern man can not answer, and, rather unfortunately, it is not one we moderns seem particularly concerned about asking. This, it seems to me, is what makes Socrates' question on

the relationship between knowledge and the Good an absolutely imperative question to address, and what makes looking at the *Charmides* pertinent to understanding the forces that define and direct our own political order – an order where impersonal scientific knowledge holds enormous sway.

### **Methodology**

The *Charmides*, like other early Platonic dialogues, sets out to define *sophrosune* and ends in aporia. By the end of the dialogue the interlocutors have not been able to find a definition for *sophrosune*, yet they have acknowledged that *sophrosune* has something to do with both knowledge and the Good. Agreeably, no conclusive definition of *sophrosune* is ever articulated between the interlocutors. Thus my consideration of Socrates' question of whether a city ran by scientific knowledge would be of any good to human beings may seem contradictory due to the aporetic nature of the dialogue. However, the inconclusiveness between the interlocutors does not preclude an understanding between the reader of the dialogue and the rich implications of the text. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to engage with the majority of literature that classifies the *Charmides* as one of Plato's "early" dialogues<sup>5</sup>.

Gregory Vlastos' work has been pivotal in looking at these early dialogues. Vlastos makes an important distinction between Socratic philosophy, said to be present in the early dialogues, and Platonic philosophy, which occurs only later in Plato's works, once he had developed his own distinct understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> Vlastos lists the following as the early dialogues: *Apology*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Republic* (Book I), *Euthydemus*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*. Gregory Vlastos "Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher," (Cornell University Press, 1991), 51.

things. Such a claim suggests that Plato does not begin his own independent thought until the middle period. Vlastos states: “In different segments of Plato's corpus two philosophers bear that name [Socrates]. The individual remains the same. But in different sets of dialogues he pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabitating the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic.”<sup>6</sup> Opposed to accusing Plato of mental illness, he distinguishes two Socrates, the early one, who is more characteristic of historical Socrates, and the later one that embodies the mature philosophical position of Plato himself. The latter of which only begins to emerge in the latter dialogues.

David Roochnik, in his work *Of Art and Wisdom*, suggests that this sort of 'discontinuous' reading of Plato broadly implies that “the Young Plato used the *techne* model to accomplish certain theoretical tasks. As he matured, however, he saw intrinsic difficulties with the model and therefore sought other means to accomplish those tasks. But – and this is the key point – those tasks remained quite the same.”<sup>7</sup> Roochnik sees there to be a problem in looking at these texts in this way. Namely, this approach “mitigates the need for constructing a complex chronological story to explain Plato's development.”<sup>8</sup> Thus Roochnik is not proposing that there is no development in Plato's thought whatsoever, he merely elicits an important problem in approaching the texts in this matter. Discontinuists often use chronology to explain what may appear to be discrepancies in Plato's thought and this steers away from an in depth

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> David Roochnik, “Of Art and Wisdom” (University Park, Pennsylvania State Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

engagement with these philosophical concepts. On this point I agree with Roochnik, who “conforms to no scholarly convention” in his approach to these texts. Roochnik does not assume the younger Plato was captive to the historical Socrates nor does he distinguish early Socrates from the later Socrates that characterizes Plato's own liberated thought.

I do not surmise that Plato's early dialogues are divorced from the more complex concepts and ideas that are present in his later works. Indeed, I think what appear to be discrepancies in Plato's thought could be the result of ignoring the dramatic context of the dialogue, particularly with the *Charmides*. The tendency to overlook the action and setting in which the more philosophical discussions take place has been particularly problematic in scholarship on the *Charmides*. However, this is not to say that the *Charmides* is as developed or explicit about more complex metaphysical, epistemological and ontological concepts as later works such as the *Theatetus* or the *Republic*. The more profound concepts are certainly more clearly articulated in Plato's later works. Yet there is reason to suggest that such profound concepts are alluded to in Plato's early dialogues, and hopefully this will be apparent in my interpretation of the *Charmides*. To summarize, the methodology I use in approaching and focusing on this early Socratic dialogue, like Roochnik mentioned above, supposes no limitations by the fact that it is classified as such. I do not reject that it does have aspects that link it to other early Socratic dialogues<sup>9</sup> nor do I see this as a

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<sup>9</sup> The *Charmides* is without question an early Socratic dialogue: it aims to define *sophrosune* and fails, ending in *aporia*. Vlastos' work is appropriate here; he suggests that the early dialogues all set out to define *x*, and while no finite definition is ever articulated, the meaning can be derived from what *x* is not. In the case of the *Charmides*, no definition of *sophrosune* is ever attained, however *sophrosune* come to be better understood through a determination of what it is not. The definition of something as its negation is somewhat limiting of a scope. Thus it is best to consider this method alongside the

limitation in terms of philosophical richness of the content.

Historically, Scholarly interest in the *Charmides* has paled in comparison to other seminal Platonic dialogues. Since the 1950s, there has been a resurgence of interest in this text. While a majority of these works mention the political significance of Critias, Charmides, and Chaerephon, they make no attempt to attach the political elements to the philosophical argument<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, if the political element is mentioned, it is usually done with the intent of either incriminating or absolving Socrates (or the Socratic method) of complicity in the education of a future tyrant. My work focuses on the *Charmides* as a revelation of the souls of the main interlocutors over the course of the dialogue, primarily of Critias – a man who Plato himself refers to as evil in the Seventh Letter. My study of this text is distinguishable from any recent examination of this text, at least to my knowledge, because I purport that we can learn from what is revealed to us about the nature of the tyrannical soul, and this can help us to understand an underlying force that still exists in modern tyranny.

### **Dramatic context and the Charmides:**

As mentioned, taking into account the dramatic context of the dialogue is pivotal to understanding the Socratic dialogues of Plato. If the philosophical arguments are examined in their own right, disregarding the dramatic context, they appear

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dramatic context, setting, and the psyche of the characters in the dialogue.

<sup>10</sup> For example, C. Kahn connects the presence of Charmides and Critias to Plato's personal connection with the *Charmides*, opposed to the political importance. See C. Kahn "Charmides and the Search for Beneficial Knowledge," ch.7 of *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge 1996) 186–187. Even the most recent book on Plato's *Charmides*, does little to connect the soul of Critias in the *Charmides* to his political actions, despite a decent examination of the contemporary attitude towards Critias. See T. Tuozzo, *Plato's Charmides: Positive Elenchus in a "Socratic" Dialogue* (Cambridge 2011) especially 50-63.

inconclusive and contradictory. W. Thomas Schmid in *Socrates and the Art of Rationality* points out that the prologue is often ignored in the scholarly literature on the *Charmides* since the actions and setting of the prologue fall outside of the inquiry itself; the importance is often derived from when concepts are examined and arguments developed. The substance, it is argued, lies in the purely philosophical part of the work. Schmid argues that this approach is indeed mistaken, particularly so in the case of the *Charmides*, which enjoys one of the most richly textured prologues amongst all of Plato's work. Schmid suggests that the main themes touched upon in the dialogue are outlined in the prologue of this work. Such an alternate approach is vital to scholarship surrounding the *Charmides* because the previous seminal commentaries on this dialogue pay very little attention to the prologue (such as Tuckey, Taylor, and Guthrie). Hyland goes into the prologue briefly but certainly does not engage in an in-dept analysis of its relation to the subsequent philosophical arguments. Yet, more recent commentators, such as Schmid, Tuozzo, McCoy, and McAvoy, see the prologue as a way to provide a necessary framework for understanding the *Charmides*, which is indispensable to a sound and meaningful interpretation of the later philosophical arguments.

Schmid emphasizes that the *ergo* (action) of the prologue, in some way or another, furnish the philosophical *logos* (the discourse) with meaning. He views the prologue as vital to understanding the complex nature of this text. I would certainly agree with Schmid's emphasis of the importance of the prologue. Schmid sees the prologue to direct meaning that occurs later in the more philosophical part of the dialogue; I do not dispute this to be true. However, my

approach varies slightly from Schmid's. I want to suggest that the myth that Socrates tells to Charmides in the prologue, regarding his role as a Zalmoxian doctor, is necessary in order to understand the political element of the dialogue that occurs in the more philosophical debate later on.

In the *Charmides*, Socrates contests that knowledge is something one can possess without limitation. For Critias and the sophists, knowledge is something one possesses that allows them to control and exert their influence over others. The more knowledge one possesses, the more control and power one has over those with lesser knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge becomes the will to control and manipulate human beings. In this text, Plato is not warning us about the tyrant of the *Republic* who is consumed by his endless lust for pleasure. Instead, he is warning us of the tyranny inherent in trying to realize absolute and error-free knowledge. Knowledge, once extrapolated from a concern for the greater whole within which it exists, serves only as a means of control and manipulation.

In this work I argue that an essential element of a strong political order is the recognition (*gignoskein*) of our limitations as human beings. The desire to pursue perfection is a real and dangerous force in the human soul. However, the realization of perfection always comes at the cost of the human being. The *Charmides* teaches us not to see human limitation as something to overcome; human limitation need to be recognized and acknowledged. A recognition of our own ignorance is necessary for both the pursuit of knowledge and to maintain a healthy political order.

In order to execute this argument, this work will be divided into four

Chapters. Chapter I will focus on the myth of Zalmoxian medicine. Here, a new understanding of medicine is initiated as a metaphor for a how one comes into true knowledge. The inception of true knowledge is the acknowledgement of a whole greater than oneself. In acknowledging this whole, one acknowledges one's ignorance and rightly directs oneself towards what *is*.

Chapter II examines Critias' speech on the Delphic Oracle. Critias' holds the conviction that he partakes in the nature of the divine insofar as he is intelligent. Critias is so convinced that he understands the nature of reality that he loses any form of receptivity to what *is*. In other words, Critias' self-certainty thwarts his own capacity for knowledge.

In Chapter III, I discuss Socrates's dream, in which he envisages a dystopian city ruled by perfect abstract knowledge. In order for this city to come to fruition, human desire must be overcome and eradication of human desire means the end of conflict and the end of politics. I will conclude with Chapter IV, where I will draw a connection between the *Charmides* and modern tyranny.

## Chapter I: Human Ignorance and *Gignoskein*

### Section I: The Characters

In this section I provide a brief synopsis of the dramatic setting and the action in the prologue of the *Charmides*. The *Charmides* begins as Socrates returns from battle at Pottidea in search of the wonted pleasure of conversation. Upon arrival in the *polis*, Socrates is immediately probed for details about the battle. He answers the inquiries, but takes the opportunity to steer the *logos* in the direction he desires: he is curious about the present state of philosophy and whether there are any young men who have become distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both? (153d). Critias responds that his nephew Charmides is the man of the hour – he's handsome, young, and aristocratic – to which Chaerephon and the others happily agree. Chaerephon and the others suggest that they strip Charmides and expose his beautiful body for Socrates viewing pleasure. Socrates, however, is more concerned with whether Charmides' outward beauty mirrors the inner beauty of his soul. Critias assures Socrates that Charmides is notably distinguished for his well-formed soul. Socrates suggests that, if this is the case, then prior to undressing the body of the beautiful boy, they should begin with an undressing of Charmides soul by engaging in a discussion with him (154e).

Despite the fact that it is Socrates' idea to engage with the boy, Critias cunningly orchestrates the discussion into action. As of late, Charmides “complains of a headache when he gets up in the morning” (155b), so Critias calls Charmides over to meet a doctor, Socrates, who he tells to pretend to know a

remedy for such thing<sup>11</sup>. Hyland rightly points out that Charmides morning headaches are likely to be little more than a hangover from Charmides' excessive engagement in the drinking festivities of the previous evening. Socrates plays along with what is requested of him by Critias, while Charmides makes his way over to the older men. Our first glimpse of Critias' character is present in this passage: he is clever and intelligent. He knows that veiling Socrates in the cloak of a doctor will appeal to Charmides' interest in potentially putting an end to his headaches. In other words, Critias wants Charmides to engage with Socrates, and knows what role Socrates needs to take on in order to lure Charmides into conversation with the older man. Accordingly, he does not wait for Socrates to answer him, or contribute to his plan. Critias knows what he wants and knows how to use his wit to persuade others to give it to him.

Once Charmides arrives to the place where the men are seated, a commotion occurs when each man, driven by impulse, tries to push his neighbour so that he could be sat next to the attractive young boy. Each man, lead by his own *eros* for Charmides affection, contends with the other men. The pushing continues until the man sat on the end stood up, which pushed the men on other end off sideways. There is a jovial tone to this opening act, and the scene is described in a manner that elicits a sense of comic lightness into the scene. However, for the first time in the dialogue, we are pointed towards the relationship between erotic desires of the body and conflict that can derive therefrom. Each of the men pursuing his own carnal desire is indeed what lead to

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<sup>11</sup> I think this very well could be the case, yet Charmides disordered soul runs deeper than his propensity to engage in excess; his disorder also stems from his overly submissive nature.

the commotion.

Eventually, the beautiful Charmides chooses a seat between Critias and Socrates. What follows is Socrates own account of being overcome with passion, the only instance in the entire Platonic corpus. Importantly, Socrates references his reader three times in this passage,<sup>12</sup> and this is the only instance when Socrates directly addresses his reader in any of the three dialogues narrated by him (*Republic*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*). Each time this is done, it is in reference to the erotic affect of Charmides as he enters, approaches Socrates, and then gazes into Socrates eyes.

West and West argue that Socrates is employing rhetoric to remind the reader of his or her own erotic desire by giving a description of his own passion. They contest that Socrates had not lost control of himself and become privy to his desire to indulge in the beauty of Charmides' flesh. Instead, Socrates describes his desire only to remind the reader of something quite familiar to all human beings, that is, how easily one can be pulled toward erotic desire. This very well may be the case, at the very least it seems likely that Socrates is embellishing his physical desire for Charmides, in order for the reader to recall the basic pleasure of the body that are henceforth overlooked after this section of the dialogue.

Socrates admits to being in perplexity here: his former boldness, and assurance in his ability to converse with Charmides with ease, now escapes him (155c6-7). Charmides looks at Socrates in such an irresistible (*amekanon*) way and

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<sup>12</sup> Specifically: (154b8): '*Emoimenoivn, ohetaire, ouden stathmeton*'; (155c5): '*enta thamentoi, dphile, ego ede eporoun*'; and (155d3): '*tote de, ogennada, eldon te la entbs tou himatiou kal ephlegome*.'

was just about to ask Socrates about his knowledge of the headache drug, when all of a sudden they are encircled by a wrestling school. The external flow of the wrestling school (moving around them in a complete circle) is meant to portray the internal violence of erotic desire that has encircled Socrates. And it is right at that moment that Socrates sees into Charmides cloak and becomes inflamed, or on fire, and no longer himself. He recalls the words of Cydias that “a fawn coming opposite a lion should beware lest he be taken as a portion of the meat.” (155d7-8). When referring to the words of another, Socrates is able to identify himself in a position of weakness, where he can be devoured like a piece of meat. Socrates' recognition of his present situation, allows him to come back to himself and to his previous intention, and enables him to answer the question posed by Charmides.

Charmides inquires about the alleged remedy for his headaches and Socrates manages to come back to his senses and answer him that he does. This act is important because the reader witnesses Socrates inner act of self-control. Socrates experiences *eros* for the beautiful young boy, and it is through his logos (his words) that he is brought back into himself. The passage is also our first introduction to the relationship between body and soul. It is important because it is Socrates' own description of what occurs to him in the presence of erotic desire, as well as his recognition of himself through his speech, that he is able to come back into himself and carry on conversation. It provides a sensual description of the overpowering force of desire accounted through his own experience. Indeed, the reader witnesses as Socrates' pursuit of the pleasure of conversation with Charmides, mitigates his desire for the bodily pleasure of Charmides body. We

also witness the relationship between external forces (represented by the chaos of the encircling wrestlers), and the internal battle one wrestles with when overcome with the commotion of desire.

Returning to the dialogue, Charmides, curious, asks Socrates what the cure is. Socrates responds that he learnt a charm (*epōidē*) and knows of an herb (*phúllon*) and, together, they compose a remedy for his headaches. The two must work in concert with one another in order to be effective; the herb is of no use without the charm. Charmides' first impulse is to ask if he can write the charm down while Socrates dictates to him. Charmides assumes the charm is a series of words told to him from an authoritative source, therefore he understands his own role in the process to be one of submission, not active participation. This response reveals a facet of Charmides' character: he is used to being told what to do and sees his role to be one of passively listening to these directions. Furthermore, Charmides also sees the charm as something he can possess. Opposed to requiring an engagement between both himself and Socrates, Charmides perceives the charm to be something that will be given to him and, once possessed by him, he will use it to cure himself.

After Charmides has made this comment, Socrates asks if he knows who he is. Charmides affirms that he does, he certainly knows what Socrates is known for, that is, he has formed an opinion of him. Presumably, this is meant to infer that Charmides is familiar with what Socrates is known for, his method and the effect he has on his interlocutors. Socrates states that initially he was unsure what method he was going to use to demonstrate the power of the remedy to Charmides. Now, after Charmides has revealed a bit about himself, Socrates

begins to tell Charmides the myth. Hence we know that the myth will be catered to Charmides specifically, as Socrates has stated so explicitly.

In closing, from the opening scene we are introduced to two factors: the presence of our erotic desire, and our desire to possess knowledge. Socrates' narrative account of his manic overcoming of erotic desire for Charmides in the early moments of the prologue remind us of the tension between our bodies and our souls. Even Socrates presents himself as susceptible to passions of the flesh, and this points to his, and all human beings, existence as soul connected to body. That is, human beings are inescapably embodied. Socrates own awareness of his predicament, reminded him that he did not want to be prey to the lion in Charmides, and his speech brought him back into himself. Accordingly, we witness a scene where all the men, also experience the same desire for Charmides and come into conflict with one another in order to realize their desire. While all the men espouse an erotic desire for Charmides and show that in their actions, Charmides speech reveals a desire to possess knowledge, revealing a glimpse of his will to possess knowledge, something that will be argued in full by Critias in the latter half of the dialogue.

## **Section II: The Myth**

The following section will outline the myth presented by Socrates, a myth that brings into importance the connection between body and soul. In this myth, Socrates places utmost importance upon the health of the soul. In order for the body to be in health, the soul must first be in order.

Socrates begins by telling Charmides that the nature of his method is not

to cure the head alone. The reputation of good doctors, he says, is that they work in the following manner: if you go to them with a pain in the eyes, they are likely to tell you that the eyes alone cannot be cured, it is necessary to treat the head at the same time. Moreover, just as the eyes cannot be treated without taking the entire head into account, neither can the head be cured without treating the whole body. Good doctors, Socrates tells Charmides, plan a regime for the whole body in order to treat and cure the part that is affected. In other words, good doctors treat the part alongside the whole, the part is cured simultaneously to the whole, not separate from it. When asked by Socrates if he has noticed this, Charmides affirms that he has.

Socrates, delighted with Charmides approval, begins to feel his former confidence returning to him. Here, having told Charmides about the principle on which the charm is founded and having received his approval of it, he begins to tell Charmides about the charm. He begins by mentioning a Thracian doctor who taught him about his divine king, called Zalmoxis who is said to make men immortal. Before delving into an examination of Socrates' myth, it seems necessary to first acknowledge the historical legend of Zalmoxis. Indeed, the Zalmoxis mentioned here is in some respects the fictionalization of Plato, I will not contest that. However, D. J. Murphy suggests that Plato's original audience believed that Thracians had special powers of music and healing<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, there is historical evidence, largely furnished by Herodotus, that there was a divine figure called Zalmoxis in Thrace.

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<sup>13</sup> D. J. Murphy, "Doctors of Zalmoxis and Immortality in the Charmides," (Augustin, Germany: Verlag, 2000) 288.

Herodotus tells of the Gatae, the bravest and most law abiding of the Thracians, who claim immortality, or, that they do not die<sup>14</sup>. Instead, those who perish go to the God [*daimon*] Zalmoxis. Mircea Eliade, an important commentator on this subject, suggests that there was considerable legend surrounding this cult: either the legend amongst Greeks in the area, or Herodotus himself, “had integrated what they had learned about Zalmoxis, his doctrine, and his cult, into a Pythagorean spiritual horizon”<sup>15</sup>. Zalmoxis, then, is connected to Pythagoras, who we know also taught of the immortality of the soul. Yet, Eliade seems to suggest that this could be due to the meddling of Herodotus or other Greek legends. However, the link between these two is still significant: It suggests that if Pythagoras is the source of Zalmoxis's religious doctrine then “the Getic god involved belief in the immortality of the soul and certain rites of the initiatory type. Through the rationalism and euhemerism of Herodotus, or of his informants, we divine that the cult had the character of a Mystery religion.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the legend of Zalmoxis extends beyond just the notion of an immortal soul to a practice of mystery rite and ritual.

Furthermore, Eliade suggests that from Herodotus's account we can infer that Zalmoxis is not a supernatural being of the cosmic or institutional type, understood to have begun with the tradition. While Herodotus mentions other inaugural Greek Gods (Ares, Dionysus, or Artemis) who are part of the tradition, Zalmoxis “makes his appearance in a religious history that precedes him”<sup>17</sup>. He is not a canonical Greek God in Thrace, yet Zalmoxis does induce a new epoch in

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<sup>14</sup> Herodotus, “The Histories” (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 4.93.

<sup>15</sup> Eliade Mircea, “Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God”, (Univ of Chicago Press: 1972), 259.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

eschatological terms. He bears a message concerning the survival and immortality of the soul. And he reveals this message to the Gatae through “a well known mythico-ritual scenario of 'death' (occultation) and 'return to earth' (epiphany), a scenario used by various figures engaged in founding a new era or establishing an eschatological cult.”<sup>18</sup> In short, Zalmoxis represents the death of an old understanding and the birth of a new conception – a common mythico-ritual practice found in the world of the mediterranean and Asian Minor at the time.

Zalmoxis is linked to legends of him dwelling in a cave, yet this connection does not necessarily imply he is to be understood as a cthonian divinity. Since “descending into Hades means to undergo an 'initiatory death' the experience of which can establish a new mode of being.”<sup>19</sup> This initiation acts more as a metaphor for the death of an old understanding through 'disappearance' (occultation) and 'reappearance' (epiphany) of a divine or semi-divine being (messianic king, prophet, magus, lawgiver). In short, Zalmoxis signifies a new message affirming the immortality of the soul and he brings fourth this message by means of certain mystical rituals. These rituals are initiatory in the sense that the old mode of being is put to death giving birth to a new mode of being and understanding<sup>20</sup>.

Returning to the dialogue, Socrates is recounting to Charmides the divine

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 262

<sup>20</sup> I think that the above historical context is relevant and necessary to the examination of the Thracian myth. Admittedly, it does remain uncertain as to whether or not Plato was versed in Herodotus' account of the Zalmoxian cult. However, even if Plato did not do so, Herodotus would have recorded legends that circulated at the time and it does not seem that far fetched to suggest that Plato would have been familiar with these in some form or another despite concrete historical evidence proving so.

wisdom of the God Zalmoxis that he has learned from a Thracian while away with the army. Zalmoxis teaches that the body should not be cured apart from the soul: "one should not attempt to cure the body apart from the soul." Body and soul, it would seem, ought to be cured in unison. In fact, Socrates continues, this is why most diseases escape the ability of Greek doctors: they try to cure body but not soul, they "do not pay attention to the whole as they ought to do." (156e). According to the wisdom of Zalmoxis the soul is the source of good and bad for the body and the whole person. Therefore, if the whole is not in proper condition, then it is impossible that the part should be. Indeed, both bodily health and disease flow from the soul, according to the Thracian God. Before the part is cured, that is, before Charmides' headache is to be cured, it is necessary to first and foremost cure the soul.

Socrates continues: instead of focusing on the part, a doctor must cure the whole: "the soul, my dear friend, is cured by means of certain charms, and these charms consist of beautiful words." (157b). Moreover, "it is a result of such words that temperance arises in the soul, and when the soul acquires and possesses temperance, it is easy to provide health both for the head and the rest of the body." (157b). So it seems as though certain beautiful words cause temperance to come into presence in the soul. When the soul has acquired temperance then it is easy to provide health of body as all things of body flow from the soul. Plato's account of Zalmoxis, then, parallels the historical account offered by Herodotus. Both accounts identify Zalmoxis as divine and ascribe utmost importance upon the care of soul. Socrates' account is more specifically linked to medicine, as this is conjured through a charm of beautiful words. Once the soul acquires and

possesses temperance, health for the head and for the body naturally come to be present.

In closing, Socrates states that he has given his promise to the Thracian that he should not be persuaded by wealth, position, or personal beauty “to treat anyone's head with this remedy who does not first submit his soul to [him] for treatment with the charm,” (157b). Thus, the condition of Socrates acting as the doctor who will remedy Charmides' headache is that Charmides must submit his soul to be charmed with the Thracian charm (to which he does agree). In this sense, this myth is, in and of itself, a form of initiation. Charmides must resign to having his soul examined by Socrates. Recall that according to Herodotus' historical account Zalmoxis is known to represent the death of a former mode of being and the rebirth of a new understanding; he represents an initiatory ritual where a new message comes into understanding. It is Charmides' initiation into a new conception of himself, guided by Socrates, which brings forth a new understanding of health as ultimately connected to, and dependent upon, the state of one's soul<sup>21</sup>.

### **Section III: Ignorance and the Whole**

In this section, I interpret the medical metaphor outlined in the myth in the previous section<sup>22</sup>. Medicine necessarily transcends the limited scope of *techné* and is thus different from crafts like housebuilding or shoemaking. This is why Greek medicine is wrong to solely examine the part and neglect the whole and

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<sup>21</sup> Zalmoxis' role is as the God who gives birth to a new understanding of what *is* in his initiate's consciousness. This parallels Socrates reference to himself as a midwife at 149c in the *Theatetus*.

<sup>22</sup> Here I am heavily indebted to Martin McAvoy who, in a brief footnote in his “Carnal Knowledge in the Charmides,” provided the basis for much of my philosophical interpretation of the Zalmoxian myth.

why Socrates praises a new form of medicine. Both medicine and philosophy require a recognition of the doctor and the philosopher's own limitations. Medicine serves as an example for knowledge throughout the dialogue, and here I will allude to why I think this is so.

At the surface level, Socrates' Thracian speech is directed at Charmides. His intent is for Charmides to admit his lack of knowledge concerning the true art of healing and submit his soul to examination. On a deeper level, an acknowledgement of ignorance is apparent in the act of Charmides admitting his own ignorance in order for his soul to be examined. The action and the speech (*logos*) are in consonance. Indeed, Socrates attempts to get Charmides to admit his ignorance – an action. This act “is ultimately an acknowledgment of ignorance of the whole, the mark of Zalmoxian rather than from Greek wisdom, according to the Thracian stranger.”<sup>23</sup> That is to say Socrates forces Charmides to admit his ignorance about a greater whole that he knows exists but he himself does not possess. Recall, the Zalmoxian mark of medicine is that which tends to the whole, while that of the Greek doctors deals solely with the part. In such, Socrates is removing Charmides from only looking at the part (such as relieving his physical headache) and forcing him to acknowledge that there is a whole (a much more desirable state of *sophrosune* in the soul).

Socrates is critical of Greek doctors because “they do not pay attention to the whole as they ought to do, since if the whole is not in good condition, it is impossible that the part should be”(156e). Many commentators suppose this is meant in a tongue-in-cheek manner; Socrates is not literally suggesting that

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<sup>23</sup> Martin McAvoy, “Carnal Knowledge in the Charmides,” *Apeiron* 29:4, 1996, 98.

doctors should be able to cure the soul of their patients. If this were the case, then all Greek doctors would be practicing medicine in vain as health is derived from the soul, not the body. Yet, it seems probably that, to an extent, Socrates is genuine when he states, “the soul is the source of both bodily health and bodily disease for the whole man, and these flow from the soul in the same way the eyes are affected by the head.”<sup>24</sup> It is not completely illogical to suggest that all things “flow from the soul”. Neither is it absurd that doctors should see the soul as something they can attend to. Indeed, it would be impractical to suggest that the *technè iatros*, or the practice of medicine, should be aimed at healing the soul. Socrates is not suggesting that doctors should take it upon themselves to heal the souls of their patients opposed to their bodies. Instead, what he purports is that doctors should at least acknowledge the soul as a greater whole of the person whom they are treating, not something entirely disconnected from the physical part of the the body. In other words, the doctor should know his or her own limitations as a starting point for medical practice.

What I am suggesting, then, is that a knowledge or recognition of one's own limitations is the central form of knowledge to the practice of medicine. Importantly, there is no direct translation of medicine into classical Greek; it is quite literally the physician's craft (*iatrikê technê*). There is a necessary connection between the physician (*iatros* or 'healer') and the craft (*techne*). Medicine, then, for the Greeks, cannot fully be regarded as a discipline or subject matter that can be understood as divorced from the physician himself, as the English-language allows for. There is no craft called medicine separate to the physician himself,

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

instead healing is the craft that the physician practices. The human being is inseparable from his art.

Evidently, there are many different forms of knowledge or knowing involved in the physician's craft. A profound examination of all the forms of knowledge necessary for medical practice and their interrelation is far beyond the argument at hand. However, I will address the central Greek terms for knowledge addressed in the *Charmides*. Surely, the doctor must be able to identify the illness and have learnt the skills necessary to heal his patient. In the prologue at 155b, the first use of the term knowledge (at least in regards to medicine) is given by Critias. He suggests Socrates pretend to have knowledge (*epistasthai*) of some drug for the head. At 165c of the *Charmides* Socrates states that medicine, i.e., the physician's craft (*iatrikê technê*), is the knowledge (*epistêmê*) of health. *Episteme* can be translated to 'knowledge' while *epistasthai* is the verb equivalent that means 'to have knowledge'<sup>25</sup>. In short, the physician's craft requires both knowledge of a skill as in *technê* and knowledge of the more theoretical form of knowledge of *episteme*.

Furthermore, a third form of knowledge as a form of recognition (*gignòskein*) is used in the text in relation to the medical art at 164c, where Socrates proposes that the doctor could have done something beneficial while being ignorant of how he himself did it. Critias is appalled at this suggestion, implying that the doctor must recognize how he benefitted his patient. Indeed, recognition (*gignoskein*) is an important form of knowledge for the doctor to have.

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<sup>25</sup> In the *Charmides*, *episteme* is also used to designate varying branches of learning, as we do with 'sciences' today. See Plato, "Charmides" trans by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (1986), see footnote 46, 36.

A doctor cannot be ignorant of how he cured his patient, he must recognize how he did it.

*Gignoskein* is classifiable as a 'progressive perfect' wherein the present is understood to be a progressive expression of a process begun in the past<sup>26</sup>. In this sense 'recognition' is a process that begins at the birth of the individual and continues into the present state. Importantly, it is a form of knowing or understanding that began in the past, but continually exists into the present. In that sense, it is a continual 'coming into knowing' that the individual experiences in the present. One cannot '*gignoskein*' the future, as it is a sense of knowing firmly rooted in one's own experience. *Gignoskein* is often translated as knowledge in the sense of 'coming to know' or realizing<sup>27</sup>. In the practice of medicine, *gignoskein* is a form of self-reflexive knowledge; it is knowledge that sees itself. A good doctor looks upon himself and sees his own limitations. Based on the process of learning that began in the past, he realizes the way in which his own abilities are limited and thereby acts accordingly. The point I am making is that while the doctor's knowledge certainly involves a degree of theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) and practical skill (*techne*), it also requires a different form of knowledge, one that enables the practicing doctor to recognize the limits of his own abilities.

Knowing the limitations of one's ability is not entirely foreign to ancient Greek medicine; as part of the Hippocratic corpus. As Sara Brill points out:

The practice of refusal of treatment is explicitly defended in the essays 'On *Techne*' and 'Prognostic'. These texts suggest that the

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<sup>26</sup> Smyth, "Greek Grammar", para 1885a.

<sup>27</sup> Related nouns are *gnōrimos* 'acquaintance' (occurs at 153a and c) and *gnōsis*, 'cognition' (at 169e).

doctor's awareness of his own capacities and the limits of his art is a necessary element of medical practice. In order to appropriately refuse treatment, a physician must be aware of the limits of the practice of medicine, and must have firmly in mind his own capacities. The physician is implicated and at stake in his practice in such a way as to make self-knowledge a requisite part of his practice. The necessity for such self-knowledge and restraint is another element that marks medicine off from many other *technai*. A carpenter can refuse to build chairs for a person, but the art of carpentry does not depend on the ability to do so.<sup>28</sup>

A doctor must be aware of his own capacities and the limitations he faces in his medical practice. In other words, the doctor must be cognisant of something that exists beyond the part that he focuses on. A recognition of this greater whole is necessary for good practice.

Does the above imply that we take the following statement literally: "one should not attempt to cure the eyes apart from the head, nor the head apart from the body, so one should not attempt to cure the body apart from the soul"<sup>29</sup>? Should doctors be expected to heal the soul of their patients? Certainly not. Surely, it is beyond the scope of Greek doctors to consider the soul and this passage should be taken metaphorically to an extent. However, I do not think we can take Socrates' statement as a rhetorical device used to convince Charmides to agree to his examination of the soul. There is a degree to which the above passage should be taken literally: any good doctor must take into account the whole of a person – the soul and the body – to the extent that they are able.

In fact, this view was not at odd with Greek medicine of the time: According to D Tsekoyrakis, the application of herbs would be accompanied by certain chants. He also mentions that the Hippocratics, the most renowned school

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<sup>28</sup> Sara Brill, "Medical Moderation in Plato's *Symposium*", *Studies in the History of Ethics*, Symposium on Bioethics, [www.historyofethics.org](http://www.historyofethics.org), November, 2006

<sup>29</sup> Plato, 156e.

of medicine of the time, accepted the more holistic view of the human being that Plato ascribed to Zalmoxian medicine here. However, the holistic element of medicine should not be overemphasized. The doctor, surely, would not be able to fully and adequately heal the soul of his patient nor should he be expected to. Logistically, it would be madness. So, whether it is possible or not for the doctor to heal his patient's soul is beyond the point. What is significant is that doctors should at least acknowledge that there is a whole that exists (the soul of the human being) that he must attend to the best he can. By admitting of the presence of a whole greater than the part in which he is to cure, the physician is aware of the limitations of his own capacities. It is this acknowledgement, or self-awareness, that leads to good practice.

Is there is a general form of knowledge that parallels the metaphor of a doctor practicing his craft? Is there a type of knowledge which restores one's soul to balance and rightly directs one's pursuit of knowledge? Just as the doctor must consider the whole, the philosopher too needs to consider the whole. There are several other Platonic dialogues where this is referred to or stated explicitly (*Theaet* 174a, 175c, 181 a; *Rep* 486a, *Symp* 202e; *Phaedrus* 270c). It comes across as somewhat paradoxical: in the acknowledgement of the whole of knowledge one also admits to ignorance. In acknowledging a whole of knowledge that one does not immediately possess is to admit that the philosopher does not know everything. Ignorance is itself a part of knowledge: by acknowledging that there is a greater whole of knowledge that one must strive towards also implies that one must admit a state of ignorance. In such state, one does not know all there is to know and he is aware of this fact. In other words, the "recognition of

ignorance acknowledges the whole from which they are presently excluded from knowing”<sup>30</sup>. That is to say any form of knowledge implies an acknowledgement of what one does not know.

The connection between the part and the whole, exemplified through medicine and the body and soul, is part of a deeper and underlying epistemological problem. The recognition that all knowledge is partial knowledge is foundational to the role of both the philosopher and the (proper) doctor. The doctor must take into account the whole of the person he is attending to; he must acknowledge something beyond himself and know the limits of his own capacities. It is this recognition that allows him to properly practice medicine; it is only in admission of the inevitable limitations of his ability that he can have more profound knowledge about, and ability to heal, a singular part of the body. Accordingly, the philosopher must acknowledge that there is a whole of knowledge that he does not have. He admits to a knowledge beyond himself, which is his acknowledgement of ignorance – ignorance of the whole. Yet, this admission of ignorance also implies the recognition of a whole of knowledge that exists beyond him, which provides an ideal for which he is to strive. The philosopher must constantly be in recognition of his ignorance in order to partake in the whole of knowledge.

Then “the soul, my dear friend, is cured by means of certain charms, and these charms consist of beautiful words,” (157a). From these 'beautiful words' “temperance arises in the soul” (157a). Certainly it is unclear at this point in our examination what these 'beautiful words' consist of. Yet, it seems reasonable to

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<sup>30</sup> McAvoy, “Carnal Knowledge,” 98.

suppose that these 'beautiful words' begin with an admission of a whole of knowledge beyond oneself<sup>31</sup>. According to Herodotus, Zalmoxis is known to represent the birth of a former mode of being and the rebirth of a new understanding; he represents an initiatory ritual where a new form of consciousness comes about. Socrates, by introducing the authority of Zalmoxis, brings forth a new understanding of bodily health as ultimately connected to, and dependent upon, the state of one's soul. This parallels what Charmides is meant to experience: a change in his consciousness occurs as he comes to understand that he is ignorant in regards the true relationship between soul and body. One is initiated when he or she submits to having their soul examined by Socrates and the charm can only begin to work its magic once they accept the possibility that they are ignorant.

When Charmides asked Socrates to dictate the charm to him, it was noticed that Charmides conceived of knowledge as something he could possess. Socrates would dictate the charm to him, he would write it down and then use it to cure himself, or so seemed reasonable to Charmides. Yet in his account of the Zalmoxian myth, Socrates aimed to refute the proposition that knowledge is something one possesses. Socrates initiated Charmides into a new understanding of the relationship between body and soul. More importantly, in doing so

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<sup>31</sup> For an in depth and well constructed examination of what these charms entail and whether or not they are used on either Charmides or Critias see Mark McPherran "Socrates and Zalmoxis on Drugs, Charms, and Purification" in *Apeiron* 37 (1):11 - 33 (2004). McPherran concludes that Socrates does not perform charms on Charmides and Critias because "the disharmony of their souls runs so deep that no song could produce even the slightest of harmonics" in their souls (33). The charms, he argues, can only be applied to a human soul who is able to first submit himself to them. Neither Critias nor Charmides is able to do this. In other words, the souls of both Charmides and Critias are so disordered that there is no hope of restoring them to balance through charms. The *Charmides* is not a process whereby Socrates charms his two interlocutors, it is an uncovering of Critias and Charmides discordant souls.

Socrates outlined a new understanding of how the human soul comes into true knowledge, through an acknowledgement of the limitations all human beings face. Socrates' myth directly opposed the claim that knowledge is something one possesses as advanced by Critias, Charmides, and the sophists. Indeed, the recognition (*gignoskein*) of one's own ignorance is necessary for knowledge to be rightly directed towards the Good. This is because *gignoskein* of ourselves calls us to be present, it is a form of knowing that is not directed at the future, but instead at the present, by recalling the past<sup>32</sup>. And it is this sense of knowing our own present limitations that rightly directs the philosopher in the pursuit of knowledge, as well as the physician in pursuit of health.

In Chapter I, I addressed the importance of the prologue of the Charmides. By careful examination of the actions and banter, the setting, as well as those present interesting elements were revealed. Socrates' recount of his overcoming of desire for the young, beautiful Charmides, conveyed the preeminent connection between the human body and the human soul and mind. The myth of Zalmoxian medicine proposed we move away from narrowly examining the part and ignoring the whole, a philosophy that was rumoured to be practiced in Greek medicine. Ultimately, the moving away from this narrow and technical examination of what *is* begins by acknowledging what we do not know. Our ignorance is indeed central to our knowledge.

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<sup>32</sup> If we understand *gignoskein* as the progressive expression of a process of knowing begun in the past, as the verb sense implies, then *gignoskein* is a form of knowing which takes human experiences of the past and connects it to the present moment. It means that our experiences of the past form the judgement from which we know something, someplace or someone, and this is why 'recognize' is often used as the English translation. It is a form of knowing firmly rooted in our own past experience.

## **Chapter II: The Delphic Oracle as Human Nature**

Chapter I of this work examined how Socrates' myth brought to our attention a new understanding of how the soul comes into true knowledge, which begins with a recognition of our own limitations. I argued that Socrates' myth aimed to counter the claim that knowledge is something one possesses. True knowledge begins with the recognition of the whole of knowledge that one does not possess. In Chapter II, I address how a lack of recognition (*gignoskein*) of ourselves, and denial of our place between beasts and Gods, precludes our ability to properly direct knowledge to our benefit. The link between knowledge and the divine is made explicitly clear in both Critias' actions and his speech throughout the dialogue.

In section I, I outline the build up to Critias' speech on the Delphic Oracle and provide an interpretation of how Critias' psyche is revealed in his speech and action early on in the dialogue. In section II, I address Critias' speech on the inscriptions at Delphi and his understanding of the meaning of 'know thyself' (*gnōthi seauton*). Knowing oneself is reduced from a moral council of the Gods to a common greeting, now placing intelligent human beings on equal plane to the Gods, exempting the intelligent from moral self-regulation. In section III I will look to Socrates' understanding of the Delphic oracle in the *Phaedrus* and suggest that any sort of prophesy or knowledge must be rooted in an awareness of our limits as human beings.

### **Section I: Charmides and Socrates**

After Socrates has finished explaining the myth, Critias is the first to respond. He is pleased that Charmides is willing to submit himself to Socrates' teaching, he says: Charmides' "headache will turn out to have been a lucky thing for the young man, Socrates, if, because of his head, he will be forced to improve his wits (*dianoian*)"<sup>33</sup>(157d). Socrates was quite clear in the myth that it was Charmides soul that would be subject to examination and (possibly) need healing. Critias, however, is not concerned about Charmides' soul or whether or not it needs to be healed. How could Critias take Socrates' medical diagnoses seriously, when it was he that contrived Socrates' role as a doctor? Be that as it may Critias is nonetheless satisfied that Socrates' prognosis will enable Charmides to cultivate his wit (*dianoian*: often translated as understanding). Critias hopes that Charmides will benefit from his endeavour with Socrates and increase his intellectual capacity. I mention this to point out how Critias, Charmides' guardian and uncle, is entirely unconcerned with the healing of Charmides soul, and solely concerned with the cultivation of his wit.

Next, the main subject of the dialogue, *sophrosune* – moderation or soundmindedness – comes into play. If Charmides does possess *sophrosune* and speaks the Greek language, Socrates says, then he will be able to give an account of it. In order to determine this Socrates tells Charmides he must say what his opinion of *sophrosune* is. Charmides hesitates and at first seems as though he is not quite willing to answer. But then he suggests it must be "doing everything in an orderly and quiet way"(159b)<sup>34</sup>, which Socrates refutes. It is no surprise that

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<sup>33</sup> Here I use the Sprague translation.

<sup>34</sup> Sprague translation.

this is the first definition that Charmides provides. His young age and aristocratic family association means he is expected to act in a certain way. Charmides' experience of what it means to have *sophrosune* would align with his definition. Indeed, Charmides' social role requires him to behave quietly and orderly according to the traditional Greek expectation for a promising young aristocrat. Thus it is important to note that Charmides does provide an answer that reflects internal self-reflection and does portray a recognition of the role expected of him.

Socrates refutes this definition by suggesting that all things are done more beautifully, when they are done quickly so Charmides' definition does not hold<sup>35</sup>. Socrates prompts Charmides to look deeper into himself: “apply your mind more and look into yourself: think over what sort of person *sophrosune*, by being present, makes you, [...] say well and courageously what it appears to you to be” (160d). Charmides is asked to look within himself, to examine what his life experience has led him to suppose *sophrosune* to be. Socrates asks Charmides to give an account of the presence *sophrosune* has had upon him and then to provide an account of it. Socrates commands Charmides to look deeper within himself and respond truthfully how *sophrosune* appears to him. Socrates' narration suggests that Charmides indeed does look within himself: he first pauses and then “look[s] into himself very manfully”, Charmides takes the time to examine himself and to relate his experience of *sophrosune* to himself. He offers to Socrates, that *sophrosune* makes people ashamed and bashful, thus *sophrosune* must be modesty (160e).

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<sup>35</sup> Both West and West and Schmid point out that the argument used by Socrates to refute Charmides is bogus. I agree, Socrates is testing Charmides' intelligence and ability to call him out on his false use of logic. Charmides' acquiescence to Socrates' argument demonstrates his lack of resolve to engage deeply in thought.

Socrates manages to convince Charmides that *sophrosune* cannot be the same as modesty using the authority of Homer. Recall that previously Charmides had revealed his respect for authority when he asked Socrates to write down the charm without questioning either the alleged authority of Socrates or the Thracian cure. Certainly, Charmides character would not see it in his place, or perhaps even fathomable, to question the authority of a great poet such as Homer. Despite Charmides' honest attempt to look into himself and provide an account of what he believes *sophrosune* to be, he lacks the self-assurance to question the authority of the great poet. At a loss, Charmides asks Socrates' opinion of a definition of temperance he has heard from someone else (Critias): *sophrosune*, he suggests, is 'minding one's own business'.

Charmides greatest weakness is his lack of self-assurance and his lack of willingness to engage in real debate. He sees himself and his role as submissive to authority, by demanding Socrates give him the charm, and being unwilling to question the authority of the great poets. Charmides would prefer to be admired for his physical attributes and aristocratic position, he would gladly be admired for his external beauty – as a statue. Socrates, however, will not allow him to play an ornamental role, prompting Charmides to look within himself. It is important to remember that Charmides will become a prominent member of the Thirty Tyrants, and thus it seems reasonable to assume that Plato is revealing to us how his nature is susceptible to a complicity in tyranny. It seems contradictory, the gentle Charmides, who blushes in modesty and respects the great poets will become a part of one of the bloodiest regimes to hit classical Athens.

Charmides' unwillingness to challenge authority, be it of the great poets,

or of Socrates, means he is susceptible to being easily controlled and accepting of any kind of authority. Charmides lacks the self-assurance and courage to engage in deep thought, wanting to be left alone as an object admirable only for his physical beauty and traditional aristocratic family. Indeed, it is precisely Charmides' desire to be treated as a submissive object, rather than an active and voluntary participant, that leads him to engage with tyranny. Although Charmides lacks the ability to skillfully manipulate others for his own benefit, he is equally as implicated in the Thirty Tyrants because he lacks the willingness to engage in deep thought.

With his third reply Charmides capitulates in the face of not knowing an answer. He gives two answers to Socrates where he looks inward, but in his third answer he is no longer willing to engage. He lacks the courage to try again after facing two blows to his ego. He prefers not to engage further in the argument, and he no longer questions or defends the position that he once held. Indeed, the element of submission is revealed to the reader here, displaying a lack of willingness to persevere in face of the difficult question that Socrates has faced Charmides with. When forced to look and engage within himself, Charmides must risk putting forth an element of himself and in doing such he risks being wrong and facing an insult to his ego – an ego that has been built up substantially from praise of physical beauty by Critias and others.

Plato suggests that by revealing Charmides' reluctance to engage actively, it becomes apparent that submission to authority can lead to violence and tyranny. If we look at our modern political attitude of indifference and our lack of willingness to engage in thorny moral issues, in our willingness to take a

relativist stance, we too are susceptible to complicity in tyranny. I will discuss this more in Chapter IV, for now let it suffice to point out Charmides weakness is his submissive nature and its facilitation of tyranny and violence.

When Charmides attempts to pass off Critias' definition, Socrates responds immediately, calling Charmides a wretch (*miairos*, literally 'defiled with blood'). Charmides abandoned his vow to look into himself, foregoing his oath to provide an earnest account of what his experience has led him to believe. He attempts to pass off the definition of someone else as his own, and here marks the point where Charmides digresses from the path of self-examination. Charmides lack of courage and willpower marks the cessation of the examination of his soul. Once Charmides no longer looks into himself, he retrieves his soul from Socrates custody, offering over the soul of Critias in its place.

Socrates, continues to question Charmides, but it is clearly in a way as to provoke Critias to engage in the conversation and defend his own answer. Socrates is even so bold as to call the person who Charmides heard the definition from quite simpleminded (162b). Charmides contests this, stating that he is indeed very wise. However, Charmides admits that he cannot say with any conviction what "minding your own business" means. Once again at a loss, Charmides attempts to agitate Critias, proposing that he who said these words may not have understood them either. Critias impetuously enters the conversation to defend the blow to ego<sup>36</sup>. He affronts Charmides jab with his own: just because Charmides does not understand the definition does not mean

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<sup>36</sup> Notice how Charmides and Critias enter into conversation in opposing ways: Charmides is manipulated by the allure of something he wants (a cure to his morning headaches), while Critias' engages when his *thumos* is incited by a blow to his ego.

that the man who came up with it does not. Annoyed at the simplemindedness of his nephew, Critias says he is ready to take on the argument and his age means he is more capable.

Critias begins the defence of his definition by engaging in a game of semantics. Indeed, there is a difference between doing (*prattein*) other people's business and making (*poieò*) other people's things<sup>37</sup>. Critias uses this distinction as the platform from which to begin his first long speech. "Making (*poesis*) is different from doing (*prattein*) and working (*ergasia*), and that while a thing made might be a reproach if it has no connexion with what is beautiful (*kalon*) work could never be a reproach." (163c) Just as doing is not akin to making, Critias begins, neither is making akin to working. Critias refers to Hesiod, the great poet, who said that 'work is no disgrace' (163c). However, Hesiod's use of this phrase is meant to affirm the integrity and honour of all who contribute to functioning of the community. In this passage, Hesiod refers to the division of labour in the polis: all classes contribute in their own fashion to the common good of the whole<sup>38</sup>. Yet Critias misinterprets this phrase to suggest that making is something inferior to working or doing. While the latter can never be disgraceful, the former certainly can be, as in the makings of shoemakers, salt-fish sellers or prostitutes (162e7-163c2). Indeed, here Critias reduces the common labour of making to the shameful act of prostitution. In other words, a maker can produce anything, but a

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<sup>37</sup> Socrates had shown to Charmides at 161e-162b that a city would not be well governed if there were to be a law that each man had to weave and wash his own cloak, make his own shoes, and so on. Charmides agrees that it would not be well governed if everyone had to keep their hands off other people's things. Here, Critias avoids the mistake of his nephew by differentiating between *doing* other people's business and *making* other people's things.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas W. Schmid, "Plato's Charmides and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality," (New York: State University Press, 1998), 34.

worker must produce something that is beautiful. Not only does this align with Critias' aristocratic position, but it also reveals his disdain for the ordinary artisan, lumping their trade alongside the shameful and morally barren act of prostitution.

Critias continues, noting that a thing which is made or created can be a 'disgrace' when it is not accompanied with the beautiful (*kalon*, 163c). Work, on the other hand, is never any sort of disgrace. Citing Hesiod, Critias confirms, "things made beautifully and beneficially he called works, and such makings he called workings and doings." (163c). In other words, things done or made both beautifully (*kalon*) and beneficially (*òphelimos*) can be called works, or, they are not disgraceful. Critias concludes by suggesting that Hesiod meant that "only such as these are kindred to oneself, while everything alien is harmful." (163c). The greek for 'kindred to oneself' is *oikeion*, an expression that is related to *oikia*, translated as either family or household. Critias, then, seems to be suggesting that one should welcome whatever is of benefit to one's own household<sup>39</sup>. To affirm, the beautiful is what is beneficial and reflects well upon one's self and household. The harmful, is everything that is not made beautifully and beneficially, such as those produced by the ordinary artisan or the prostitute. Critias is saying that the *sophron* man must be, like himself, an aristocrat. The *sophron* man is not someone who makes or creates disgraceful things, like the shoe-maker or the prostitute; he is a self-serving aristocrat.

When Socrates responds to Critias' speech he is quick to highlight Critias' assumption that doing something to benefit oneself is akin to doing something

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<sup>39</sup> West, "Charmides," Footnote 39, 33.

beautifully. Socrates points out that Critias “calls things good that are kindred to oneself and one's own, and you call the makings of good things doings” (163d). The Good, according to Critias, extends only so far as to what is beneficial to one's own household and one's own advantage. *Sophrosune* is not something that is tied to the Good of the community at large, instead it is entirely focused on the benefit it provides the individual. Critias, like the Greek doctors, is overly fixated on the part and thus unable to see the whole. Critias has demonstrated an unabridged disregard for the community: what is good is a concern for one's own and what is bad is 'everything alien'.

Socrates links Critias argument to the sophist Prodicus, who also employs similar distinctions between words in his arguments. Eric Voegelin refers to the historical Prodicus of Ceos as likely the most notable philologist among the tradition of the sophists<sup>40</sup>. He is known for his concern for semantics – determining the precise meanings of words as well as demarcating different shades of meaning of related terms<sup>41</sup>. Critias, in the above passage, attempts to distinguish between certain words in order to prove his argument. However, this is not the only similarity between Prodicus and Critias: Prodicus is also known for what Voegelin refers to as 'dogmatic agnosticism', by which a belief in the Gods is explained in a utilitarian manner<sup>42</sup>. Examine the following passage in a fragment of Prodicus:

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<sup>40</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Order and History Volume II,”(Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2000), 345.

<sup>41</sup> Voegelin also mentions that Prodicus, despite his reputation as a sophist, impacted to a degree the philosophy of Socrates and Plato: Socrates was at some time a pupil of his and Plato's dialogue also participate in a profound concerns with semantics.

<sup>42</sup> Thus the mentioning of Prodicus here, seems to foreshadow what Critias has not yet entirely revealed about himself at this point in the dialogue, but will soon make abundantly clear as he discusses the Delphic Oracle.

He said "Sun and moon, rivers and sources, and in general everything that is of use for our life, the ancients have believed to be gods because of their usefulness, such as the Egyptians the Nile" and this is why bread was believed to be Demeter, wine to be Dionysus water to be Poseidon, fire to be Hephaestus, and so everything that could be put to good use (B 5).

The divine forces of the natural world are connected to the divine only because of the benefit that the ancients procured from it. Since it was useful and brought benefit to the people, it was thought to be divine. What is divine in origin, is reduced to what has historically been of benefit and use to the people. The meaning in this fragment reflects Socrates remarks of Critias' argument above: what is good is what is benefit to oneself, and what is harmful or bad is anything that is not of benefit. The Good does not have any sort of moral connotation, nor are there any Gods that are anything more than a construct born from utility. Critias' own reductionist explanation of the Gods is not made explicit until his speech on the Delphic oracle. However, the link of his thought to that of Prodicus seems the two connect on several levels.

A great deal of Critias' psyche is revealed in the first half of the dialogue; he is someone whose concern for knowledge extends only as far as asserting, praising, and justifying his own manner of being. Tuckey rightly describes Critias as someone who did not subscribe to traditional beliefs but still managed to maintain a stronghold on aristocratic prejudice. Charmides makes two sound attempts to look inside himself and define *sophrosune* but his lack of courage and willingness to submit lead him to hide behind the authority of Critias. Contrarily, Critias makes no attempt to look inward. His first definition of *sophrosune* as

'minding one's own business' is not an attempt at self-examination, nor does it involve any sort of reflection. Critias forms an opinion based on his already predetermined perception of himself and uses it to justify his own actions and manner of being. Indeed, his definition of *sophrosune* is nothing but an attempt to affirm his own way of being. In sum, Critias is a self-assured aristocrat, embodying a sharp disdain for the lower classes.

## **Section II: Doing one's own Business**

In short, Critias has attempted to define *sophrosune* as 'doing one's own business'. However, Socrates is not appeased by this answer, he accuses Critias of playing with words in a trite attempt at distinguishing making from doing. Socrates rewords Critias' claim, asking him to confirm that "the doing, or making, of good things" is *sophrosune*, and Critias does confirm this(163e). Socrates asks Critias if he believes that human beings who are *sophron*<sup>43</sup> are ignorant of being *sophron*. Critias does not think that someone could be *sophron* but fail to acknowledge its presence in himself. Socrates brings up that Critias previously said that nothing prevents craftsmen, even when they make the things of others, from being *sophron*. (164a).

Socrates then introduces the craft of medicine for the first time in the dialogue since the mentioning of the charm. Addressing Critias, Socrates asks "whether in your opinion a certain doctor who makes someone healthy makes beneficial things both for himself and for him whom he doctors?" (164b), to

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<sup>43</sup> A person is described as *sophron*, just as in English we would describe someone as 'temperate', 'of sound mind', or 'sane'.

which Critias agrees. While Critias, in making the distinction between doing and making, was primarily intent upon showing how lower class things are, by nature, disgraceful and cannot be called 'doing'. Here Socrates uses medicine as an example, a more well regarded craft than the craft of the common labourer. He makes the case to Critias that the doctor does what is needed of him, and he who does what is needed is *sophron*. If this is the case, and Critias has agreed that it is, then it is necessary for the doctor to recognize when he is doctoring beneficially and when he is not (164b). Critias is unsure if this is always the case for all craftsmen, "perhaps not", he replies. Surely, he is worried about contradicting his previous statement that making of un-beautiful things could not be beautiful. If he agrees here with Socrates that *sophrosune* is a recognition of what is needed then even a salt-seller or a shoe-maker – perhaps even a prostitute – could be called *sophron*<sup>44</sup> as long as they recognized how they properly achieved the aim of their craft.

Socrates, noticing some hesitation, prompts Critias further: "then sometimes [...] the doctor who has done something beneficially or harmfully does not recognize how he himself did it"(164c). Socrates wonders whether Critias judges those who are *sophron* to be ignorant of the fact that they are *sophron*? (164c). Critias himself is confused, it does not make sense to him that someone could be ignorant of his being *sophron*. The physician, for instance, performs a beneficial act and makes his patient healthy. It can be said, then, that the physician is 'doing good things' and conforms to Critias' definition that

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<sup>44</sup> Critias' self-assurance that only the *kalon* can be *sophrosune*, and only the lower classes cannot be *kalon*, means that this cannot be so.

*sophrosune* is the doing (*praxis*) of good things. This may be the case, yet it does not determine whether the physician recognizes (*gignoskein*) when the application of medical *techne* is beneficial or not, or if so, how the physician recognizes this (164ab).

Roochnik points out that a *technitas* such as the physician is generally considered to do good works and thus complies with Critias' definition to be *sophron*. On medical *techne*, Roochnik points out that "the physician himself does not know that he is virtuous, for the medical *techne* is itself value-or-use neutral. The physician may apply the correct bandages to save a patient's life, but if the patient is a tyrant, perhaps it would have been better to let him die."<sup>45</sup> Roochnik suggests that medical *techne* does not consider the outcome and ultimate ethical actions of its outcome; it is the physician who does. Roochnik points out that Critias realizes the limitations of *techne* here, and that typically it is applied to the production of an object external to the *technites* himself and knows nothing beyond that object. In other words, the *technites* of medicine is the object of health and is limited to achieving the final product (health), distinct from any sort of moral consideration. Roochnik refers to *techne* as "object-oriented" opposed to "self-reflexive," "and this implies that [medical *technites*] is neutral on the question of use or value, for to understand use requires reflection, not on the object-conceived as distinct from the subject, but on the object as part of an expanded contest including the object and the subject (the *technites* himself)."<sup>46</sup>

I am not entirely convinced that medical *techne* is completely divorced

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<sup>45</sup> David, Roochnik. "Of Art and Wisdom," (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

from morality, as Roochnik suggests. In fact, the first half of the *Gorgias* is dedicated to Socrates disproving Gorgias' argument that *techne* can be disassociated from moral concern. It does not seem entirely possible to distinguish neutral or value free *techne* that the doctor has, from the practices surrounding these specific skills. To do so seems to be a transposition of the modern scientific paradigm onto that of ancient Greece. However, I agree with Roochnik when he points out that *techne* is directed at some aim that will be realized in the future. The medical doctor's aim is to procure health for his patient at an upcoming point and time. Considering the future directed impetus of *techne*, *techne* is not a form of understanding that reflects upon itself. Its aim is what is to come into being in the future, not to reflect upon what *is* now. *Techne* is not self-reflexive and this is revealed at this point in the dialogue. The reader and Critias know that there is an element of self-knowledge involved in the physician's practice. Common sense suggests the doctor does know how and when he performed his art correctly. Critias is unable to articulate precisely what this form of knowing is but he acknowledges that there must be another form of knowing beyond the *techne* of medicine.

Critias perceives that the doctor knows he cured his patient (which is beneficial to both of the doctor and his patient) and the doctor knows how he did it. Critias would rather admit to having not spoken correctly "than ever concede that a human being who himself is ignorant of himself is *sophron*." (164d). Yet he is not entirely sure how to provide an account of how the doctor knows he did something beneficial. The lack of clarity reveals Critias lack of understanding of

the difference between different forms of knowledge terms<sup>47</sup> as he is unsure how recognition (*gignoskein*) is related to knowledge (either as a *techne* or an *episteme*). This confusion propels the latter half of the dialogue, and I will look more deeply at the implications of this confusion in Chapter III. First, Critias' speech on the inscriptions at the Delphic oracle needs to be addressed as it shows how Critias' reductionist understanding of the Gods obscures his conception of knowledge.

### **Section III: The Delphic Oracle**

In the above section I outline the build up to Critias' speech on the Delphic Oracle and gave an interpretation of how Critias' psyche is revealed in his speech and actions in the early dialogue. In the next section I will address Critias' speech on the inscriptions at Delphi and his understanding of the meaning of 'know thyself' (*gnōthi seauton*). The inscription 'know thyself' at Delphi is mentioned in a few other Platonic dialogues<sup>48</sup>, however, the *Charmides* is the only instance where it is not Socrates (or the Athenian Stranger) who references Delphi. In all other dialogues where it is referenced it is Socrates who employs the reference in order to make a point to his interlocutor. Moreover, Critias speech is the second longest in the entire dialogue, second only to Socrates speech on Zalmoxian medicine (see Chapter I, Section III). I argue that Critias' speech on Delphi serves as the antithesis to the speech offered by Socrates in the Prologue, it marks the reversal of the principle Socrates invoked in his Zalmoxian myth.

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<sup>47</sup> This suggests that Socrates was perhaps making a dig at Critias by likening him to Prodicus since it is clear to the reader that one of Critias' main obstructions is his inability to distinguish knowledge terms properly.

<sup>48</sup> *Alcibiades Major* (124a, 129a, 132c), *Laws* (II.923a), *Protagoras* (343b), *Phaedrus* (229e), *Philebus* (48c).

Before I begin, it is necessary to provide a brief historical context surrounding the Delphic Oracle, briefly touching upon its myths and inscriptions. Classical legends on the origin of the Delphic Oracle, were such that Zeus, in attempt to find the centre of the earth, sent out two eagles, one from the West and the other the East. The eagles collided, or crossed, depending on the account, at Delphi, which was then determined to be the *omphalos*, or the navel of the earth. Delphi comes from the root *delphys*, meaning womb or uterus. Prior to Apollo's association with this site, it was connected to the divine earth mother Gaia. According to the myth, in order to found his oracle next to the Castalian Spring, Apollo had to kill a serpent that harnessed the female energy of the earth, and in its death he asserted a more masculine divine presence. Apollo is often called a sun God, blessed with the gifts of truth, knowledge, and prophecy and he is associated with the arts of poetry, music, and medicine. He held the gift of healing, but he was also known to unleash his wrath, inflicting plague upon those who betrayed him. Although many descriptors are associated with Apollo, it is primarily Apollo's power of prophecy for which he is known at Delphi: here, Apollo's divine gift as seer was said to manifest itself, through the medium of the Pythia, his earthly priestess<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, Apollo's power to see into the future led the Delphic Oracle to become one of the most respected and influential oracles of

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<sup>49</sup> The Pythia was the priestess of Apollo, chosen from the local community. She had to be over fifty years old and abstain from sexual activity. At dawn, the Pythia partook in purification rituals, cleansing in the Castalian spring, and a ritual goat was sacrificed. Once these rituals were complete she took her seat upon the Apollo's sacred tripod.

The inquirer seeking prophecy also had to engage in several rites (the giving of offering, cleansing with the Castalian springs, and a sacred walk up to the temple.) When the priestess gave the prophesies it was as though Apollo entered into her, she becomes a mediumship for the divine. Her utterances are incomprehensible to the inquirer and must be interpreted by the Prophets, who make sense of her responses and render them to the inquirer in hexameter. See Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "The Delphic Oracle," in *Greece and Rome* 23 (1976), 67.

Ancient Greece.

Individuals and whole communities came to Delphi to ask Apollo for advice about practical problems and what results would follow a particular course of action<sup>50</sup>. Over the three primary entrances to the temple located on the site, three famous maxims were inscribed: *Medan agan* 'nothing too much', *gnothi seauton* 'know thyself,' and *Engýa pára d'ate* 'a pledge and bane is near'. 'Nothing too much' or 'nothing in excess,' refers to practicing moderation and exerting self-control. 'Know thyself' is not meant as a form of practical introspection that an individual ought to engage in, instead it has the connotation of 'know your place as a mortal.' Lastly, 'a pledge and bane is near' or 'A pledge is folly" can be interpreted as a warning that if one acts as a guarantor for someone, that someone may default and the guarantor would be left with the debt. Importantly, these maxims derive their authority from sixth-century sages known as the Seven Wise Men; but, as Schmid points out, "the kind of wisdom they exemplify was ancient long before their time. It has been held to be specifically connected with Apollo, and Apollo is indeed the incarnation of the attitude to life which they exemplify."<sup>51</sup>. Apollo is connected to both the divine prophesy of the oracle and the words of warning inscribed on the entrance.

The Apollonian presence at Delphi provides a revelation to the inquirer, as a divine prophetic gift from the Gods to a mortal. Prior to receiving this gift, the inquirer would pass through the gates, see the inscriptions thereupon, and be reminded of himself and his place as mortal. In other words, he was reminded of

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 65

his human limitedness prior to achieving his knowledge. As Schmid points out, the Apollonian ideal “was an injunction to religious recognition of oneself as living in a divinely ordered world – a world in which one could not attain happiness except through the moral appreciation of those limitations and of human community as bounded by them.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that the Apollonian ideal is not one of equality between human beings, but instead it implies moral injunctions derived from the divine. Accordingly, Apollo serves as the normative voice of revelation, and in such holds within its message a reminder to the person being addressed of his or her own mortality. Indeed, it calls the person being addressed to take part in this mortality through a life led in dignity, respect for others, and moral wisdom.

With the above context of the Delphic oracle in mind I return to the dialogue. Recall that Critias is very adverse to the suggestion that “a human being who himself is ignorant of himself is *sophron*.” (164d). Critias says he would not be ashamed to admit to having had spoken incorrectly just to show otherwise. He then begins his speech:

For I assert that this is almost what [*sophrosune*] is: recognizing oneself [*to gignoskein heauton*, 164d4]; and I go along with the one who put up such an inscription at Delphi. For this inscription in my opinion was put up as if it were a greeting of the god to those entering, instead of 'hail,' in the view that this greeting, 'hail,' is not correct, and that they should not exhort each other to this, but to be [*sophron*]. Thus the god addresses those entering the temple somewhat differently than do human beings. Such was the thinking of the one who put it up when he put it up, in my opinion. And he says to whoever enters nothing other than 'be [*sophron*],' he asserts. He says it, of course, in a rather riddlesome way, like a diviner. For 'know yourself' and 'be [*sophron*]' are the same, as the inscription and I assert. Yet someone might perhaps suppose they are different,

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<sup>52</sup> Schmid, “Plato's Charmides,” 37.

which is what happened in my opinion to those who put up later inscription 'Nothing too much' and 'A pledge, and bane is near'. For they suppose that 'Know yourself' is a council, not a greeting by the god for the sake of those entering. And then, so that they too might put up counsels no less useful, they wrote these and put them up. (164d3-165a7)

Critias makes it seem as though the greeting was put up 'as if' it were a salutation from the Gods to those entering the temple, however Critias is not fooled into believing the inscription was actually made by a God. Someone clever and full of wit put this inscription up at Delphi for a specific purpose, and ascribed it to a God. The aim was, it would seem, to change the current, and incorrect, greeting of 'hail' with the new greeting 'be *sophron*.' While it would be commonplace for a Greek to understand this inscription as a God's warning to mortal beings, Critias suspects that its underlying purpose is in fact a greeting, although he does admit that it is a strange form of greeting. Next, Critias equates 'know yourself' with 'be *sophron*'; the two are equivalent but 'know yourself' is written in a 'riddlesome' way. Indeed, it is riddlesome because not everyone would be clever enough, as is Critias, to perceive that it means the same thing. Critias does suppose that "someone might perhaps suppose they are different" and this is what happened with the two other inscriptions: these two inscriptions were added onto the first by someone who did not properly understand the significance of 'know yourself'. 'Know yourself' has been misunderstood by some as counsel, and not "a greeting by the god to those entering," which had led to the unfortunate addition of the two other inscriptions.

Two elements are important to draw out from Critias' interpretation of the inscriptions at Delphi. First, 'know yourself' is reduced from its traditional

meaning of 'know your place as a mortal,' that is, know the limitations that you and all human beings face as temporal beings upon this earth. It becomes a greeting, a way in which the Gods address human beings on equal planes. Yet, the Gods only express this, as Critias makes clear, "in a rather riddlesome way, like a diviner." The Gods, then, are apt practitioners of the art of subtlety. It is only the clever, those who have wit and are cunning, that are able to solve the riddlesome way in which the Gods have hidden this message. Critias' understanding also parallels the attitude he eschews in the prologue: he sees himself as someone who has the ability to understand the underlying meaning of things. His natural intelligence enables him to see the 'truth.'

Many commentators have noted that Critias' lowering of the Gods' council to that of a greeting renders his council 'know thyself' as completely disconnected from any moral guidance. West and West note that Critias is implying that the one who wrote that inscription implied that 'know thyself' means that the Gods, as well as the wise men who understand them, are divorced from any sort of good or bad. The Gods do not impose moral limitations upon men, it is the less intelligent human beings that do. Critias does suggest that the moral understanding of these inscriptions comes later, and is the result of men who were less intelligent than the first, these later men were so lacking in intelligence that they did not even properly understand the original greeting. They misunderstood the first inscription and were thereby falsely inspired to ascribed their own false moral suppositions onto the temple. Eventually, this resulted in the commonplace understanding of the inscriptions as council.

Here Critias removes 'know yourself' from the moral council "nothing too

much". Knowing yourself, or any form of knowledge, becomes a force that serves the individual – 'know what will benefit oneself' is what Critias means. By this account, the only aspect of the human being that connects with the divine is cunning intelligence, not applying moderation to one's own actions or doings. According to Critias, intelligent human beings are on par with the Gods, they share in the secret knowledge that there is no such thing as "nothing too much." All one needs to know is what benefits oneself, and intelligent men know this. That is, insofar as men have the wit and intelligence to see through the unwise moral council, they themselves partake in the nature of the Gods and transcend moral considerations. Those who do not have the intelligence to see through this council inevitably fall victim to concern over excess or 'nothing too much'. Thus "nothing too much" is not a warning from the Gods to mankind, but a foolish concern of those who lack the intelligence to see what is of benefit to oneself.

Lamb translates the phrase 'A pledge and bane is near' as 'A pledge, and thereupon perdition' and suggests that this traditional saying warns of the rashness of giving a pledge<sup>53</sup>. Indeed, this maxim seems to be a warning of the obligations of pledges taken on too easily, which may cause future troubles to arise. It implies that one should be prudent in his dealings with others, and not make commitments with those who he does not trust as he may come to regret this decision when it causes him grief at a later date. For instance, as mentioned above, if you act as a guarantor for someone, he may default on a payment and you would be left with the debt. Thus, this saying acts as a reminder to act

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<sup>53</sup> It is quoted in a fragment of Cratinus, the elder rival of Aristophanes. Cf. Proverbs xi. 15—"He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it".

prudently and carefully in one's dealings. It warns against rashness, in favour of careful deliberation of the best course of action. Yet, it seems contradictory that Critias would not connect this maxim with 'know thyself'. If 'know thyself' amounts to no more than 'know what is beneficial' for oneself, then why is this third maxim added on by men who mistook the intention of 'know thyself'? Is this maxim not suggesting that one be prudent in one's affairs so as to benefit oneself later on? If so, then why is Critias suggesting that this maxim was added after the initial first maxim?

I suspect that this is because Plato is showing us how Critias' self-assurance actually clouds his ability to see how he is contradicting himself. Perhaps Critias assumes that this well known and traditional saying only applies to those with limited intelligence, and that any man with a touch of intelligence would know that he or she ought to be prudent about not engaging in affairs that could be detrimental to one's future prosperity. In other words, the intelligent man does not need to be told to be careful about potential harms one may incur in the future, as he would already know this. That is to say the adage is only meant for those who need to hear these words as if they were the council of a God.

Critias separates human beings into two camps: those who partake in the intellectual gift of cunning and recognize what the Gods truly mean, and those who are too simpleminded to work out the Gods' riddle and truly understand these maxims, mistaking them for council from the Gods. Intelligent men, like Critias, do not need council from the Gods as they already possess this trait and have this in common with the Gods. This is a form of esoteric agnosticism: to

doubt the simpletons' conception of the Gods, and to believe the Gods only reveal themselves to an isolated, select few.

Seemingly, for Critias 'recognition' or *gignoskein* is almost the same as intelligence. It is not recognizing one's ignorance or one's place as a mortal. It is knowing that you yourself know, and using this knowledge to one's benefit and betterment. Yet something is inevitably lost in this conception of recognition. As one would reach the temple at Delphi he or she would be reminded of a human being's place as mortal, and warned of the dangers of excess, and reminded not to commit to things in haste. It is only after being confronted with the markings on the temple upon entering that one is given knowledge in the form of prophecy. Knowledge, is then limited by an acknowledgement of one's own limitations. In other words, knowledge is limited by the recognition of one's place as a human being. The inquirer receives his prophecy but must acknowledge the limitedness of human existence in order to apply that knowledge to the best of his or her ability.

#### **Section IV: Socrates Speech on Delphi**

Critias speech elevates human intelligence to the Godlike plane, and reduces moral council to the imbecile's recourse. Socrates makes the opposite argument in the *Phaedrus*, to his friend Phaedrus. Phaedrus brings up the legend of Orithuia<sup>54</sup> and asks Socrates, in the name of Zeus, if he believes this legend to be true. Socrates responds to him:

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<sup>54</sup> Referring to Orithuia the daughter of the Athenian king Erechtheus, who was abducted by Boreas, a personification of the North Wind, while she was playing with the nymphs along the banks of the Ilisus river.

Actually, it would not be out of place for me to reject it, as our intellectuals do. I could then tell a clever story: I could claim that a gust of the North Wind blew her over the rocks where she was playing with Pharmaceia; and once she was killed that way people said she had been carried off by Boreas – or was it, perhaps, from the Areopagus? The story is also told that she was carried away from there instead. Now, Phaedrus, such explanations are amusing enough, but they are a job for a man I cannot envy at all. He'd have to be far too ingenious and work too hard – mainly because after that he will have to go on and give a rational account of the forms of the Hippocentaur, and then the Chimera; and a whole flood of Gorgons and Pegasus and other monsters, in large numbers and absurd forms, will overwhelm him. Anyone who does not believe in them, who wants to explain them away and make them plausible by means of some sort of rough ingenuity [*Sophia agroikos*], will need a great deal of time.

But I have no time for sure things; and the reason, my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed and, as I was just saying, I look not into them but into my own self: Am I beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature? (229c6- 230a8)

Here, Socrates states that some men, men like Critias, may attempt to give a rational account of the traditional myths and the Gods. These intellectuals claim to give rational accounts of why and how divine powers are ascribed to the Gods; they 'cleverly' try to dissect the literal from what is only meant metaphorically. Socrates implies that to attempt to rationally give an account of every legend and myth is a tedious and endless task. He refers to this as *sophia agroikos*, translated above as rough ingenuity, but this does not seem to capture the essence of the Greek. *Sophia*, is translated by Lamb as 'cleverness' in this case, while *agroikos*, literally means 'dwelling in the fields,' implying something that is boorish, rustic, rough around the edges, as someone who dwells in the fields. The opposite of the rustic life of the fields is the civilized and refined nature of the city (*polis*). Socrates reminds us of a common dichotomy that still exists today: the city

represents sophistication and intelligence, while rural life is dull and lacking in intellectual cultivation.

Socrates refers to the attempt to give a rational explanation of the Gods as boorish cleverness. Intellectuals, such as Critias, perceive of those who believe in the mythological tales of the Gods to be those who are *agroikos*, and lacking the sophistication of the polis (*asteios* – the opposite *agroikos*). Socrates purports the reversal: what is *asteios* becomes what is *agroikos*. Lost in their own world of scientific reductionism, losing the part to the whole, these wise men have embarked upon the endless and consuming task of rationalizing what is, by nature, meant to transcend the rational. In such, the initial starting point, from which they seek to examine the Gods, is mistaken. They start with a premise that is wrongly founded; the myths of the Gods are not something that can be examined by reducing them to their literal meaning. It is common knowledge, any *agroikos* person would understand this, but the self-assured 'wise men' seemed to have lost the ability to recognize this simple fact.

For Socrates, it seems superfluous to consider these things, to ask whether a certain God actually did this or that. Socrates has no time for this (literally: no leisure *skholē* for it). Instead he says it seems ridiculous to attempt to understand other things, as he is still not able to 'know himself.' He must first understand himself. So is not cast away by the pursuit of endless thoughts, but looks into himself, asking the following question: "Am I beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?" Is he, and are all human beings, by nature, more like beasts or do they share more in the divine? Indeed, it is only by posing the above question

and reflection upon one's own experience of the world, that one can come to any form of knowledge. Thus *gignoskein*, recognition, forms the basis of inquiry and directs any sort of useful pursuit.

Returning to the *Charmides*, Critias' interpretation of the inscriptions at Delphi is entirely at odds with Socrates. Critias is not attempting to look into his own self, he does not ask if his nature partakes more in the nature of the divine or the nature of beasts. He already knows, or thinks he knows, that he is divine insofar as he shares the same knowledge as the Gods, as he and the Gods operate on the same intellectual plane. Beasts, for Critias, are those that lack both the cleverness to recognize the riddlesome ways of the Gods, as he had, as well as those who lack the sophistication and aristocratic stature that he has. In other words, for Critias, the beasts are *agroikos*, lacking the sophistication of the aristocratic city dweller (*asteios*) and partaking in neither his cleverness nor intelligence. The divine, are those like him, bestowed with the gifts of intelligence, wit, and a social status. Thus, for Critias there is no question to pose internally about one's nature: there are simply two categories of people, beast or divine. Opposed to a tension between beast and divine existing within oneself, according to Critias, there only exists a dichotomy.

This is why Critias is unable to differentiate between two forms of knowledge: *gignoskein* and *episteme*. Recognition (*gignoskein*) demands that man looks into oneself, to reflect upon his mortal state and to be aware of the limitations he faces as a human being. Yet Critias sees through this – *gignoskein* means being privy to a secret of the Gods and 'knowing oneself' means knowing that one who is clever and intelligent by nature is God. The saying 'know

yourself' is meant to instill awe in human beings, it serves as a reminder of the *metaxe* of human life. Human beings exist in a tension between beast and divine, and a recognition of this is paramount in the pursuit of knowledge. Critias denies this tension, men like him are Gods just as other men are beasts and, 'knowing oneself' means knowing one is God as a matter of fact. Thus 'knowing oneself', amounts to no more than self-assurance of oneself as God.

Recall that I previously argued that Socrates' myth of Zalmoxian medicine argued against the assumption that knowledge is something one can possess. Indeed, it is an acknowledgement of the knowledge (one we can never possess) that rightly situates us towards true cognizance of what *is*. An awareness of human limitation, of our place between God and beast, rightly directs knowledge towards what is good for human beings, or towards human happiness. Critias' speech on the inscriptions at Delphi provided the counter argument, withdrawing man from the tension of human existence – man is either God or beast.

At this point not enough has been said in regards to how recognition is a necessary grounding force for further knowledge. The verb tense of *gignoskein* is a progressive expression of a process begun in the past. And *gignoskein* provides a human being's ability to know but is strictly rooted in the experiences one has of the past. I recognize something as I have come upon it in the past and this stays with me into the present through some sort of memory of it. Our experiences of the past inform and direct the way in which we know, whether it be knowing ourselves, something, someone, or someplace. *Gignoskein* is a form of knowing rooted in our own experience. Thus 'knowing oneself' implies that he who is

seeking to know himself looks into his own experience in order to know. One revisits one's past in order to comprehend the present. And this is why *gignoskein* calls us to the present while connecting us to the past.

Critias does not look into himself, he does not delve into his own experience of the past in order to better understand himself. He sees himself as blessed with the divine gift of intelligence and therefore already knowing of all that *is*. He believes one must act in one's own interest and pursue one's own desire tactfully. Critias has utterly no concern for the greater community, he sees those who lack intelligence as beast and thus able to be controlled. Critias' bifurcation of human beings into two camps allows us to see how he so easily committed violence against the many during his role in the Thirty.

Contrary to his uncle, Charmides made two sound attempts to look inward and give an account of his experience in order to define *sophrosune*, and Socrates praised him for this. Charmides displayed a small instance of willingness to look internally to reflect upon his own experience. However, he lacked the courage and the will to deeply look into himself, preferring the safer route of latching onto the authority of another and getting himself out of an uncomfortable situation. Charmides preferred to be treated as a submissive object and is unwilling to engage in a dialogue with Socrates. This lack of willingness to engage is also connected to tyranny, as we know Charmides too was a prominent member of the Thirty. I will return to this in Chapter IV.

As mentioned above, Apollo's presence at Delphi was to provide prophecy to those who sought council. Yet this prophesy was bound by the traditional rituals surrounding its revelation as well as the inscriptions one would see upon

the temple, which were commonly known and quoted. Knowledge or information about the future is connected to the past and present in *gignoskein*, it was a recognition or an understanding of one's place in the universe. Critias seeks to remove prophecy, the acquisition of information, from the context in which it was meant to be revealed and from one's grounding of his or her human experience that ought to accompany the pursuit of this knowledge. And, again, this is counter to the pursuit of philosophic knowledge: the philosopher's knowledge, as exemplified by Socrates' speech in the *Phaedrus*, begins with the question of what is the nature of a human being – who am I? And this question brings us back to a recognition of what we do not know, an acceptance of the whole of which we can only ever have a part. Critias, on the other hand, is convinced that he has the part and this is conveyed to a greater and greater extent as the dialogue unfolds.

Socrates' acquiescence to the fact that man is not the centre of the universe lies at the heart of his pursuit. He realizes he only partakes in a part of the whole of knowledge that *is*. The philosopher's pursuit of knowledge begins with the admission that one does not possess, nor can he possess, absolute knowledge. Critias sees knowledge as a possession, and subsequent to his speech we see his tyrannical outlook on the acquisition of knowledge come into play. Consequently, after Critias' speech on the Delphic oracle we see the pursuit of knowledge digress into an abstract pursuit that is eventually abandoned because conceiving of knowledge in this manner (without a recognition of one's ignorance) cannot appertain to human good and happiness.

### Chapter III: Overcoming Human Desire and the Technotopia

In the first two chapters, I examined Critias and Charmides and their actions in the dialogue. I highlighted the ways in which the two *psyches* of these men differed: Charmides lacked the courage to question any figure of authority, preferring to be admired for his physical attributes and noble family ties. That is, he preferred to be treated as an object, opposed to actively engaging in deep self-reflection. On the contrary, Critias is self-certain, dominant, and unwilling to engage in any form of self-reflection. Critias perceives himself as privy to an underlying truth about what *is*. This perception allows him to logically determine that moral consideration is only a derivation of the simpleton. The inability to recognize their own ignorance is fundamental to both interlocutors; Charmides because he lacks the confidence and determination, Critias because his perception is skewed by his own misguided convictions.

In Chapter II, I argued that Critias speech on the Delphic proverb 'know yourself' unveiled his understanding of knowledge as something possessed by the individual. I also suggested that Critias was unable to articulate a distinction between recognition, (*gignoskein*), knowledge (*episteme*), and skill or craft (*techne*). Recognizing oneself, according to Critias, was merely knowing how to act in a way that benefits oneself. I suggested that Critias' conflation of the meaning of recognition and knowledge is the root of the lack of conclusive agreement throughout rest of the dialogue. In this Chapter I contend that the conflation of different knowledge terms allows Critias to propose a technical understanding of knowledge, which ultimately divorces knowledge from human experience.

Chapter III, will conclude that human existence is comprised of body and

soul and therefore all human knowledge is embodied knowledge, and therefore limited in nature. Particularly so, if knowledge is going to be of any good to human beings. I will suggest that Plato is warning us that any attempt to remove human experience from knowledge cannot lead to human happiness and ultimately results in the eradication of politics and the pursuit of justice. In essence, attempting to conjure a form of knowing that operates according to the aims of *techné* – towards precision and certainty, and ignoring elements of the human being, can lead to a form of tyranny.

### **Section I: Critias' Ignorance of his own Ignorance**

Following Critias' speech on the Delphic oracle, Socrates and Critias set out once again to define *sophrosune*. Critias retracts from what was said before his speech: it does not matter what had been said by who or who was speaking more correctly between the two of them, as none of it was quite clear (165b). Critias wants to completely forget the previous arguments and start afresh; he has no interest in resolving the issues that occurred prior to his speech. Returning to the previous argument would require him to face up to the possibility of his own error. Critias implies that Socrates is purposefully disagreeing with him and suggests that Socrates is choosing to agree or disagree with Critias based upon his own wish to do so (165bc). Critias, it seems, understands their common inquiry as a battle to be victorious over the other. However, Socrates claims this is not at all how he is approaching their argument (165c), he says he is “inquiring along with [Critias] into whatever is put forward because I myself don't know.” Only once Socrates has investigated is he able to say whether or not he agrees.

Critias' accusation, and Socrates response, are characteristic of the conflicting perception of knowledge between the two men. Critias is not interested in connecting the subject at hand (what is *sophrosune* or self-knowledge?) to himself. If knowledge is merely something one possesses, then one's ability to show that one possesses more than another is the extent of the discussion one can engage in. He is concerned with showing off his possession of knowledge, and directing the argument away from areas where his own argument may have been weaker<sup>55</sup>. According to Critias the hunt for knowledge is not rooted in a grounded search for truth, which is evident when we he accuses Socrates of not agreeing with him merely because he does not wish to do so. On the contrary, Socrates is not concerned with proving that what he knows is correct, again, as I mentioned in Chapters I and II, his search begins with the admission that he does not know. This form of recognition of himself when Socrates says he seeks out the answer because he himself does not know.

At 165c, Socrates suggests that if *sophrosune* is recognizing something, it is clear that it would be a kind of knowledge (*episteme*) of something. Critias agrees and they look to examples of other crafts (medicine, housebuilding, and other arts) and list what each is a knowledge of (health, houses, etc). Since Critias has blurred two forms of knowing -- *gignoskein* and *episteme* – Socrates plays on this lack of clarity by suggesting that *sophrosune* (which at this point has been agreed to be a knowledge of the self) can be likened to a form of *techne*. Here, then, *episteme* becomes characterized by the precision and certainty of a *techne*, or, in

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<sup>55</sup> Prior to his speech on the Delphic oracle, Critias put forth the argument that *sophrosune* is doing one's own business, which is altogether abandoned at this point and Critias is not adamant to return to it. So much so, in fact, that he mistakingly perceives Socrates to be trying to prove him wrong.

other words, as the theoretical knowledge component of practicing a craft<sup>56</sup>. In other words, aware of Critias' inability to discern between knowledge terms, Socrates assimilates *episteme* into a technical knowledge that is precise and certain. Supposing that if Critias cannot distinguish between *gignoskein* and *episteme*, Critias would not be able to distinguish between *techne* and *episteme*.

Given that all the crafts listed above have an object of knowledge (medicine to health, housebuilding to building houses) what sort of knowledge does self-knowledge (*sophrosune*) produce? Critias, rightly, answers that it is not like other crafts because the object is itself. Critias does not argue that self-knowledge is not a craft altogether and therefore cannot have a fixed object, he only makes the specification that it is not like other crafts. The presumption that self-knowledge functions as a craft forms the underlying premise throughout the remainder of the dialogue. It also probes the questions that haunts the interlocutors' inquiry in regards to self-knowledge or *sophrosune*: in knowing ourselves, do we know a determinate object? Can we possess knowledge of this object (the self) with certainty and uniformity<sup>57</sup>? Furthermore, is there a difficulty in having knowledge that is both the knower of this knowledge, as well as what is known. That is, is it possible to be the knower and the known? If so, can this knowledge ever be precise and certain, given the changing nature of human beings?

To affirm, *sophrosune* is not like other knowledges as it has no product. Critias, frustrated with Socrates continual questioning, says that “[*sophrosune*]

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Stern, “Tyranny and Self-Knowledge,” *The American Political Science Review* 93 (1999): 405.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

alone is a knowledge both of the other knowledges, and itself of itself.” (166c). Critias attacks Socrates in anger, saying that “you [Socrates] are far from being unaware of this, for you are doing, I suppose, what you just denied that you were doing. You are attempting to refute me and letting go of what the argument is about.” (166c). Critias believes Socrates to be practicing eristic; pursuing the sole interest of winning. However, Socrates is merely trying to point Critias to different forms of knowledge –*episteme*, *gignoskein*, and *techne* – all three of which Critias has muddled into one by this point in the dialogue.

Socrates responds to this accusation :

What a thing you are doing! I said, “by believing, even if I do refute you, that I am refuting for the sake of anything other than that for the sake of which I would also search through myself as to what I say, fearing that unaware I might ever suppose that I know something when I don't know. So I do assert that this is what I am doing now: investigating the argument most of all for the sake of myself, but perhaps also for my other companions. Or don't you suppose that it is a common good for almost all human beings that each thing that exists should become clearly apparent just as it is?”(166c-d)

Critias readily agrees with Socrates' speech, which on first impression seems strange considering what Critias has revealed about himself up until this point in the dialogue. Indeed, Critias' readiness to agree to a notion of a common Good is at odds with his interpretation of Hesiod's *Work and Days* (163b), and his speech on the Delphic oracle (164d-165b). In both of these instances, Critias does not conceive of a common Good beyond one's own self. How then, can Critias agree with Socrates that there ought to be a common Good for all human beings to come to know what is true? There might be a degree of truth to the idea that Critias is lying so as to avoid shamefully admitting there is no common good in front of those present. However, I do not think Critias is lying on this occasion;

Critias' understanding of the Good as what is beneficial to oneself could allow him to conceive of a form of the common Good. However, this good would only extend insofar as each human being should be allowed to pursue what is good for themselves, and ought to cultivate the wit to do so.<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly, Socrates' says that coming to see things as they are is a common Good for *almost* all human beings, not *all* human beings. Only *almost* all human beings will be able to see reality "just as it is". Seemingly, there are some individuals that are unable to see things as they really are. Perhaps Socrates is alluding to Critias' inability to truly pursue the knowledge of what *is*, due to his lack of concern beyond his own betterment and enrichment. A concern for a common Good is only possible for human beings that are not blinded by their own certainty to have affirmed a concrete perception of what *is*. In Critias' case, his perception of reality is skewed by his presumption to know the true meaning of things (which is the reduction of everything to self-interest and rational explanation). In other words, Socrates seems to be alluding to the fact that some human beings, like Critias, are blocked by their own self-certainty. Self-assurance prevents one from seeing things as they really are or from true knowledge.

The speech does, however, have the effect of sedating Critias' contentiousness towards Socrates, and he willingly engages with Socrates with much more ease after this point in the dialogue. Upon pressing from Socrates, Critias reveals his revised definition: *sophrosune*, or self-knowledge, is "a knowledge of knowledge both of itself and of the other knowledges." (166e).

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<sup>58</sup> To support this claim further, I point to Critias' apparent delight when Charmides engages in discussion with Socrates, which would allow Charmides to cultivate wit. This wit and cunning developed by Socrates' education would ultimately allow Charmides to pursue his own benefit (or good) once this wit is put towards serving himself.

Critias' definition is abstract and removed from the human being. Accordingly, it implies that all is knowable, insofar as one is able to know oneself and all the other knowledges. Yet Socrates is quick to amend the definition, amending it with the addition of a 'knowledge of non-knowledge.' For Socrates, there is always a knowledge of what one does not know. Indeed, there is always a greater whole that we can only know a part of. Socratic knowledge implies being aware of what one does not know, while for Critias, knowledge is absolute and attainable.

Critias is concerned with making knowledge abstract and removed from the individual, and Socrates tries to return the concept of knowledge to the human being. He talks about the person who is *sophron*, not *sophrosune* in general. In his response to Critias' above definition (as well as his own amendment) he says the following:

Then only the [*sophron*] one will himself both recognize himself and be able to examine both what he happens to know and what he does not; in the same way it will be possible for him to investigate others in regard to what someone knows and supposes, if he does know, and what he himself supposes he knows but does not know. No one else will be able to. And this is what being [*sophron*], and [*sophrosune*], and oneself recognizing oneself are: knowing both what one knows and what one does not know. Is this what you are saying? (167a)

Socrates refers here to the human being as *sophron*, not to the abstract concept of knowledge (*episteme*) of itself and the other knowledges put forth by Critias. Importantly, Socrates indicates that he first begins by recognizing (*gignoskein*) himself in order to examine what he happens to know and what he does not know. The quest starts with introspection, and from this point he begins to examine what he does and does not know. Socrates' ability to recognize himself is

what makes it possible for him to investigate the knowledge that others claim to possess.

Next, Socrates remarks that the examiner is able to see where he may be wrong. The examiner may find that the knowledge he presumed himself to have was wrongly conceived and the examiner is able to see where he is ignorant. Ironically, in this dialogue the examiner (Socrates) is not the one who needs to recognize where he supposes he knows but his knowledge is wrongly conceived. Critias ought to recognize that he does not know, while Socrates willingly admits that he does not have knowledge. Socrates engages in the inquiry of *sophrosune* for his own sake and for the sake of others and makes no claim to know what it is. In sum, Socrates says that the examiner can investigate what his interlocutor knows, but he is clear to specify that he can only *recognize* (*gignoskein*) in himself what he does not know. The examiner, or Socrates, cannot make the person he is examining recognize what he does not know. Indeed, one cannot make another recognize his own ignorance<sup>59</sup>.

## **Section II: The Eight Elements of Embodiment**

The dialogue then moves into what is unquestionably the most difficult and abstract part of the dialogue. Socrates provides an outline of how the argument will proceed: first, they will determine whether or not it is possible to have self-knowledge. Next, even if it is possible to have self-knowledge, what benefit might there be to possessing it (167b)? Socrates points out his perplexity and

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<sup>59</sup> Insofar as the process of recognizing (*gignoskein*) is rooted in a person's experience, then one cannot teach another or force another to be aware of their ignorance. One can only point someone towards it, as Socrates is doing with Critias.

confusion over the self-reflexive nature of knowledge, noting that this strange relationship is not apparent in other things. For instance, Socrates asks if there is a kind of seeing (*opsis*, or vision) of seeing that sees itself and of other seeings and non-seeings? He asks Critias if there is a sort of seeing that sees no colour, and only sees itself and other seeings? Critias' response, "by Zeus, not in mine!" (167d), conveys how preposterous Socrates question seems.

Socrates goes through a total of eight examples where self-reflexion does not seem to make any sense. After sight is hearing (*akoen*) and this is followed by sense perception (*aisthesis*). These first three elements explicitly refer to the connection between body and soul. The two primary human sense perceptions – sight and hearing – are listed alongside the more general term for perception (*aisthesis*). The middle group outlines forces of desire in human beings: the wish or will for something (*boulesis*), the erotic love for another human being (*eros*), and the appetitive desire (*epithumía*) for something apart from ourselves. The last two are fear (*phobon tina*) and opinion (*doxan*), both of which are vital forces in determining what a human being desires and perceives. Lastly, the comparison of the above examples are referred back to the concept of knowledge (*episteme*).

Many Scholars evaluate this passage vis-a-vis actions that have taken place in this dialogue, while others engage in the philosophical examination of whether a thing can see itself, or desire can desire itself, and so forth<sup>60</sup>. However, Paul Stern, in *Tyranny and Self-Knowledge*, makes an insightful point here: The eight examples provides are characteristics of the human being that point to the

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<sup>60</sup> West and West argue that in certain cases it is possible. See West and West, *Charmides*, 40, footnote 51. Schmidt refers to certain actions in the prologue where this occurred. See *Plato's Charmides*, 89-93.

amalgam of body and soul. Thus the eight examples are not necessarily meant to be examined in regards to their plausibility, they are meant to remind us of the fundamental elements of human existence and remind us of our embodied existence. Indeed, these faculties recall the interdependence of body and soul advocated in Thracian medicine. Just as one cannot remove the part from the whole, one cannot overlook the many elements that form a human being in favour of pure and absolute knowledge.

Our condition as embodied beings necessarily hinders our capacity to attain absolute knowledge. For an examination of the relationship between these varying human elements we have to look to other Platonic dialogue; this is only alluded to briefly in this passage. Stern suggests that it is significant that desire (wish, eros, etc) is placed in the middle between our perceptions (sight, hearing, sense perception) and our fears and opinions<sup>61</sup>. Human desire lies between the sense perception of the body and our opinions and fears. In other words, desire lies at the heart of human existence; desire is the central element of a human being. Take, for instance, Critias whose desire to control and dominate is connected to his perception of human nature and his opinion of himself as intelligent and superior to others. Moreover, Charmides' desire to be admired and praised for his physical beauty and noble birthright leads him to fear engaging in deep discussion with Socrates.

Human beings all have conflicting perceptions, desires, fears and opinions and these make an error-free knowledge almost inconceivable, certainly a unified homogenous knowledge attainable to all human beings. In order for knowledge

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<sup>61</sup> Stern, 407.

to be conceived of as an absolute possibility for all human beings, one would have to somehow overcome the human faculties that define our embodied nature and prevent us from attaining it. There is no objective absolute knowledge, particularly so in regards to ourselves, because of the nature of the human existence.

There will always be a rift between recognizing (*gignoskein*) ourselves and knowing (*episteme*). There is an inability to attain certainty in terms of human beings having knowledge of themselves, because of the presence of our perception, our desires, our fears and our opinions. We can have certainty and precision of an object as in a craft, but human beings are not fixed and finite objects. The human soul is constantly in motion: desires, perceptions, fear, and opinions all change as time proceeds. The movement of the human souls renders the study of a human beings as a fixed object impossible. Accordingly, a human soul cannot be examined as a statue,<sup>62</sup> it can only be revealed through dialectic. It is through discussion that a person's opinions, desires, wishes, fears, and so forth, come to the surface. Dialogue reveals elements of that particular person's soul. Socrates begins with the question 'what am I?', he looks into his own nature before examining what *is*. Thus it is not the study of a human being as an object, that one is able to examine the human soul. An awareness of ourselves as non-fixed objects and our human limitations is what allows us to examine what *is*.

Returning to the dialogue, Socrates questions whether it is possible for sizes and quantities to have their own power in reference to themselves. Socrates

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<sup>62</sup> In the prologue Chaerephon refers to Charmides as a statue, Chaerephon wants Charmides to undress so that he can be observed for his physical body. Socrates does not want to observe Chaerephon as a statue, but wants to engage with him by undress his soul. By actively engaging with Socrates as a voluntary participant, Charmides will unveil to Socrates his soul.

concludes that “some great man, my friend, is needed, who will draw this distinction capably in everything: whether none of the things that are has itself by nature its own power with regard to itself, except knowledge, but has it in regard to something else.” (169a). It is no coincidence that Socrates references his 'friend' in this passage. Recall that he had referred to 'his friend' three times in order to draw the attention of the reader when he was overcome with desire for Charmides in the prologue (155d-e). Here, Socrates draws the attention of the reader again. He does not say whether one can have power in regards to oneself in terms of knowledge and, further, whether that would be *sophrosune* or not. However, the notion of whether something can have power in regards to itself connects onto the notion of a self-moving soul in the *Phaedrus*. The metaphysical concept that something can 'by nature' have power in regards to itself connects with what Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* about the perpetual motion of the soul (245c). Therein, Socrates tells Phaedrus that every soul is immortal because the soul is a self-moving entity.

Lamentably, there is not the time to examine the metaphysical concepts of the motion in the soul presented in the *Phaedrus*. However, if the soul is constantly moving, then our ability to treat the soul as a static object, an object that is subject to certainty and precision, is misguided. Desire lies at the centre of the human soul and directs its motion towards what a particular person perceives will complete them. As temporal beings, what we desire, and what we perceive will make us whole, changes over time. Over time, our wishes, our fears, our opinions and our perceptions change, keeping us in constant motion. For instance, Critias perceives that human wholeness is achievable once he

attains absolute knowledge. In other words, Critias' desire to possess knowledge appears to him to be what will complete him and furnish him with a sense of wholeness.

Socrates begins with the question: who am I? He looks into his own nature and recognizes that the human condition is to desire to be whole. Socrates differs from Critias because he recognizes human desire as part of himself and part of the human condition. He is aware of the temporality of desire, which we noted in the prologue when he is overcome with lust for Charmides. This awareness of himself is what directs his hunt for knowledge. Given our non-static nature, human beings cannot know themselves in the same way a craftsman knows his craft. Technical knowledge strives for certainty and precision but is limited to the knowledge of a static object. The human soul, on the contrary, is in motion and cannot be known in the same fashion. The best we can do, the first step in our pursuit of knowledge, is recognizing ourselves and our human condition.

Socrates does not examine these concepts with his interlocutor; it is likely that they are beyond the capacity of Critias and are alluded to only for the reader. Socrates admits his perplexity about the argument up until this point. He states that he does not trust himself to be capable of drawing distinctions in regards to whether certain objects are self-moving and whether it is possible to have a knowledge of itself (169a). Critias, on the other hand, does not admit to being in perplexity. Socrates observes that just as a yawn is contagious, Critias must have caught Socrates' perplexity. Since Critias is "well reputed on every occasion, he was ashamed before those present." (169c). Critias was not "willing to concede to [Socrates] that he was unable to draw the distinctions that [he] called upon

him to make.” (169c). Previously, Socrates had admitted with ease to not being able to draw these distinctions but Critias is silent and halted from uttering something simple in order to cover up his perplexity. Evidently, Critias' own fear of the opinion of others deters him from admitting the truth – he is just as perplexed as Socrates about the nature of *sophrosune*. Critias' reluctance to admit to his confusion is due to his fear of the opinion of others. Indeed, in this act Critias is affirming the point made previously that as human beings we are limited by myriad factors from absolute knowledge of what *is*. Here, Critias' fear of the opinion of others hinders his ability to speak the truth. Critias' lusts for a knowledge disconnected from anything human obfuscates his ability to see how his own desires (for control and power), fears (of publicly admitting he is wrong), and wishes (to rule over those beneath him) preclude him from what *is*.

The human condition, it seems, is one of motion due to the nature of human desire. And it is our desires that link our opinions formed in the psyche and the perceptive faculties of our bodies. In Thracian medicine, the body could not be cured apart from the soul; the soul had to be cured in concert with the body. Critias' impetus for absolute and perfect knowledge, is attempting to make perfect only a part of the human soul: the knowing mind. However, if the body must be cured in concert with the soul, wrongly directed physical desires and false perception ought to be cured in concert with ailments of the soul. That is to say, of the eight examples used previously to describe embodied experience, all of these must be cured in concert. It serves of no good to cure just one part while neglecting the greater whole.

Stern makes the point that we all lust after what we believe will make us

whole<sup>63</sup>. Given our condition as embodied, human wholeness needs to consist of a wholeness of body and soul. Critias supposes us to be pure mind and tries to ignore the fact that we are encased in body. An awareness of ourselves as embodied beings is essential to our knowledge of what *is*. Socrates recognizes his propensity to desire – we were privy to his experience of desire for Charmides in the prologue – and his recognition of himself as falling prey to Charmides hunt is what brings him back to his senses. In short, Socrates recognition of himself as an embodied being is what allows him to thwart his impulses and direct them towards the nobler pursuit of conversation. Critias is more concerned with eliminating elements that hinder his possession of pure knowledge and refuses to acknowledge his own desires, opinions, and fears. Without the acknowledgement of our desiring nature, desire can be conceived of as something to be overcome, not something that ought to be acknowledged and accounted for in the pursuit of truth.

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<sup>63</sup> Stern, 408-411.

### Section III: The Dream City and the Just

In the above section I outlined the importance of our recognition of human beings as embodied beings. Our limited and embodied nature obstructs us from our ability to attain pure knowledge. In this next section I examine the political importance of not acknowledging our own ignorance. However, the political implication of tyranny will not be properly articulated until Chapter IV.

Recall that Critias had become silent with Socrates, so as to hide from revealing his own perplexity. In order to move forward Socrates suggests they assume it is possible for *sophrosune* – a knowledge of knowledge – to come to be (169d). Based on this assumption, the two will now investigate whether *sophrosune* is of any benefit to human beings. Socrates asks about the relationship between two crafts – politics and medicine, and the knowledge (and non-knowledge) required for each one. Notably, this is the only instance where politics is mentioned in the entire dialogue. Socrates says just as doctoring is the knowledge of the healthful, politics is the knowledge of the just (170b). Socrates makes three distinct categories: doctoring, politics, and “nothing other than knowledge.” Such a division suggests that knowledge, as they now conceive of it, cannot coexist with either doctoring or politics (170b).

The investigation that ensues considers only medicine, not politics nor the just. And although it considers medicine, it only considers the technical expertise of medicine. Indeed, Plato's brief placement of politics at this point in the dialogue serves to remind us of the political implications of the conception of absolute knowledge. Absolute Critian knowledge is by nature apolitical; it is disconnected from human beings and justice. At this point in the dialogue the

concern for human beings is neglected in favour of abstract knowledge. Socrates sketches two cities that bring to life a political order erected on the principle of abstract, technical knowledge. They sketch a portrait of the perfect apolitical *polis*, where error and recognition cease to be possible, and where the human condition is overcome.

Socrates describes the first utopian city at 171d, where life is said to be lived error-free. Appealing to Critias' will to rule, Socrates mentions that everyone would be ruled by the two of them, and each craft of the city would be managed according to he who had knowledge of that particular domain. Socrates compares the city to a household: "a household managed by [*sophrosune*] would be beautifully managed, as would a city so governed, and everything else that [*sophrosune*] would rule" (171e). Without error, everything would be done well and beautifully, and all would be happy (172a). Yet, Socrates is skeptical about the realization of such a city since they have not discovered anything close to a sort of knowledge that would be able to rule over them. Critias, overcome with lust to rule over such a city, cannot comprehend how Socrates sees this as anything other than a beautiful agreement (172e).

Socrates moves on with the discussion, not wanting to feed Critias' obvious lust for this city. He does not outline the reasons why he is skeptical that a utopian city like this could even exist, opting instead to portray to Critias a second more dystopian city. (I will henceforth refer to as the second city as the technotopia.) Socrates remarks that the second city occurred to him as a dream (*onar*). As Dodds points out, the language used by Greeks at all periods, appears to

suggest that the Greek attitude towards dreams varies from our own<sup>64</sup>. In the English language, we speak of *having* a dream, whereas the Greeks refer to it as *seeing* a dream – the Greek wording implies that the dreamer is a passive recipient of an objective vision. Most interpreters of this passage suggest that the reason for Socrates' presenting its content as a dream is in order to pacifying the content of the dream to his volatile and easily threatened interlocutor. If Socrates were to say this in his own voice, Critias could become angered that Socrates continues to question what Critias is so certain he knows: that absolute knowledge is an absolute Good. By presenting this thought as a dream, Socrates manages to convey himself as a passive recipient of objective information, absolving himself from responsibility that which is proposed in the dream. Therefore, Critias cannot become offended and accuse Socrates of eristic.

I certainly agree that this is one effect of Plato placing the technotopia in the form of a dream. However, a dream is not the only way of conveying a thought through a more an objective stance. Look, for instance, to Socrates' use of the Zalmoxian myth in the prologue, or to Socrates putting words in the mouth of an absent friend in the *Hippias Major*. There are numerous ways for Socrates to bring up a thought as though it were something told to him by another, and that gives reason to suggest that there is some meaning in the fact that the information is conveyed as a dream in particular.

A commonality between modern and Greek dream experience is that dreams occur beyond the limitations and confines of time and space. That is to

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<sup>64</sup> Eric R. Dodds, "The Greeks and the Irrational." (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 102-109.

say, dreams are realms of escape from the finitude and limitations of mortal life. In a dream, one can bring back the dead to life again, or transcend the boundaries of time in order to relive an instance of the past or to experience events of the future. I purport that the primary reason for Socrates presenting this information as a dream is because Socrates outlines a city that can only exist outside of space and time.

Prior to sketching the picture of the dream Socrates is sure to qualify its content, saying his dream may come through horns or through ivory – a clear reference to the words of Penelope in the *Odyssey*. In Book XIX, lines 562ff of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is asked by his wife Penelope to interpret a dream she had about eagles and swans. Penelope says that dreams in of themselves are confusing: they comes either through a gate of horn or of ivory. If through the gate of horn, the dream comes true, if through ivory they are deceitful. Hyland sees this as suggestive of an untrustworthy dimension of the dream, it outlines the manner in which the reader is to understand the above passage<sup>65</sup>. He points out that Penelope's dream does come true, but Socrates' dream acts more as a warning of danger implicit in realizing the distopia that Socrates has imagined:

“Then hear my dream (*onar*),” I said, “whether it came through horns or through ivory. Even if [*sophrosune*] would rule us, it being such as we now define it, would everything be done in any other way than in accordance with the knowledges? Someone claiming to be a pilot, but who is not, would not deceive (*exapataó*) us, nor would we be unaware of a doctor or a general or anyone else pretending to know something that he doesn't know. From this being so, would there be any other conclusion for us that that we would be healthy in our bodies more than now, that those endangered at sea and in war would survive more, and that equipment, clothing, all footwear, and all our possessions would be

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<sup>65</sup> Drew Hyland, “The Virtue of Philosophy,” (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981) 93.

produced for us more artfully, and much else as well, because of our using true craftsmen? If you wish, let us concede that divination (*mantikos*) too is a knowledge of what is going to be, and that [*sophrosune*], presiding over it, will turn away the boasters and establish for us true diviners (*aléthés mantis*), prophets of what is to be. That the human kind, so equipped, would act and live knowledgeable, I can follow, for [*sophrosune*] being on guard would not allow non-knowledge to creep in and be our fellow-worker. But that in action knowledgeable (thoroughly knowledgeable, *epistémon*) we would do well and be happy – this we are not yet able to learn, my dear Critias.” (173b-d)

The technotopia is similar to the first city Socrates imagined – both are free from error and ruled by absolute knowledge. However, in this city there is no mention of 'us ruling,' in reference to Critias and Socrates. Now, Socrates states that it is *sophrosune*, the abstract form of knowledge, that rules over all. Critias presupposes that the rule of abstract knowledge equates to the rule of him. He fails to see the contradiction between his will to rule over those with lesser intelligence, and the rule of absolute and error free knowledge. Indeed, Critias himself does not seem to realize that an error free knowledge cannot belong to a human being and therefore fails to see the tension between his will for control, attainable by possessing knowledge, and the rule of absolute knowledge that is detached from the human being. Accordingly, while the first city was likened to a household and thereby to the family unit, the household is not used as a metaphor in the technotopia. Presumably, this is to further distance the human being, and human relationships, from a city ruled by abstract technocratic knowledge.

All *techne* is done according to perfection in the technotopia: medicine, piloting a ship, and the production of crafts. The reference to medicine alludes to the importance between the relationship of body and soul illuminated

throughout the dialogue. Medicine concerns the physical healing of the body, and its reference here brings us back to our own physical embodiment. Next, Socrates mentions that those who would be in danger at sea and at war would have a higher survival rate. But this begs the question of how, even with the best of knowledge, one could manage to overcome the chance forces of nature like storms and warfare. Lastly, we are told that all artisans would produce the best quality of things. The possession of quality things reminds us that all human beings desire to possess the beautiful. In the mentioning of these arts, the reader is brought back to the greater whole – the purpose for which these crafts exists. Medicine reminds us of our embodied condition, war and natural disasters to the difficulty of error free life due to chance, and material possessions points to our desire for the material pleasures of life. The sketch of how these are to be controlled by abstract knowledge reveals the absurdity of such a notion, and is applied to reminds us that knowledge that is abstracted from the human being ignores the purpose for which these crafts exist in the first place.

The dream also presents the art of 'divination' (*mantikos*) as an art that has as its product 'what is going to be'. The city would only have 'true diviners' *aléthés mantis* (literally: unconcealed prophets) of what is to be and those who merely boasted would be turned away<sup>66</sup>. All human beings would be unconcealed, everything would be knowable by those who possessed *sophrosune*.

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<sup>66</sup> The comment about boasters is meant ironically. Critias has done nothing but boast about the knowledge he claims to possess. However Critias ultimately lacks the depth and willingness to engage in a profound manner with Socrates; Critias is unable to look into himself. The first part of the dream feeds Critias' desire for authority over those lower than him (the common artisan). Accordingly, the *techne* of prophecy appeals to Critias' understanding of knowledge as something that one can possess. It resonates with his conviction that the more knowledge one possesses the more control one yields over those below them (lowly artisans in particular). The city is a technocratic utopia, and those who rule do so by ensuring that everything is done according to the knowledge (*episteme*) of its craft.

Previously, Socrates has alluded to the impossibility of a soul being treated as an object. If my interpretation is correct, then Socrates is contesting the conception of a human soul as entirely knowable or unconcealable. A soul is only revealed through dialectic. Here, in the technotopia all human souls are completely unconcealed, which is something already deemed to be impossible insofar as the soul is united with body. Our ability to recognize ourselves will never equate to having a knowledge (*episteme*) of ourselves.

Socrates says that in a technotopian political order human beings would act and live according to knowledge (*epistemon*) and that *sophrosune* in this regard would keep out non-knowledge *and not let it become our fellow-worker* (173c, my emphasis). Socrates alludes to the fact that non-knowledge can become our fellow-worker if we let it. Surely, as Socrates has suggested many times in this dialogue, non-knowledge is not something we should try to overcome, it is the point from which all knowledge comes to fruition. Here, in the *sophon* city, a recognition of human finitude, that is, our inevitable limitation to knowledge as human beings, is overcome. What is left is the rule of absolute knowledge. Human beings create a craft of prophecy, and are able to produce more and more knowledge of what is to be.

Interestingly, there is no craft of knowledge of the past or the present, the only knowledge that can be known is according to a forward directed trajectory. Technical knowledge is directed towards a future aim, and does not look to the past or to the present. Recall, it was *gignoskein*, the recognition of our past experience which exists with us into the present, that rightly directs our pursuit of knowledge. The technotopia echoes the craft analogy of *techne* which has an

aim to produce something in the future. If *techné* is a form of knowledge only directed towards the future, then a city which has no recognition (*gignoskein*) of the nature of human beings can only be entirely disconnected from the past and the present.

Socrates' dream sketches what it would look like if Apollo were freed from the confines of his temple at Delphi. Recall that as one approached the temple at Delphi and prepared himself to receive prophecy of the future, one was first told to 'know oneself' and reminded of the limitations of human existence. I noted that in his speech on Delphi, Critias sought to remove knowledge, or the acquisition of prophesy, from the traditions and experiences in which this information was revealed. Here, Socrates sketches for Critias what this form of unbounded and decontextualized knowledge would look like in a *gignoskein*-free city.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the technotopia is removed from politics. A city where all human souls are unconcealed, where human embodiment is overcome, would have to be a city without wishes, without fear, without desires, and without any opinion. As Socrates points out, even if this knowledge were possible (which for Plato it does not seem to be), he is doubtful that it would bring with it human happiness. In other words, even if we could be complete in knowledge, that certainly does not mean that we would be completely whole because a human being is always body and soul, not pure mind. Again, we return to the Thracian myth, and are reminded that the part cannot be separated from the whole. The technotopia give us completeness of knowledge, however, it comes at the expense of what makes us human beings.

#### Section IV. The Good and the Violent

Even if human beings could live perfectly according to knowledge, Socrates doubts two things: whether we would do well (*eu prattoimen*) and be happy (*eudaimonoimen*). Critias questions Socrates “you will certainly not easily find some other delimitation of 'doing well' if you dishonour 'knowledgeably.’” Critias cannot conceive of doing well without knowledge, surely it is one's intelligence that allows him to 'do well.' Intelligence allows one to procure what is of benefit to himself. When asked by Socrates (173e) what he means by knowledgeably (*epistemon*): Does Critias mean shoemaking? Critias replies in astonishment: “No, by Zeus, not I!” This is the only instance in the dialogue where Critias uses the expression 'by Zeus,' conveying how strongly he sees knowledge to be removed from craft of the common artisan. He maintains his sense of outrage as Socrates lists other works of the common artisan (woodworking and bronze-working). But Socrates makes the point that as long as the argument is that he who lives knowledgeably is happy<sup>67</sup> (*eudaimon*), then these artisans must be happy. Critias cannot acknowledge them to be happy. Instead, as Socrates points out, “you [Critias] rather delimit the happy man, it seems to me, as one who lives according to knowledge about certain things.”<sup>68</sup> (173e). If living happily was as simple as living according to knowledge, then the artisan who properly knew his craft would be provided as a good example. However, Critias has been clear that it is a certain type of knowledge that leads

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<sup>67</sup> *Eudaimonia*, comes from the Greek words *eu*, good, and *daimon*, spirit and is often translated as 'happiness,' doing well, or human flourishing. It does not refer to the psychological state of being of a person, as the modern term does.

<sup>68</sup> Here I use the Lamb translation.

one to do well.

Socrates suspects that when Critias speaks of knowledge and doing well, he refers to Socrates' dream and the true prophets (*aléthés mantis*) of what is to be. Critias replies that it is in fact him, but also someone else – someone whose knowledge (*episteme*) is not limited to the future, but can also see the past and the present. Someone who is ignorant of absolutely nothing.

Critias cannot think of anyone who lives more knowledgeably than the all-knowing prophet. But Socrates makes an excellent observation: which of the knowledges, of all the knowledges that the all knower possesses, is the one that makes him happy? Critias responds that it is the knowledge of the Good and the bad. Tuozzo suggests that Critias' concern for the Good and the bad is testament to the fact that Critias is not entirely devoid of moral consideration<sup>69</sup>. However, Critias is not concerned with knowledge of the Good and the bad in a moral sense, that is, of knowing what is right and wrong. It is in fact the opposite, the all-knowingness of the divine prophet is only useful if one knows what is good for him or herself. Absolute knowledge must be done for one's own benefit and well being. The possession of absolute knowledge is the power to serve the self. Applying absolute knowledge would allow Critias to never have to face limitations to his desires.

Socrates responds in indignation, calling Critias a wretch (defiled in blood) – the same word he had called Charmides when he tried to pass off Critias' definition of *sophrosune* for his own. Socrates says that Critias has been dragging him around in a circle, “concealing that it was not living knowledgeably that

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<sup>69</sup> Tuozzo, “What's Wrong with These Cities?,” 338-340.

makes one do well and be happy, not even if it be with all the other knowledges together, but with one alone of the good and the bad.” (174c). And indeed, Critias has brought Socrates around in circles, not because he has always known the key form of knowledge to the question that they have been seeking. Only because he cannot see beyond his own self-assured stance, and has not gained any insight from his examination with Socrates. Critias continues to argue for his concept of the Good (as the beneficial) despite Socrates continued efforts to guide him in the right direction. Critias has not been looking for the Good, he already fancies himself to know.

For Socrates, there is a common Good for all human beings. The concern for a Good beyond one's own benefit and procurement begins with the realization that one can only ever have a part of the greater whole of knowledge of what *is*. In admission of his own ignorance, Socrates opens himself to a whole beyond himself. And, as he outlined in his speech in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' question – what am I? – concomitantly asks the question what is a human being? In other words, the hunt for knowledge concerns all human beings. And it begins with the realization that the knowledge one has is only a small part of a much greater whole of knowledge that exist. Critias is so infatuated by the part (absolute knowledge for the sake of himself) that no amount of reasoning or dissuasion can lead him to believe otherwise, clouding his receptivity to what *is*.

Critias' fervour for knowledge does not allow him to see that a human being is composed of much more than mind. The human being, comprised of both soul and body, is perceiving, desiring, and opining by nature. And because of these specifically human faculties, a human being can never know himself as

an object. Accordingly, to ignore these faculties and try to overcome them, as is outlined in the technotopia, can only be done in the most frightening and disturbing of dreams. It would be a city where all human beings are treated as objects and where all human desires to be complete apart from absolute pure knowledge are neglected<sup>70</sup>.

The *Charmides* ends as Charmides admits that he may be in need of the Thracian charm mentioned at the beginning of the dialogue. The prior roles of lion and prey are interchanged, as Charmides now desires to be charmed to by Socrates until he deems it is sufficient. (176b). Critias remarks that Charmides should submit to Socrates' guardianship. Charmides says that he can be counted on to diligently follow Socrates, for he would be doing something terrible if he refused to obey his guardian and what his guardian bids of him. This is a chilling reminder of what we know Charmides will eventually do: he will submissively obey his guardians orders and become implicit in one of the bloodiest reigns of ancient Greece.

Socrates reacts to the conspiracy between Charmides and Critias and jokes that they are making decisions in counsel without him (176e). Will they use violence against him, and forbid him a 'preliminary inquiry' (*anakrisis*, 176c7)? Charmides says to Socrates: "you can count on me to use violence, since he is ordering me to." (176c). Again, Charmides willingness to do what he is told, violent or not, is unsurprising. He sees himself as an object at Critias' disposal

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<sup>70</sup> At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates returns from war and asks the men about the state of philosophy among the young. He is concerned for the future of the community and the education of the young. Throughout the dialogue Socrates' trajectory moves out of the violence of international war towards the leisurely pursuit of philosophy. Reversibly, Critias moves from the leisure of the Palestrea towards a reign of violence, as the disorder of his soul is progressively revealed to us.

and thus safe from having to think for himself. Socrates responds that there is no counsel left, if the two of them attempt to do “anything at all, especially by violence, no human being will oppose you.” (176d1-3).

There is no counsel because what Critias wants, and what Charmides will accede to, is inimical to discussion. Socrates wants a fair trial, something only available where rule of law and politics exist. A just trial is not available in a tyrannical regime. Particularly so in a tyrannical regime that resembles the technotopia that enamours Critias, where human beings are only conceived of as objects to be controlled.

In summary, the latter part of the dialogue expands on the implications of a Critian understanding of human nature. According to Critias' speech on the Delphic oracle, human beings can be divided into either beasts – those without intelligence – or divine beings those with intelligence. In such, Critias perceives of himself as divine in intelligence and thus entitled to rule over those more beastly in nature. Indeed, beastly human beings can be conceived of as objects in need of control by those bestowed with intelligence. The conception of human beings as objects, means that human beings can be controlled in the same manner as a *techne* – according to certainty and precision.

Socrates, on the contrary, denies that human beings can be categorically divided into beast and divine. Instead, human beings exist in the *metaxe* -- in the tension between beast and divine. Human life is necessarily an amalgam of body and soul and our desires will always obstruct our attainment of perfection. The realization of our embodied and limited condition is what properly directs our pursuit of knowledge, as well as what allows for a rich political life.

A recognition of ourselves and the temporal nature of the human condition conflicts with Critias' lust for absolute and error-free life. The realization of error-free life will always come at the cost of human desire. Critias reminds us of the danger implicit in the pursuit of a perfect life. He reminds us that the human condition is not something to overcome in pursuit of an absolute, instead, human conditions and limitations ought to be recognized.

In closing, the apolitical technotopia denies the embodied nature of human life. Embodiment means we are desiring beings and as much as we aspire to perfection we will ultimately fall short of attaining it. Thus, such a political order can only be conceived of as a dream, which is outside the conditions of temporality. That is, the finitude of human life makes the attainment of perfection impossible. Moreover, the pursuit of perfection has the tendency to blindsight us to the complex nature of human life; it has the tendency to eradicate politics. Indeed, Critias' pursuit of absolute knowledge allows him to neglect the whole of human happiness. It will be the force within him that propels his leadership in a violent and relentless reign of tyranny.

## Chapter IV: The Danger of Politics as Overcoming

In the following Chapter, I conclude that there is a parallel between Critias' will for absolute knowledge and the modern ideological understanding of knowledge. Admittedly, this chapter does not come close to a thorough and comprehensive study of the nature of modern tyranny. However, I conclude that through the *Charmides* we can learn from Critias' and Charmides' tyrannical nature. Indeed, a study of the nature of these two souls can assist us in understanding the basic capacity for tyranny in the human soul, a capacity that is still relevant to us today.

### Section I: Chaerephon and Madness

To begin, recall that in the description of the technotopia, Plato has Socrates conceive of prophesy (*mantis*) as a craft that produces knowledge of the future. However, Critias overlooks the question of whether or not prophesy could be adapted into a *techne*. Overcome with lust to rule over such a city, Critias fails to question whether a *techne* of the future is even plausible and, if so, what conditions would be necessary for a technotopia to exist? Socrates, on the contrary, is aware of the impracticality of producing a *techne* of prophecy and Socrates is presumably aware that Critias will not question a *techne* of prophecy. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that the best thing human beings have, come from madness, so much so that madness “is given as a gift of the god.” (244b)<sup>71</sup>. In

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<sup>71</sup> Socrates himself says he has a prophetic sense (*manteuomai*) that *sophroune* has something to do with the Good at 169b.

such, prophecy is not something that can be produced by human beings in the manner of a *techne*, nor is prophecy something that can be controlled and directed according to certainty and precision. To Socrates, prophesy is, by nature, beyond the scope of human control.

The term *mantikos*, or divine prophet, first appeared in the prologue of the *Charmides*. Chaerephon, Socrates' 'friend from youth' (*Apology* 21a1), is referred to as a madman because of his abrupt and excitable temperament. Historical Chaerephon is known to have been a fervent democrat, as well as one of the main supporters of the restoration of democracy when Athens had been seized by the bloody regime of the Thirty. In other words, Chaerephon fought to bring back politics after they had been eliminated by the vicious reign of the Thirty. More than just coincidental, Chaerephon's presence, albeit brief, is relevant in understanding the political importance of the *Charmides*.

When Socrates returns from battle at Poltidea, it is Chaerephon who spots him from afar. Jumping up in enthusiasm from the midst of the other men, he runs over to Socrates, grabs him by the hand and speaks the opening words of the dialogue: "Socrates, how did you survive the battle?" (153b5). Chaerephon cannot control his excitement to see that his dear friend has returned safely from the dangers of war. Many people they know (*gnorimon*) have lost their lives, and Chaerephon wants to know details of their fate and of how Socrates survived the battle. Chaerephon's excitement and his abrupt actions impel Socrates to refer to him as a madman (*mantikos*).

Yet, how mad is Chaerephon's excitement and rash action? To be mad in such a situation is to react erratically, however, Chaerephon's actions are

relatable within this context. Upon the first sight of a friend who is presumed dead, an exaggerated display of delight seems like a normal response. It would seem detached and lacking in sentiment if Chaerephon were to greet Socrates with cold aloofness. Chaerephon's actions seem more impulsive than mad, and his passion – his losing of wits to emotion, humanizes him and makes him more relatable. There is no question about what Chaerephon is feeling or desiring; his actions are in consonance with his desires.

Furthermore, the transparency of Chaerephon's desires is not limited to his delight to see his old friend. He is equally passionate when inquiring about the war, and in expressing carnal excitement over Charmides' physical beauty. It is Chaerephon (on behalf of the others) who presses Socrates for details of the war. Plato has Chaerephon say the word battle three times in the opening conversation (153b5, 153c1, 153c3), while Socrates does not say the term battle once. Plato has Chaerephon display an excitement for war, while Socrates seems disinterested in the subject.

Accordingly, when Charmides makes his entrance, Chaerephon expresses, without shame, his physical desire for the young boy. Chaerephon fawns over Charmides to Socrates, boasting that he ought to see Charmides strip to admire the beautiful form of his body. Chaerephon exudes no shame or inhibitions in wanting to observe and enjoy Charmides as a statue (*agalma*, 154c). Again, Chaerephon's desires and wishes coincide with his impulsive actions. He does not seem to be ashamed or hindered by the public opinion of his desires, but conveys them openly in what he says and does.

Chaerephon's carnal desire for Charmides, and his excitement for war,

suggest that his character is lacking in moderation. Chaerephon lacks Critias' capacity to keep his desires hidden; Critias pursues his desires in a cunning manner. Chaerephon does not try to mask his desires, while Critias' consuming lust for knowledge obfuscates his ability to recognize his own human desires. The technotopia represents the realization of the Critian ideal of absolute knowledge -- a city in which desire has been overcome. Chaerephon reminds us that the human condition is one of desire; there would be no place for him as a citizen of technotopia. Imagining Chaerephon as a citizen of this city reveals the impossibility of realizing such a city<sup>72</sup>.

The reader knows that Charmides and Critias eventually become tyrants. Chaerephon, a known democrat, will be instrumental in the restoration of justice in Athens after the tyranny of the Thirty. Here, Plato is warning us that it is not one's overtly lustful behaviour that necessarily leads to tyranny. It is the explicit will to overcome our passions in pursuit of an absolute (in Critias' case this absolute is knowledge). Our attempt to overcome the elements that make us human, brought to fruition in the technotopia, is considered a far greater danger to the community than the excitable and lusty nature of Chaerephon<sup>73</sup>. The *Charmides* does not warn us about the tyranny of desire itself. Instead, it warns of the tyranny inherent in not recognizing desire as a necessary part of the human condition.

In sum, Chaerephon's madness functions as a remedy to Critias' narrow

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<sup>72</sup> Correspondingly, Chaerephon was exiled during the reign of the Thirty.

<sup>73</sup> Ironically, Critias desires complete transparency when it comes to knowledge, insofar as it can coincide with his own desire to control others. Yet, he fails to recognize all human beings as desiring in nature. Chaerephon displays utter transparency for what he desires displaying the essential part of a human being that Critias is intent upon overlooking.

and misguided understanding of what leads to human fulfilment. Critias' focus on the part (knowledge) means he eclipses the whole – all other elements of a human being. Chaerephon's presence reminds us of what Critias wants us to overcome, but what can never be overcome.

Socrates does not aim to overcome the human condition. Socrates knows that attaining the ideal of true knowledge, certainly in regards to own selves, will always be at odds with the recognition of what we are. There will never be a perfect and homogeneously accepted understanding of things that *are*, nor will there be a simple solution that will allow us to achieve perfection. Recognizing our lack of knowledge in regards to our own selves is essential for philosophy and for politics. In philosophy it serves as the force that drives our hunt for the unanswerable question of who we are. In politics, the awareness of our limited ability to possess absolute knowledge reminds us to be skeptical towards those who claim to offer an error-free life or a one-track solution. It reminds us that, while our natural proclivity may be to prioritize the part, politics require a recognition of, and consideration for, the whole.

As I mentioned in Chapter III, Socrates uses the example of politics and justice right before he describes the two *sophron* cities. Both of these cities are erected on the presumption that human beings can have complete and absolute knowledge. Hyland calls human desire (*eros*) the structure of the finite impetus toward completeness.<sup>74</sup> The human condition is one where our desire compels us towards what we understand to be completeness. Critias believes that to complete himself he must proceed in the direction of attaining more and more

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<sup>74</sup> Hyland, 135.

knowledge (*episteme*). However, the realization of the technotopia would mean that human beings had overcome the defining human condition: desire. Politics, then, could not exist. There would there be no force compelling human beings to act in any way or to pursue anything. Moreover there would not be any conflict between human beings as they would be ordered according to their knowledge. Completeness would mean the end of conflict and the end of political life. In order to live according to absolute knowledge, we would have to overcome concerns about the best way to live together given our imperfect human condition.

## **Section II : Ideology, Critias, and Arendt**

In the Charmides, the technotopia is presented as Socrates' dream -- it is only imaginable outside of space and time. Even then, the city is said to be inimical to human happiness. It serves as a warning to the dangers of pursuing the part and failing to recognize the whole. A considerable divide exists between the speculation of the technotopia, and the reality of modern tyranny. A myriad of factors restrict the comparison of classical tyranny to modern tyranny – ideology, technology, and bureaucracy are a few of many. However, the drive for absolute knowledge that existed in Critias' soul is evident is our modern attitude towards knowledge: Our unwillingness to accept our own limitation is as present in modern tyranny as it is in Critias' soul. Additionally, the will to attain human completeness is the underlying force of the ideological aims of twentieth century tyranny. The premises of the bloodiest ideological forces – the most extreme being Nazism and Communism – presupposed no given limitations to human

beings. An error-free life could be executed on this earth with the removal of certain conditions – the condition to overcome in Nazism was the Jewish people, and in Communism it was class divide.

It seems necessary at this point to defend the use of this study of classical tyranny, to that of our own. I surmise that we can learn from the ancient form of tyranny. Leo Strauss's reflection in *On Tyranny* expresses the need we have to understand classical tyranny if we are to understand the nature of our own tyranny:

Not much observation and reflection is needed to realize that there is an essential difference between the tyranny analyzed by the classics and that of our age. In contradistinction to classical tyranny, present-day tyranny has at its disposal "technology" as well as "ideologies"; more generally expressed, it presupposes the existence of "science," i.e., of a particular interpretation, or kind, of science. Conversely, classical tyranny, unlike modern tyranny, was confronted, actually or potentially, by a science which was not meant to be applied to "the conquest of nature" or to be popularized and diffused. But in noting this one implicitly grants that one cannot understand modern tyranny in its specific character before one has understood the elementary and in a sense natural form of tyranny which is premodern tyranny. This basic stratum of modern tyranny remains, for all practical purposes, unintelligible to us if we do not have recourse to the political science of the classics. (21-22)

Strauss is right to point to the availability of technology and ideology in modern tyranny. He argues that classical tyranny was based on a science that was not meant to be applied to what he refers to as the "conquest of nature." However, the root of understanding of science and knowledge as a means to control and to better oneself is as relevant to us today as it was for the Ancients. Critias in particular, demonstrates that the lust for unlimited knowledge is as much part of the ancient soul as it is our own<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> As an aside, Critias supposes that his intelligence puts him on equal playing field with the divine and exempts him from the moral restrictions of the laymen (he who is too foolish to

Critias struggles to reconcile his desire for the rule of knowledge (*episteme*) with his own desire to rule and control. Critias retains the conviction that his capacity for knowledge has bestowed him with a deeper “truth” about the universe (he understands the riddlesome ways of the Gods). This conviction impedes' his capacity to see beyond his own axiomatic position. Critias has no qualms about emancipating knowledge (and the process of thinking) from the confines of embodied life and experience. Furthermore, Critias thinks that having knowledge of the past, present, and future will furnish him with the power to pursue his own interest and advancement. However, knowledge of this sort comes at the expense of the human being, himself included.

Critias considers himself to have knowledge, and is therefore entitled to rule a city that is ruled by knowledge. However, the image the technotopia invokes does not seem to leave a place for the human being: all things are done according to the precision and certainty of a form of error-free *techne*. In order for this to be executed, the human being has to be eliminated. The rule of nobody but

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realize he is being deceived). Critias understood human nature as a dichotomy between those who are commensurate to the Gods in intellect. For Critias, beasts are those who lack of intelligence and therefore are susceptible to a false morality being inflicted upon them. It is not hard to connect this understanding of nature and human beings to that of Nietzsche, who supposed that the tradition of all human morals was a construct of those asserting their own will to power. However, Critias eschews traditional moral values but has not shaken tradition aristocratic prejudice (which is where Critias would be at odds with Nietzsche).

Indeed, Critias' understanding of the duality of human nature is reminiscent of Nietzsche's conviction that human beings are by nature either weak or strong. To Nietzsche, traditional morals are the invention of weak men to exert power of the naturally strong. If morals are merely constructive, then it is not hard to arrive at the conclusion that there could exist pure knowledge, distinct from moral consideration. I am not taking it upon me to argue that there is unity between Nietzsche and Critias, as Nietzsche is grappling with two millennia of Christian thought. However, Critias' atheism and will to separate knowledge from any sort of moral inquiry, happens to be very modern in nature. Critias makes the separation of morals from knowledge and this is reminiscent of the present day fact-value distinction. Indeed, the removal of moral consideration from knowledge led to the distinction of objective facts from moral-ridden values from Nietzsche and their application to politics with the advent of Max Weber's social theory. See Leo Strauss, “Natural Right and History,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

science alone is uniquely characteristic of the bureaucracy of modern tyranny.

As Strauss rightly points out, Ancient (or Critian) tyranny is not synonymous to modern tyranny. However, it is not far off to suggest that Critias' will for knowledge, as well as his inability to see his own limitations, is reminiscent of our modern tyrannical nature towards knowledge. Furthermore, the rule of nobody but absolute knowledge, parallels the rule of ideology. Hannah Arendt, in *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, points to the tyrannical element inherent to all ideologies. She identifies the recent phenomenon of ideology as "isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise." Ideologues, focus on a single part, isolated from the whole, and use this isolated focus as the basis on which they claim to know.

I want to address two elements of tyranny that Arendt says are present in all modern ideologies. Ideologues, like Critias, approach the pursuit of knowledge through a narrow lens in order to pursue perfection. First, ideology as "the claim to total explanation promises to explain all historical happenings, the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future<sup>76</sup>." The modern tyrant has relied on ideology, by focusing on a narrow and limited premise, the modern tyrant claimed to possess knowledge that can explain occurrences of the past and present as well as the ability to predict the future. For instance, the Nazi's claimed with certainty that all the problems of the past, present, and future were, and will be, because of the Jewish people. This led them to conclude such a problem could be eradicated

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<sup>76</sup> Hannah Arendt "On the Origin of Totalitarianism", (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 668.

with the extermination of a race. Similarly, the modern tyrant claims to possess a knowledge of the past, present, and future, while Critias only lusted after such a thing; he desired to possess such knowledge because he knew that it would allow him the power to control all those who were lesser in intelligence to him. Critias willed to possess absolute knowledge, while modern ideologues claimed to actually possess an absolute knowledge of all that *is* – past, present, and future. It is the modern conditions and the modern understanding of nature that has allowed modern ideologues to put their convictions to action.

The *Charmides* is relevant to the study of modern tyranny because of the similarities between the technotopia and the bureaucratic rule of today. Both Critias and modern ideologues exert an unwillingness to question their own axiomatic position. Once one becomes so utterly convinced of their own vision, there is little capacity to conceive of reality beyond this conviction. Indeed, one loses the capacity to consider the whole. Both Critias and modern ideologues have demonstrated their incapacity to recognize their ignorance, a necessary foreground to considering the whole. The presumption of having all the answers precludes a consideration for the greater whole. Furthermore, the will to possess knowledge and use it to control is a very real part of the human soul. And this will to control others with knowledge needs to be recognized and acknowledged as dangerous to political order.

Second, within an ideology Arendt states that:

thinking is independent of all experience from which it cannot learn anything new. Ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insist on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a

sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it. (468-469)

We witness Critias' detachment from reality in his inability to recognize and account for human desire, perception, opinion and fear. Socrates continually reminds us that knowing is rooted in our own experience, and it begins with a recognition (*gignoskein*) of ourselves and our embodied human condition. Critias was unable to grasp this, conflating *techne*, *episteme*, and *gignoskein* into a broad form of knowledge – knowledge that was precise and certain and removed from the human being. Furthermore, Critias' inability to recognize his own ignorance and see beyond his own convictions precluded his ability to know what *is*. The inability to learn anything new, to think about the nature of reality, is also impossible in ideological thinking because they can only dig as deep as to not question the axiom to which they have subscribed.

The tendency to get lost in the part and lose sight of the whole is as much a part of the ancient soul, brought to flesh in Critias, as it is part of the modern soul. The human proclivity to overcome aspects of ourselves was as common to the ancient soul as it is to the modern soul. It seems then that the human soul has a natural inclination, in certain natures in particular, to prioritize the part and forget about the greater whole to which the part belongs. In the wrong circumstances, this can be politically disastrous and lead to the violence of Critias or the violence of ideology.

Plato warns us in the *Charmides* to be skeptical of those who claim to know all there is, and of those who taut an ability to explain the past, present, and future. This text reminds us to recognize our limitations and not see them as

elements that ought to be eliminated, but to see them as elements of ourselves we should at very least be aware of. Plato also reminds us that one cannot teach another to recognize his or her own ignorance. Critias is unchanged throughout the dialogue, despite Socrates' effort to guide his attention towards the whole. The tyrannical tendency to control is not something that can be overcome. Indeed, the nature to dominate, which is inherent in some souls, is something that needs to be recognized, addressed, and politically accounted for.

## Conclusion

Before closing, I want to briefly address the parallels between Charmides' soul and our modern soul. Charmides lacked both the courage and the desire to engage in real debate with Socrates. His desire to be passive and submit to the authority of force ultimately led Charmides to share the same bloody political fate as Critias. Charmides was unwilling to question the authority of the great poets of his tradition and was unwilling to look within himself, opting instead for the easiest way out, and relying on Critias to do his thinking for him. In this sense, our modern acceptance of a relativist moral stance is equally complicit in tyranny.

Charmides fault is twofold: he lacks the courage to question tradition, and lacks the will to forgo his role as object, and to actively participate in moral debate. Modern man is often unwilling to engage with thorny moral issues and speculations, opting instead to accept moral values as respective to a particular individual or a culture. The presumption that there is no Truth worth knowing means that what is right or wrong, good or bad, is subject to the individual. This is particularly evident in the educated youth of the West today: everyone has a right to his or her own moral beliefs and these are distinct from scientific fact<sup>77</sup>. Charmides preferred to be admired as a statue of physical beauty, opposed to the arduous task of looking within oneself and having the courage to make a moral stance.

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<sup>77</sup> See Allan Bloom, "The Closing of the American mind." (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

When Charmides hands the conversation over to Critias, Socrates says that “it's no wonder that he at his age is ignorant,” (162d8-e1). Thus, this lack of courage and willingness to examine oneself in depth is characteristic of youth, but what happens when it is characteristic of a general *ethos* propelling the Western world? Substantive moral debate and willingness to engage with meaningful questions about what we are as human beings, and what is best for us, are not encouraged or cultivated in our political order, particularly in our education system. There is little one can say about human existence, about who we are as human beings, if one presumes that all moral values are equally as valid and there is no best way to live.

Through Charmides' character, Plato warns us that it is not only violent, cunning, and dictatorial natures that can lead to one's complicity in tyranny. A source of tyranny is present in all of us when we give into what is easiest or most immediately gratifying and refuse to look into ourselves and question our moral suppositions. It can happen at the level of the individual soul, as readily as it can happen within an ideology. In our refusal to actively participate and to question, we partake in the nature of Charmides. This is not to say that as moderns we are all tyrannical in nature. It means that the courage and will to look within ourselves, and engage in debate with others is necessary when faced with tyranny.

The form of knowledge that will lead to political Good must be rooted in the recognition of our own ignorance. It begins in each of us with the questioning of our own nature: Who am I? Am I savage beast or part of the divine? Too often, and too available, are simple and seemingly sensible answers to these questions.

In the age of ideology, technology, and bureaucracy, there is not much cultivation of dialogue around this question and this can make the philosophical pursuit seem dismal. However, I purport that the *Charmides* can help direct our optimism in this manner.

Socrates alludes to the fact that one cannot make another recognize his or her own ignorance. The ability to recognize oneself comes from one's own experience, lived through one's own embodied life. Stern points out that "Critias' urge to impose his hopes on the world is but an extreme expression of the pervasive human desire, born of self-concern, to live a complete life, to be whole, to have the whole good."<sup>78</sup> The force of desire in Critias for absolute knowledge, although misdirected, is the same force that directs the philosopher's aspiration to pursue a greater understanding of what *is*. We all long for completeness as a basic part of our existence. The force that propels Critias to pursue the possession of absolute knowledge is the same force that propels Socrates on the hunt for truth. And this force cannot be eradicated from the human soul, nor should it be.

The answer, then, is not to try to eradicate or overcome such a force, but to recognize it and acknowledge it as part of the human soul. The false conception that completeness is attainable by means of possessing more knowledge and control was as present in classical Greece as it is in modern society. Our lust for a perfectly ordered error-free life runs deep. While the form of tyranny has changed, the essence of such a will has not changed. Recognizing the desire for absolute knowledge and control as a part of the human soul is the first step in facing a tyranny. In order to face tyranny, we need to understand the search for

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<sup>78</sup> Stern, 410.

knowledge as a search that begins with ourselves. One is not going to come to know oneself or one's nature by reading a series of abstract scientific studies on the nature of human beings. The hunt begins by looking into our own selves and asking what we are. This requires the courage that the young Charmides lacked, and it requires the will to go beyond the surface of ourselves.

Furthermore, we need to realize that as human beings there are certain limitations we are always going to face. Trying to overcome aspects of our nature propels us towards a future directed aim of completeness and blinds us to the importance of the present and the past. In short, perceiving the limits to knowledge as something that ought to be overcome narrows the scope of what we can know. And the fact of the matter is it will only ever be a part of a much greater whole.

Since the tyrannical regimes of Nazism and Communism in the early twentieth century, tyranny has changed shape. In the twenty first century, we axiomatically assume that the tenants of a liberal democracy – freedom, individuality, and choice – are unquestionable Goods for human beings. In other words, the same way that Critias presumed absolute knowledge was good for human beings, we assume freedom and choice to be unanimously good for human beings. But we must be careful not to accept freedom and choice as the unquestionable single premise of our time that cannot be questioned. Surrendering to a sole focus on freedom, means we lose sight of the greater whole of human existence. We need to continually question the presumptions inherent to a liberal democracy and recognize that there are fatal flaws in singularly embracing its precept of what *is*. We need to recognize that we do not

possess all of the answers. And only in our awareness of these limitations can we begin to approximate what *is*.

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