

## Polytropic Socrates' Implicit Defence of Philosophy: Lying, Justice, and Sophistry in Plato's Lesser Hippias

Samantha Trudeau

<https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.43.3>

*Samantha Trudeau, from Washington (US), is graduating from Carroll College with her Bachelor's degree in political science in 2020. She plans to pursue a PhD in political theory starting in the fall of 2020. Her current research project is examining Nietzsche's treatment of women and marriage in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Her research interests focus around the political thought of Plato, Xenophon, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt. E-mail: [samantha.m.trudeau@gmail.com](mailto:samantha.m.trudeau@gmail.com).*

### Abstract

*This article offers an interpretation of Plato's Lesser Hippias, containing several original claims. First, it contends that the dialogue takes place in front of an unnamed audience composed of Socrates' students and the dialogue is therefore for their benefit, not that of Hippias or Eudicus. It then argues that Socrates juxtaposes himself to Hippias to show the superiority of philosophy to sophistry. Finally, this article claims that the central argument of the dialogue is a means to demonstrate Socrates' superior understanding of justice, for he is able to tell the truth on the matter as well as lie, showing mastery of both philosophy and sophistry. These assertions demonstrate the importance of the Lesser Hippias in the broader Platonic corpus.*

### Keywords

Hippias; Justice; Plato; Political Philosophy; Socrates; Sophists

## Introduction

The *Lesser Hippias* is often regarded as the least important of Plato's dramatic dialogues on Socrates (de Laguna, 1920: 550—551). Its argument initially appears simple and inconclusive, leading some to disregard the work as irrelevant to Plato's broader teachings and to discount its philosophic contribution to the corpus (de Laguna, 1920: 550; Alexander, 2008: 6fn7). However, there are several aspects of the dialogue that remain widely unexamined, such as its dramatic setting and the conclusions that arise from that setting. After a brief recapitulation of the argument of the dialogue, I argue that Socrates uses the argument of the *Lesser Hippias* to offer a dramatic teaching for his students, who are unnamed, but present at this dialogue. Through this Socrates shows the superiority of the philosophic way of life to that of the sophist by contrasting himself and the sophist Hippias. Further, Socrates shows that he is the most knowledgeable man on justice because he is the one most capable of telling the truth *and* lying on a given subject. Thus explaining the otherwise contradictory nature of the dialogue's argument when compared to other Socratic teachings.

Socrates regularly proves to his students that he knows more about justice than any other man; the *Lesser Hippias* broadens this effort, as he demonstrates that he is also most capable of lying about the nature of the good and just man (*LH* 375e).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the dialogue's central focus is not voluntary and involuntary wrong, but the differences between the philosopher and the sophist--Socrates and Hippias—as demonstrated through their own actions as well as through the references to Achilles and Odysseus. As Davis puts it, "Hippias...believes it is possible for Achilles to appear as simple and for him to appear as Achilles" (Davis, 2016: 8). Socrates contorts the argument to degrade the famous sophist in the presence of Socrates' own students and elevate his students' appreciation of his own, Odysseus-like, wily soul. Socrates' sophistry, though it might appear hypocritical, emerges as a demonstration on the dangers of sophistry for Socrates' true audience. Neither Hippias nor Eudicus detect Socrates' teachings on the soul and himself, but the dialogue was not for the benefit of either of these men. For these reasons the *Lesser Hippias* emerges as a dialogue pregnant with significance for Socrates' students; more broadly, it stands as an important part of the Socratic teaching and as a confirmation of Socrates' knowledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the *Lesser Hippias*, unless noted, I rely on James Leake's 1987 translation. For the *Greater Hippias*, David R. Sweets' 1987. These English translations will be referenced as *LH*, and *GH*. The Greek I rely on is Burnet's 1903 accessed through Perseus online.

## Argument and Action of the *Lesser Hippias*

### *Dramatic Introduction (363a—364a)*

As demonstrated in the opening, the philosopher, Socrates, is slow to approach the sophist, Hippias. The dialogue opens with Eudicus asking Socrates why he does not engage Hippias following Hippias' speech. Eudicus exhorts Socrates to question Hippias because the many have left, leaving only a small group who "claim to share in the pursuit of philosophy" (LH 363a). Hippias assures the assembled that he will answer because when he speaks at the Olympic festivals, he answers all questions his audience may give him on his prepared subjects. He thinks that it is impossible for Socrates to question him in any problematic way given his vast experience and the public recognition he had received for his speeches. To this Socrates says Hippias is blessed if his confidence in his soul and wisdom at the Olympics are as he claims, for it would be greater than any of the athletes there with their bodies. Hippias claims his confidence is based on him never meeting "anyone better than [he] in anything" (LH 364a).

### *Presentation of the Argument (364b—365c)*

Socrates begins the discussion by asking: is Achilles or Odysseus better, in which respects, and what are the reasons for Hippias' distinctions? Hippias replies, "Homer represented Achilles as the best man of those who came to Troy...and Odysseus as the wiliest" (LH 364c).<sup>2</sup> Socrates seeks clarification on what Hippias means by "wily," asking if Homer also represented Achilles as wily. Hippias insists that Achilles was not wily but simple; he references Achilles' response to Odysseus in the *Iliad*, in which Odysseus is trying to convince Achilles to re-join the battle and has offered incentives for his return (*Iliad* IX.308—314). Achilles responds bitterly to Odysseus, accusing him of being deceptive with his words and intentions, something Achilles despises. Hippias claims that this passage shows Achilles to be "truthful and simple" and Odysseus to be "wily and lying" (LH 365b). Socrates then suggests that Hippias' definition of wily is: "the wily man is a liar" (LH 365c). Hippias agrees to this and they both further agree to Socrates' claim that, "it seemed to Homer that the truthful man is one sort and the liar another, and they are not the same" (LH 365c).

As the argument opens, Hippias' preference for Achilles emerges. Despite his traditional view as a hero, Hippias favours Achilles for his simplicity, a trait not often

---

<sup>2</sup> Following Alexander, I depart from Leake's translation of *polytropos* as "versatile" and instead I will use her translation of "wily" throughout (Alexander, 2008: 22 fn6).

considered complimentary. Yet here, he gladly attributes it to Achilles and himself, both of whom he considers champions.

### ***Discussion on Liars (365d—368a)***

Hippias is next led by Socrates to agree that liars are: “capable of doing many things, particularly deceiving people”; “wily and deceiving...by unscrupulous wickedness...and by prudence”; “they know very well [what they do and] that is why they do evil”; they are “wise with respect to...deceiving thoroughly” (*LH* 365e). They summarize, “liars are capable, prudent, knowing, and wise in those things in which they are liars” and “the truthful and the liars are different and most opposite to one another” (*LH* 366a). The liars then know they are lying and those who are ignorant of such things cannot lie (*LH* 366b).

Socrates shifts the conversation towards the examination of Hippias as a calculator. They determine that because Hippias is the most capable and the wisest calculator, he is also the best. They conclude that the one who is most capable of lying about calculations is also the one who is the most capable of telling the truth about calculations and “the one who is good at these things [is] the expert calculator” (*LH* 367c). They then apply the same argument to Hippias as a geometer and astronomer and come to the same conclusions; because Hippias is the wisest in these subjects, their argument suggests that he is also the most capable liar and therefore a liar. This undermines Hippias’ claims to simplicity.

### ***Socrates’ First Speech (368b—369d)***

Socrates continues this examination of Hippias and asserts that all of these things are true in regards to all the sciences and Hippias is “altogether the wisest of all human beings in the greatest number of arts” (*LH* 368b). In the presence of his students, Socrates seeks to elevate himself while diminishing the perception of Hippias—and sophists more generally. He uses his first speech of the *Lesser Hippias* to mock and diminish Hippias’ claim to wisdom, thus undermining sophistry’s legitimacy. Socrates recounts that Hippias’ boasts “in the marketplace beside the banking tables” about what he wore when he went to the temple of Zeus, god of oaths, at Olympus (*LH* 368b). Socrates contrasts himself and his wisdom of the soul to Hippias’ claim to wisdom based on external adornments and personal wealth as a sophist (*GH* 282d). Socrates mentions Hippias’ rings and shoes, in silent contrast to Socrates’ simple clothes and bare feet (*Memorabilia* I.6.5—7). Socrates mocks Hippias’ boastful account of his tunic, which he wove himself (a skill usually practiced exclusively by women). Hippias also claims to carry a scraper and unguent for oil, the usual accessories of an athlete—one who is skilled in a physical art, not a mental art, as Hippias claims to be. And Socrates recounts that the “most unusual” or “most absurd” thing Hippias wears is an

imitation of an expensive Persian belt that Hippias had plaited himself; belts, or *zōne*, were traditionally worn only by women and were a mark of femininity (*LH* 368c).<sup>3</sup> Not only does Socrates note that this belt is the “most unusual” piece in his collection, but ironically it is also “a display of the greatest wisdom” (*LH* 368c).<sup>4</sup> Following Socrates’ critique of Hippias’ physical adornments, Socrates comments on the numerous poems and speeches that Hippias brought with him (*LH* 368d). In this, Socrates is careful to note that Hippias wore or brought all of these things; none are attributed as characteristics of his soul. Further, Socrates notes that he had nearly forgotten about Hippias’ “artful device...for remembering,” which is what Hippias supposes to be his “most splendid” adornment, yet, this best possession of Hippias soon fails him in the discussion when he claims confusion at Socrates suggested return to the previous argument (*LH* 368d, 369a).

Following Socrates’ mockery of Hippias’ adornments, in an attempt to return to the discussion of Odysseus and Achilles, Hippias implores Socrates to respond with a proper speech in order that “these people here will know more fully who speaks better” (*LH* 369c). His embarrassment apparent, Hippias wishes for the discussion to continue in a manner in which he feels he can prove his superiority; Hippias wants to return to sophistic refutations based in Homer. More importantly, Hippias’ request reminds the reader of the audience before whom this dialogue is occurring. Hippias is calling on the silent audience to make the final judgment on who “more fully speaks better” (*LH* 369c).

### ***Homeric Sophistry (369e—371e)***

In response, Socrates presents passages from the *Iliad* in which he claims Achilles is portrayed as a liar. At one point, Achilles tells Odysseus that he intends to leave the next day instead of assisting the Achaeans; Socrates also cites Achilles’ earlier threat to leave peremptorily (*Iliad* IX.357—63, I.169—1). Socrates here emphasises that in neither situation did Achilles ever begin to mobilize his ships despite telling both his comrades and the army that he intended to leave. Where Socrates suggests that the difference between Achilles and Odysseus is indistinguishable; Hippias counters that Achilles lies involuntarily, out of compulsion and necessity, whereas Odysseus lies voluntarily, from design. Socrates asserts

<sup>3</sup> When looking at the works of Plato and Homer, *zōne* is used in reference to women in *Alcibiades 1* 123b; *Odyssey* at 5.233, 10.545, 11.245; *Iliad* 14.181. It is used in reference to men only in *Iliad* 2.479, 11.234.

<sup>4</sup> The word *atōpotaton* is the superlative form of the adjective *atōpos*, which means extraordinary, but also strange, odd, eccentric, unnatural, and disgusting. Further, while mocking his source of identity in physical adornments, Socrates also discounts Hippias’ Greekness by showing that his most prominent piece of clothing was in the style of the Persians, and Persian women at that. To be accused of Persianness is to be not only anti-Greek but to be slavish and effeminate; the Persians were looked down upon as barbarians, their leaders tyrannical and Persian subjects were little more than slaves.

in opposition that Achilles lied voluntarily with design, more prudently than Odysseus because his lies avoided detection by Odysseus, or at least “Odysseus says nothing to [Achilles] that shows he perceived he was lying” (*LH* 371a). Socrates recounts another time when Achilles said one thing and acted in another way: he tells Ajax that he wouldn’t fight until Hector arrived at his ships, neglecting to mention his plans to sail away as he had denied to Odysseus earlier (*Iliad* IX.650—55). Socrates asserts that this claim, which stands in contradiction to Achilles’ earlier ones, proves the intentionality of his lies and also shows how Achilles viewed Odysseus as “someone of primitive simplicity” because of his readiness to lie and contradict himself after “he had railed against imposters with the most extreme abuse” (*LH* 371d).<sup>5</sup> Hippias responds that Achilles is guileless and for that reason spoke differently to each, without design, whereas when “Odysseus speaks the truth he always speaks by design, and whenever he lies it is the same” (*LH* 371e). Socrates then declares that Odysseus is better than Achilles; Hippias disagrees.

***Voluntary and Involuntary Evil, and Socrates’ Second Speech (372a—373c)***

Hippias objects to Socrates’ claim that those who are voluntarily unjust are better than those who are involuntarily unjust, arguing that there is more forgiveness for a person who does evil unknowingly and laws are harsher towards those who do evil knowingly.<sup>6</sup>

Socrates now expresses his need to question Hippias, the “best of men,” because Socrates knows nothing and wishes to learn (*LH* 373b). Though admitting that his opinion on the question at hand vacillates, Socrates maintains his opinion that those who go wrong voluntarily are better than those who do so involuntarily; he only maintains this position reluctantly, giving many concessions to the hesitant Hippias. Socrates’ opinion, which contradicts his famous and oft-repeated public position, finds basis in their previous agreement that those who are wretched act involuntarily.

Partly because of Socrates’ mocking account of the items that Hippias identifies as his source of wisdom, Hippias becomes reluctant to continue talking with Socrates and only through the intervention of Eudicus does he agree to continue (*LH* 373b). Socrates moves to flatter Hippias in order to keep him engaged and the discussion shifts from wondering if it is the mark of the expert in anything to tell the truth and lie about the given subject, to the question of whether it is the mark of a good thing to err voluntarily or involuntarily. Here

---

<sup>5</sup> Socrates does not mention here that Odysseus was also present at the exchange between Achilles and Ajax (*Iliad* IX 624—57).

<sup>6</sup> Socrates’ claim here stands in contradiction with his later teaching in the *Gorgias*, in which Socrates argues that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.

Hippias emerges as Achilles, bitterly upset with the deceptive Odysseus, Socrates.<sup>7</sup> Appeasing Hippias, Socrates claims that if this is so, it is involuntary and he should be forgiven, per their argument.

***Who is Better? (373c—374e)***

Socrates and Hippias now transition into an investigation of “whether those are better who go wrong voluntarily or those who do so involuntarily” (LH 373c). They begin by examining the runner. They agree that he who runs well, and runs quickly, is good, and he who runs slowly involuntarily is bad. A good runner is then capable of voluntarily running quickly and slowly. They apply the same principles to wrestling and every other use of the body; he who is capable of voluntarily acting both good and bad in respect to their sport, is the better. Through more examples, they determine that it is desirable to act with an inclination towards the bad voluntarily rather than involuntarily; the two, attribute virtue to the capacity one has to demonstrate capability at any given skill of the body—good or bad (LH 374e).

***Good and Bad Souls (375a—375c)***

Socrates then redirects the discussion to which is the better souled horse and they agree that it is the one which will voluntarily ride badly. The horse that “would do voluntarily the wretched works of this soul” is better than the one that does so involuntarily (LH 375a). They agree that this applies to “a dog and all other animals” (LH 375a). On the human soul of an archer, they agree that the one “which voluntarily goes wrong and misses the target” is better for archery (LH 375a).<sup>8</sup> Continuing, they agree that in medicine “he who willingly effects what is bad with regard to bodies” is more skilled (LH 375b).<sup>9</sup> They agree that this case of the soul applies to the arts and sciences, the better soul, which appears synonymous with the more skilled soul, which “voluntarily effects evil and shameful things and goes wrong, while the more wretched one does so involuntarily” (LH 375c).<sup>10</sup> They also agree that it is preferred “to own the souls of slaves that voluntarily go wrong and effect evil” (LH 375c).

---

<sup>7</sup> Compare the reaction of Hippias at 373b, “Socrates always causes confusion in the argument and seems to want to make trouble,” with that of Achilles towards Odysseus as illuminated at 365ab, “for that one is hateful to me as the gates of Hades who hides one thing in his mind but says something else.”

<sup>8</sup> Here the use of *hamartiano*, though directly relating to archery, foreshadows the argument to follow based in the morality of souls that ‘go wrong.’

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Republic* 341e—342c.

<sup>10</sup> Leake here translates *e aménon* as better in regards to the better soul (the better one).

*Justice (375d—376c)*

Socrates now asks if we would “wish to possess our [soul] in as good a condition as possible,” to which Hippias agrees (*LH* 375d). However, when Socrates asks if it is better for the soul to go wrong and do evil voluntarily or involuntarily, Hippias objects that “it would...be a terrible thing...if those doing injustice voluntarily are to be better than those doing so involuntarily” (*LH* 375d). Socrates then suggests that justice is “a certain capacity or knowledge or both” and “the more capable and wiser [soul]” is “better and...more capable of doing both what is noble and what is shameful with regard to all that it effects” (*LH* 375e). Socrates continues that this soul “effects shameful things...voluntarily through capacity and art” and with their understanding of justice, “either both or one of them” must be characteristics of justice (*LH* 376a). Hippias agrees and Socrates continues saying, “to do injustice at least is to do what is bad, while not to do injustice is to do what is noble” and the better and more capable soul will do injustice voluntarily and “the more worthless will do so involuntarily” (*LH* 376a). Hippias less assuredly agrees, and Socrates continues that the good man has a good soul and the bad man has a bad soul. Hippias agrees and Socrates presents his ultimate conclusion, that the good man with a good soul does injustice voluntarily while the bad man with a bad soul would do so involuntarily. But, regardless of the voluntary or involuntary action of the men, both act badly. Socrates claims, “he who voluntarily goes wrong does what is shameful and unjust...would be no other than the good man” (*LH* 376b). Hippias declares that he cannot agree with this assertion and Socrates admits that he also disagrees with this conclusion despite it being the logical end of the argument.

This passage further illuminates Socrates’ critique of those who vacillate in their opinions and thoughts, like Achilles and Hippias (*LH* fn15). Socrates elevates Odysseus, who deceived intentionally, rather than Achilles, who lied and deceived unknowingly. Like Achilles, Hippias fails at many points to notice the emergence of contradictory statements and vacillates in his opinion until the conclusion. In contrast, Socrates steadily aims at the intended conclusion of the dialogue; though Socrates deceives, he does so intentionally and in doing so evades the notice of Hippias and Eudicus. Socrates plays Odysseus while relegating the preening Hippias to the role of Achilles.<sup>11</sup>

**Dramatic Setting and Audience**

To understand the significance of any Platonic dialogue one must examine its setting and context (Strauss, 1964: 59—60). In dialogues like the *Alcibiades I* and the *Cleitophon*,

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Memorabilia* IV.6.15 in which Xenophon relates Socrates to Odysseus and earlier in *Memorabilia* IV.2 in which Socrates displays his *polytropic* argumentation in regards to voluntary wrongdoing and ignorance.

Socrates engages with his interlocutor alone and has little reason to be overly performative.<sup>12</sup> The argument of the *Cleitophon* is delivered primarily by Cleitophon as Socrates listens, offering no response; one is not needed because Socrates is not concerned with the education of Cleitophon. Cleitophon's recounting of Socrates' teachings is that which Plato wishes to report. However, in the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates' interactions and cross-examinations are for the primary benefit of his interlocutor. In other dialogues with a large active audience, like the *Republic* or the *Symposium*, Socrates presents arguments both explicitly and implicitly, leaving it to the various interlocutors to glean the meaning of his words. In the *Republic*, for example, there are many interlocutors contributing to the dialogue and Socrates builds many different arguments with them—though, as Allan Bloom has argued, the arguments are all intended to educate and curb the political ambition of Glaucon (Bloom, 1991: 337, 436). Likewise, in *Symposium*, Socrates targets his speech at Agathon. For students of Plato's Socrates, the ultimate—and often implied—teaching differs greatly from his explicit argument. In other dialogues such as *Lovers*, and the *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates engaged with one or a few interlocutors but is ever conscious of the silent audience and uses his argument to teach and engage an audience beyond the active interlocutors; this is perhaps most obvious in the dialogues that Socrates recounts to his students, including the *Republic*.

The *Lesser Hippias* is another example of this practice. The active participants in the dialogue are Socrates, Eudicus, and Hippias. Yet, I argue that neither Hippias nor Eudicus are intended to be the primary beneficiaries of Socrates' teaching in the *Lesser Hippias*. Instead, the dialogue is performed by Socrates for the benefit of a silent audience. Though the precise composition of the silent audience is never revealed in the *Lesser Hippias*, the context identifies its character, and allows for the reader to understand Socrates' motivation for speaking with Hippias a second time, as well as to better understand the implicit ends of his strange argument.

Recall that the dialogue opens at the conclusion of Hippias' speech in Athens. Eudicus compels Socrates to question Hippias, since he did not do so inside (*LH* 363a, c, 373bc; *GH* 286b). This is the primary dramatic setting; Eudicus' claim at 363a, alongside Socrates' claim that one of the reasons he was reluctant to question Hippias was "because there was the *hoi polloi* inside...but now, since there are fewer of us," he is willing to engage, confirming that there is a broader audience present (*LH* 364bff). With the presence of a

---

<sup>12</sup> In the *Cleitophon*, Socrates notes, "we happen to be alone" (*Cleitophon* 406).

broader audience established, we are closer to understanding who constitutes it.<sup>13</sup> Blundell and Ludlam claim that those present, whom Eudicus acknowledges, are Hippias' supporters. Most scholars pass over the audience without comment.

I maintain that the silent audience is instead made up of Socrates' own students (Ludlam 1992: 141). Eudicus notes that those who remain are the few from the many who "alone are left who would particularly make claim to share in the pursuit of philosophy" (*LH* 363a). Consider that in both Plato's and Xenophon's accounts, the dialogue is presented as a direct dialogue, rather than a recounting of events by Socrates as in other works (like Plato's *Republic*), this would suggest that perhaps Plato or Xenophon were in the audience, or at least other students of Socrates were there to recount the story (*Memorabilia* IV.4.6—25).

Critical details of both the *Greater Hippias* and the *Lesser Hippias* support the claim that the audience is constituted by Socrates' students. In the *Greater Hippias*, Hippias invites Socrates to attend the presentation of the speech that immediately precedes the *Lesser Hippias*. Hippias tells Socrates, "so be there yourself, and bring others who are able, when they hear, to judge what is said" (*GH* 286b). This suggests that those present at the *Lesser Hippias* are those whom Socrates was instructed to bring during the *Greater Hippias*. Once the speech that occurs between the *Greater Hippias* and the *Lesser Hippias* is over, the smaller crowd would likely include those who came with Socrates, probably waiting to observe any of his interactions or waiting to leave with him (*Memorabilia* III.11.1—2, IV.1.1). Socrates' lingering after the event suggests that although he was not going to approach Hippias, he expected to be approached and was ready to question him again—not for the purpose of teaching the large crowd that heard the speech, but as a teaching demonstration for his students.

With Socrates' students as the audience, Socrates' implicit attack on sophistry becomes more pregnant. Following the events of the *Greater Hippias*, Socrates had no reason to question Hippias again. The *Greater Hippias* opens with a lengthy discussion between Socrates and Hippias that centres around Hippias' career. This includes discussion of Hippias' earnings, the laws of Sparta, and Hippias' activities in Sparta (*Greater Hippias* 282e, 283d—286c). The dialogue then transitions into a discussion of the beautiful during which Socrates continually refutes the assertions of Hippias as "incorrect, if not ridiculous" and it concludes with them seeking to understand the relationship between the beautiful and the good (*GH* 303e—304b; Alexander, 2008: 12). As in the *Lesser Hippias*, the *Greater Hippias* ends in apparent Socratic aporia and with Socrates' feigned concern for his vacillation and

---

<sup>13</sup> This is further supported in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, in which he recounts that Socrates was talking to some people when Hippias approached him (*Memorabilia* IV.4.5). The dialogue Xenophon recounts shares similarities with Plato's accounts of both the *Lesser* and *Greater Hippias*.

departure from the conclusions of the wise (*GH* 304c). This dialogue left Socrates rather dissatisfied with the wisdom of Hippias; so why question him again?<sup>14</sup>

The *Lesser Hippias* offers an explanation. There, Socrates explains his methods of investigation, questioning, and learning. He claims that he questions his interlocutors thoroughly and is “indefatigable about the things said by [the one whom Socrates holds to be wise], questioning him so that by understanding I may be benefited in some way,” but “if the one speaking seems to me to be of little account neither do I ply him with questions [question him again], nor is what he says of concern to me” (*LH* 369d).<sup>15</sup> Applying this lesson to the Hippias, Socrates does not begin to question him without the intercession of Eudicus, nor does he question him in the presence of the *hoi polloi* (*LH* 364b).

### Conclusion: Socrates’ Teaching

Socrates concludes that “he who voluntarily goes wrong and does what is shameful and unjust... would be no other than the good man” (*LH* 376b). Lampert argues that this furthers Socrates’ usual teaching that “no one voluntarily goes wrong and commits injustice,” claiming that Socrates is suggesting that no one is truly good, nor has the level of self-knowledge and self-control to go wrong voluntarily; all go wrong involuntarily because their culpability lies in ignorance (Lampert, 2002: 252—53). Yet, following Sprague, I judge that Socrates’ contradictory conclusion is not one reached through confusion—as Socrates himself suggests—nor is it merely a sophisticated version of Socrates’ other teachings as Lampert suggests. Rather, it is an intentional dramatic and ironic teaching for the benefit of his students (Sprague, 2013: 77). It seems more apparent that Socrates is proving to his students that he is “the most capable, prudent, knowing, and wise” in regard to the just nature of souls precisely because he can lie about them (*LH* 366a).<sup>16</sup>

Socrates’ contradiction of his other teachings in the second part of the dialogue is grounded in the conclusions of the first. Socrates had already concluded that Hippias was

---

<sup>14</sup> For a longer discussion on the relevance of the *Greater Hippias* in the context of the *Lesser Hippias* see: Alexander, 2008: 9—12. Alexander goes on to conclude that: “The questioning of Hippias in the *Greater Hippias*... may be seen as a test of the sophist’s knowledge, a test which he abjectly fails. His claim to wisdom is a spurious one. Since Socrates now knows this, it is unlikely that he goes to the school of Pheidistratus to further assure himself of Hippias’ lack of wisdom. But perhaps he goes there to reveal this fact to some of his fellow Athenians” (Alexander, 2008: 14—15). Alexander here suggests that, as I argue, Socrates’ primary audience was not Hippias, although she fails to specify the audience for the benefit of whom the dialogue takes place.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek *epanerotáo* is translated as both “to question again” and “ply with questions”, it suggests that Socrates would not engage with a person he didn’t find to be wise on a second occasion, hence his reluctance to speak inside.

<sup>16</sup> Here it is worth noting that *Memorabilia* IV.4, in which Xenophon recounts Socrates’ discussion with Hippias, is a section about Socrates’ concern for justice, for “he did not hide the judgement he had concerning justice, at any rate, but showed it even in deed... he [also] often spoke in this manner with others too” (*Memorabilia* IV.1.1, IV.1.5).

not wise, so when he disagrees with Hippias he is not disagreeing with the wise, as he had claimed to fear initially, but instead it is Hippias who is incapable of learning from the expert—Socrates. Socrates claims that their dialogue logically concludes that it is the mark of the good soul to do wrong voluntarily. Hippias does not attempt to convince Socrates that he is wrong but instead shows alarm that he cannot agree with the conclusion of Socrates, for fear of showing his ignorance in the company of a wise man but also because of the non-conventional nature of the argument.

Socrates, however, is not telling the truth, nor is his primary concern in alarming and confusing Hippias. Socrates is instead lying on the subject that he is the expert—the good and just soul. Socrates had repeatedly shown that he was the expert on what is the good and just soul—generally through defining what it is not—by questioning anyone who would discuss the subjects with him, and by starting from a claim of not knowing (*LH* 376bc). However, in accordance with the first half of the dialogue, a sign of expertise includes the ability to lie the best about the subject about which one is an expert. Further, Socrates' conclusion so radically departs from his usual teaching on the nature of voluntary and involuntary wrong, that his students would see it as a farcical conclusion.<sup>17</sup> Despite this being apparent to the students, Hippias ends the dialogue in a state of great confusion. With this, Socrates therefore demonstrates his ability to lie about the good and just soul in order to solidify his position as the expert on that subject to his students. The confused Hippias appears to be speaking the truth in the latter part of the dialogue, yet his refusal to agree with Socrates ought to be understood in the context of Socrates' exclamation: "what greater proof of ignorance...than when someone differs with wise men" (*LH* 372bc)?

The fact that this dialogue takes place at the expense of a sophist and at the encouragement of the sophist's sponsor cannot be neglected. Socrates' teaching was in constant tension—and Socrates himself was in competition—with the sophists. Both were generally regarded as pests to the Athenians, however, the rich would hire the sophists in hope of teaching their sons the skills necessary to be prominent in the assembly (*Apology of Socrates* 30e). Socrates was put to death for his teachings and methods; noble men would work to keep their sons away from Socrates (*Apology of Socrates* 33df). Socrates' students thus lived in a culture opposed to them and the newer more sceptical students likely needed frequent convincing that Socrates was a worthy teacher.<sup>18</sup> If he was forwarding an argument suggesting that the expert can best tell the truth and lie, it was necessary for him to prove his

---

<sup>17</sup> See for example: *Apology of Socrates* and *Gorgias*.

<sup>18</sup> Compare the image of Socrates as presented by Aristophanes in the *Clouds*, to the anger and skeptical nature of his students as seen in the *Cleitophon*.

ability to lie on the subject of his expertise. As many scholars note, Socrates not only engages in the sophist's ways by bending words and their meanings, but he also quite decisively beats Hippias at his own game by successfully confusing him and leaving Hippias upset and reluctant to continue at several points throughout the dialogue (Lampert, 2002: 254; Corey, 2013: 113—14). Here Socrates employs the use of his *polytropic* nature, in the style of Odysseus. Unlike Hippias—and sophists broadly—who bends words and their meanings for personal gain, Socrates turns the arguments in search of truth for both himself and his students. Although, in this dialogue, he uses his expertise to lie on the subject in which is he the expert.

By refuting the sophist in the company of his students, Socrates accomplishes several goals. First, he shows his superiority to the sophist and all that sophistry represents: a materialistic and conventional approach to wisdom as found in Hippias' adornments as opposed to Socrates' lack of adornments. Second, Hippias' inability to make coherent arguments that forward justice as being the mark of the more skilled stand in contrast to Socrates' superior wisdom. Instead of besting Socrates through his supposed superior knowledge of rhetoric and poetry, these are the very things that limit Hippias, leading him to direct his shame, which results from his ineptitude, into irritation towards Socrates (*LH* 370e-371a, 373bc). Socrates therefore successfully advances his teaching to his students about the nature of justice in terms of voluntary and involuntary wrongdoing by showing what it cannot be: the ultimate conclusion of the *Lesser Hippias* is ridiculous, and in ridiculous tension with Socrates' other arguments—and Hippias is unable to resist it. Socrates thus produces another demonstration in which he elevates his way of education and demotes sophistry. By successfully embarrassing and refuting a sophist, Socrates works to keep his followers away from sophistry and the false claims to education of the soul that sophists offer.

## References

- Alexander, Liz Anne (2008): 'An Interpretation of Plato's *Lesser Hippias*', Master's Thesis, University of Alberta. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7939/R3R20S19P>
- Bloom, Allan (1991): 'Interpretive Essay', in Bloom, Allan (ed. & trans.) *The Republic of Plato*. 2 ed. New York: Basic Books. pp. 307-436.
- Blundell, Mary Whitlock (1992): 'Character and Meaning in Plato's *Hippias Minor*', in Klagge, James C. and Nicholas D. Smith (eds.) *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. pp. 131-172.

Bruell, Christopher (1999): *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Corey, David D (2013): 'The Sophist Hippias and the Problem of *Polytropa*', in Dustin, Christopher A. and Denise Schaeffer (eds.) *Socratic Philosophy and Its Others*. Lanham: Lexington Press. pp. 91-114.

Davis, Michael (2016); 'Lies Like the Truth: On Plato's *Lesser Hippias*', *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 3(1133079). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2015.1133079>

De Laguna, Theodore (1920): 'The Lesser Hippias', *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 17(20): pp. 550-56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2940114>

Homer (1990): *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking.

Lampert, Laurence (2002): 'Socrates' Defence of Polytopic Odysseus: Lying and Wrongdoing in Plato's *Lesser Hippias*', *The Review of Politics* 64(2): 231-59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500038080>

Ludlam, Ivor (2017): 'Plato on the Good: Hippias Minor and Hippias Major', *Studies in Ancient Moral and Political Philosophy* 3(1): pp. 78-100.

Plato (1903): *Platonis Opera*. Trans. John Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2t2TBfD> (8 Nov 2019).

Plato (1987): 'Alcibiades I', in Pangle, Thomas (ed.) *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*. Trans. Carnes Lord. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 175-221.

Plato (1998): 'Apology of Socrates', in West, Thomas G. and Grace Starry West (eds. and trans.) *Four Tests on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, and Aristophanes' Clouds*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 63-97.

Plato (1987): 'Cleitophon', in Pangle, Thomas (ed.) *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*. Trans. Clifford Orwin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 111-116.

Plato (1987): 'Lesser Hippias', in Pangle, Thomas (ed.) *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*. Trans. James Leake. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 281-99.

Plato (1987): 'Greater Hippias', in Pangle, Thomas (ed.) *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*. Trans. David R. Sweets. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 307-339.

Sprague, Rosamund Kent (2013): *Plato's Use of Fallacy: A Study of the Euthydemus and Some Other Dialogues*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203101544>

Strauss, Leo (1964): *The City and Man*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company.

Xenophon (1994): *Memorabilia*. Trans. and Annot. Amy L. Bonnette. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.