

THE TECHNĒ ANALOGY IN THE CHARMIDES

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the interpretation of Charmides 164Dff. given by John Gould in The Development of Plato's Ethics. Gould claims that in this passage Plato wishes to indicate that he wants to delimit or qualify Socrates' analogy between morality or virtue on the one hand and art or craft (technē) on the other. Plato does this, supposedly, by showing us the unacceptable consequences which follow from assuming a complete analogy between morality and technē. I argue that this interpretation conflicts with the text, which seems to indicate that the root of whatever problems occur in the dialectic is not the technē analogy, but rather that the analogy is not being applied strictly enough. In particular, I try to show that the failure of Critias' definition of temperance is due, in large measure, to his failure to specify an object for the knowledge which he asserts is equivalent to temperance.

The Technē Analogy in the Charmides

John Gould, in The Development of Plato's Ethics,¹ puts forward an interpretation of the Charmides and several other early dialogues in which he claims that Plato's purpose, in the relevant sections of these dialogues, is to indicate that he wishes to delimit or qualify Socrates' analogy between morality or virtue on the one hand, and skill or craft (technē) on the other. This paper will concern itself with evaluating Gould's claim, specifically as it relates to the Charmides. The conclusion which will be argued for is that Gould has not successfully made out his case.

After several unsuccessful attempts to define temperance (sōphrosynē) on the part of Charmides and himself, Critias, at 164D4 (and again at 165B4) defines it as self-knowledge. He asks Socrates whether he accepts this account and Socrates replies that he must first examine what Critias has put forward. He then begins the long and involved elenchus which occupies the remainder of the dialogue and culminates in the rejection of the definition. The first section of the dialectic with which I shall be concerned may be summarized as follows:

(a) Socrates begins his examination: if temperance is to know something (gignōskein ti), it must be a knowledge² (epistēmē tis) and must be "of" something (tiños).

(b) Critias replies that it is--of the self (heatou).

(c) Socrates now attempts to get Critias to state the ergon or "product" (also identified with the "benefit," ōphelia) of temperance, understood as the knowledge of self. Just as medicine has health for its product and benefit, so too should temperance have a product and a benefit.

¹ Cambridge, 1955. Reissued by Russell and Russell, New York, 1972. All unidentified page references in the text are to the later edition. For stimulating discussions of other aspects of Gould's book than those discussed in this paper, see R.E. Allen, "The Socratic Paradox," Journal of the History of Ideas (1960), pp.256-65; G. Vlastos, "Socratic Knowledge and Platonic 'Pessimism,'" Philosophical Review (1957), pp.226-38; John Rist, Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus and Origin, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1964, pp.115-142 ("Knowing How and Knowing That").

² I translate epistēmē as "knowledge" rather than the more specific "science" or "craft" or "art" because, although these are defensible translations at certain points in the argument, the fact that the dialectic proceeds by exploiting the imprecision of this and related words necessitates the retention of the least specific word in English.

(d) Critias objects that Socrates is not inquiring in the correct manner. He is assuming a likeness between temperance and the other knowledges which in fact does not exist, for it is not like them, nor are they like each other. Consider geometry and arithmetic: what product do they have which is comparable to a house, the product of architecture, or a cloak, the product of weaving? None it seems.

(e) Socrates counters by pointing out that even if there is no product in the case of arithmetic, there is a subject matter which is distinct from the knowledge itself. Can Critias point to such an object in the case of temperance?

(f) Critias once again accuses Socrates of being on the wrong track, for this is just where temperance differs from the other knowledges. All the other knowledges are "of" something else, and not of themselves, while temperance alone is knowledge of the other knowledges and of itself (τῶν τε ἄλλων ἐπιστηκῶν ἐπιστήναι καὶ αὐτὴν ἑαυτῆς 166C).³ Critias claims that Socrates is really aware of this and is simply trying to refute him.

Socrates introduces the word epistēmē (at (a)), by a rather questionable move. He says that if temperance is to know something (gignōskein ti), then it must be a knowledge (epistēmē tis) and have an object. And as becomes apparent rather shortly, Socrates, at least in this section of the argument, equates epistēmē with technē, "art" or "craft." (Cf. 165D6, technōn). Socrates seems to assume that the knowledge which is temperance should have the same sorts of features as arts or crafts like medicine and house-building. To readers of Plato's early dialogues this assumption will hardly come as a surprise. Critias too, at least at first, appears to accept the analogy, and proceeds to identify the object of this epistēmē (= technē) with the self.

This section of the dialogue contains a great number of points which require comment and analysis.⁴ However, I shall restrict attention to the claim made by Gould, to the effect that it is Plato's purpose in this section of the dialogue to indicate that he wishes to restrict the analogy between morality or virtue and technē. According to Gould, the intent of Critias' response to Socrates in the text summarized above is to indicate "that moral skill has no tangible product, such as the production of buildings or health (p.38)." Furthermore, he supposes that the lesson to be drawn from Socrates' later arguments against Critias' definition is that its failure is due to the assumption that temperance is exactly analogous to a technē (pp.39-40).⁵

³ I refer to this formula at several points simply as "knowledge of knowledge."

⁴ A good introduction to the issues which are raised in this section of the dialogue is G. Tuckey's Plato's Charmides (Cambridge, 1951).

⁵ Gould's interpretation of the breakdown of the technē analogy is apparently accepted by R.S.W. Hawtrey, "Socrates and the Acquisition of Knowledge," Antichthon (1972), p.6, note 28.

Before turning to an examination of the passages in question, it should be noted that according to Gould's interpretation, it is into the mouth of Critias that Plato puts his "correction" of Socratic doctrine. However, although this is not an absolute impossibility, anyone who reads the Charmides with sensitivity will surely gain the impression that the portrait of Critias which is drawn therein is hardly a flattering one, especially with respect to his mental abilities.⁶ It is, therefore, hardly likely that Plato would expect his readers to take Critias' moves as intended as serious improvements on Socratic doctrine.

Now let us turn to the text, which, upon examination, seems not to support Gould's reading. We begin at 165C5, where Socrates introduces the word epistēmē, which is accepted by Critias. Socrates then asks Critias to state the object of this epistēmē which is sōphrosynē (according to the analogy with geometry) and its benefit (according to the analogy with medicine). Critias does in fact accept the analogy, and does supply an object, the self.⁷ But he immediately seems to forget this and, in response to Socrates' further questioning, changes his tactics and introduces the obscure notion of "knowledge of knowledge." This seems to suggest extreme confusion, not settled and conscious innovation, on Critias' part. That he could have rather easily defended his claim that the self is the object of sōphrosynē, and could have easily supplied a benefit for sōphrosynē so understood, is obvious, given the long and elaborate comparison between the health of the body and that of the soul at the beginning of the dialogue (156B-158D). The product and benefit of temperance, according to that analogy, would be the health of the soul, just as the product and benefit of medicine is the health of the body. That this is ignored by Critias and that he forgets his original identification of the object of sōphrosynē with the self, illustrates much about Critias and his lack of clarity; it does not indicate that Plato is revealing anything about his views on the limitations of the technē analogy. If anything, the opposite conclusion seems to be at least as probable, given the course of the argument. Critias is asked to supply the object or product of the knowledge which he equates with sōphrosynē. He fails and proceeds upon the assumption that it does not have one, even though Socrates plainly indicates his belief that it does, and the previous discussion gives an unmistakable hint of what that object or product might be. The dialectic produces unacceptable consequences in the sense that no acceptable definition of sōphrosynē is achieved (175B). From this may we not just as well conclude that the impasse results from the technē analogy not being followed

⁶ The Critias of the Charmides is well described by Prof. Santas: "He is hardly able to explain what he means by the various phrases he uses....and when it comes to Socrates' objections, he is like a windmill that is not in gear: on meeting the least resistance he changes direction. Within the space of three pages he changes his definition of temperance three times, the changes being always greater than those required by Socrates' objections, and in the direction of safety from objection.... Critias, it seems, will say anything to get out of trouble." ("Socrates at Work on Virtue and Knowledge in Plato's Charmides," in Lee, Mourelatos, and Rorty (eds.), Exegesis and Argument (Van Gorcum, 1973), p.108.

⁷ This move in the argument is not even mentioned in Gould's discussion of the argument.

strictly enough? In failing to indicate an object for sōphrosynē, Critias, it might be argued, has committed a blunder which will result in the failure of the subsequent discussion. There is certainly no need to conclude that the technē analogy is the faulty premise which lies behind the failure of the discussion.

A similar result seems to emerge in connection with the consideration of Gould's claim that the technē analogy is the basis of the refutations of Critias' definition.

Socrates gives three main arguments against the definition, one (167B-169A) against the possibility of "knowledge of knowledge" and two (169B-172A; 172C-175A) against the claim that such knowledge would be beneficial or useful.

In the first argument, Socrates points out that although Critias has put forward the claims of "knowledge of knowledge," (that is, a knowledge which has no other object except itself and other knowledges), there do not appear to be such things as sight of sight, or hearing of hearing, or desire of desire, etc.⁸ Socrates refuses to dogmatize, but has said enough, at least for Critias, to cast doubt upon the viability of the notion of "knowledge of knowledge." Socrates must hypothetically grant (169D) the possibility of "knowledge of knowledge" so that the discussion can proceed.

In the second argument Socrates casts doubt upon the usefulness of sōphrosynē as characterized by Critias. If the knowledge by which he defines sōphrosynē is of knowledge and of nothing else (i.e., of no other object than itself), then the possessor of such knowledge will not be enabled to know what he or another knows and does not know (for that requires knowledge of a specific subject matter), but only that he or another knows something.

This ability will not, then, enable him to distinguish experts from non-experts. So sōphrosynē, thus understood, turns out to be of little use.

⁸ Socrates uses a great number of counter-examples, which exhibit a rather amazing logical diversity from one another and, one might surely argue, from knowledge.

Into the analysis and criticism of these difficult and often obscure arguments I do not propose to enter in this paper.⁹ It is sufficient for present purposes simply to point out that the refutations both of the possibility and the benefit of sōphrosynē as defined by Critias seem to be rooted in the claim that the knowledge which is claimed to be sōphrosynē has no object other than itself; it is this feature of Critias' definition which is the pivot of Socrates' refutations. That is, the refutations are possible precisely because Critias has given up that assumption, central to the idea of a technē, that the technē must have an object distinct from itself. Therefore, far from providing support for Gould's claim that the assumption of the technē analogy is the culprit in the refutations, the text makes clear that it is precisely the abandonment of the technē analogy which causes the trouble.

With respect to the final argument of the dialogue (Socrates' "dream," 173ff.), Socrates suggests that even if the previous objections against Critias' definition are waived, it still appears that such "knowledge of knowledge" will not be beneficial. Granted, everything from shoemaking to prophecy will be done "knowledgeably," but Socrates is still not convinced that this state of affairs will produce happiness. Following hints from Socrates, Critias finally (174B) claims that the knowledge needed to produce happiness is the knowledge of good and evil. This section of the dialectic seems to make quite clear that what is at issue has little to do with the technē analogy per se. The difficulty again concerns the object of the knowledge which is sōphrosynē, and certainly all parties to the discussion appear to assume that the knowledge which is productive of happiness has an object. You cannot be happy with a mere epistēmē about knowledge or an epistēmē about shoemaking, but you might well be happy with an epistēmē about good and evil.¹⁰ Nothing is said to suggest that the technē analogy is being abandoned or modified, or that it should be; the focus is squarely on the problem of the nature of the object of the knowledge which is claimed to produce happiness.

Thus it appears that the text gives no support whatever for Gould's interpretation, despite the fact that the other texts which he examines (notably the *Hippias I* and *Republic I*) might better accord with his claims. But that is another story.

⁹ My summaries of Socrates' refutations do not even begin to reflect the often bewildering complexity of the text. I have simply extracted, hopefully not unfairly, what I think germane to the point at issue.

¹⁰ The fact that at this point in the dialogue epistēmē, directed toward good and evil, seems to mean not so much "craft" or "art" as "science," involving a "knowing that," militates against the principal thesis of the first part of Gould's book, i.e., that by the knowledge which is equated with virtue Socrates' meant a "knowing how." For discussion of this point see the literature referred to in note 1 above.

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