

ONE



PROLOGUE

Do you see how erotic Socrates is with beautiful young men, how he is always hanging around them and is taken with them? And on the other hand how he claims that he is ignorant of everything and knows nothing! . . . His outside is like a Silenus, but when he is opened up, my fellow drinkers, you cannot imagine how he teems with sophrosune within.

—Alcibiades

The idea that moral concepts can be better understood when they are discussed in the context of human lives and actions has come to the forefront of philosophical thinking in recent years, perhaps especially through the influence of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Of course this idea is also expressed in the Platonic dialogues, which through narrative and drama in historical context give to the meaning of moral terms a depth they otherwise would not have. It is clear that the prologues to the dialogues often have a special role in this function of framing, through drama and narrative, the ethical and cultural context of the philosophical inquiries Socrates conducts with his interlocutors. And yet the prologues are often ignored in the scholarly literature on Plato's dialogues, presumably because they fall outside the inquiry itself, in which concepts are examined and arguments developed, and therefore may seem not to contribute to the substantive, philosophical part of the works. If the interpretive approach I outlined in the preface is correct, however, this dismissive attitude toward the prologues is mistaken.

This matter is particularly relevant to the *Charmides*, which enjoys one of the most richly textured and fascinating among all the prologues to Plato's works. The prologue thematizes four issues

that are of interest not only for understanding the *Charmides*, but for understanding Socratic philosophy in general: (1) the theme of war in relation to moderation; (2) the theme of *eros*; (3) the theme of Charmides and Critias and the aristocratic tradition in *sophrosune*; and (4) the theme of Socrates and his self-portrait as a moral therapist. But despite its importance, the way in which the prologue prefigures the understanding of these themes prior to the inquiry has not been appreciated in the scholarly literature on the dialogue. Many scholars, including Tuckey, Taylor, Guthrie, and even Friedlaender, devote relatively brief or no attention to the prologue, while Hyland, who offers a more complete account, admits that he does little more than raise issues rather than elaborate on them.¹ I wish to suggest that a fuller appreciation of the prologue will prepare the reader for a deeper understanding of the later inquiries and of the dialogue as a whole. Unless these themes are recognized in the introduction, their later functions in the dialogue may be ignored, undervalued, or suppressed.

In this chapter, I will show how the prologue characterizes the cultural setting in which the ancient Greek ideal of *sophrosune* was situated. I will argue that that setting displays the problematic character of the ideal in relation to conventional Athenian attitudes toward military and political life, and toward *eros* and education. There is a profound relationship between violence and a certain kind of erotic attachment thematized in the prologue and dramatized in the later work which is important for understanding the psychology and political philosophy of the *Charmides*. There is also a profound relationship indicated in the prologue between the problematic of *eros* and its relation to *sophrosune* and to the very idea of rational self-identity, which must be appreciated to make sense of later developments in the argument. In relation to the third topic mentioned above, the reader is introduced in the prologue to the notorious figures of Charmides and Critias, who are fated to have such an important role in the Athenians' judgment of the historical Socrates' influence on public life. Their depiction in the dialogue in general and in the prologue in particular has been widely misread in the scholarly literature on the *Charmides*, with a distorting effect on the interpretation of the entire work. Finally, there is the thematization of Socrates himself, of his role in Athenian intellectual and moral life, and of the nature of his claim—after all the qualifications and denials—to some form of wisdom and virtue-inducing therapeutic power through dialectic. Now, there is a sense in which every Platonic dialogue named for a character in it chiefly

concerns the central value of that character. But obviously they are all about Socrates as well, and, as I indicated in the preface, the *Charmides*, much more than other dialogues, amounts to a kind of critical self-examination, or examination by Plato, of Socrates' philosophical enterprise. We run the risk of failing to understand the extent to which this is the case, if we rush past the prologue on our way to "the real philosophy." The prologue is part of the real philosophy, though it involves no arguments.

WAR, POLITICS, AND MODERATION (153a1–d1)

The *Charmides* begins with the fact of armed conflict between Athens and Sparta, and the intense involvement of those present in that conflict. It is around the year 429 B.C.² Socrates has been away from the city for an extended period of time, and has just returned to a "familiar haunt," the palaestra or athletic school of Taureas, from the war camp of the Athenian army at Potidea, after that army was engaged in a fierce battle.³ While he was away, the plague may have struck Athens for the first time.⁴ On entering the gymnasium, he encounters the excitable Chaerophon, who would have Socrates tell him and the others, who include Critias, news of the battle.⁵ They are tremendously eager to hear him, and we can well imagine why, since many friends and relatives may have been killed or injured. They would also want to know who fought well and who poorly, and how Socrates himself fared—as Chaerophon blurts out, in the opening question of the dialogue: "How did you survive the battle, Socrates?" (A question that will reverberate throughout the dialogue, as we reflect on its possible different meanings.) With masterly brevity, the initial scene projects the reader forward to the entire tragic story of the Peloponnesian War, beyond that to the tyranny of the Thirty, and beyond that to Socrates' own trial and execution.

Almost immediately, Socrates' narrative serves to contrast his own attitude toward the war to that of all the others present. They, like Chaerophon, if only barely less so, are caught up in its excitement and energy. (The word used to describe the battle, *ischuros*, "fierce" or "intense," is used later in the dialogue as the contrary to a term used for moderation, *hesuchos*, "calm.") To the others, the war and everything related to it is the focus of their interests and concerns. But Socrates characterizes this interest with a dismissive phrase, and says that "after we had enough of that," he was able to turn the conversation to what interested him (to what

brought him to this familiar, pleasant place), namely the young men of Athens and their education. He wanted to know who was well reputed for beauty or wisdom or both. Thus Socrates is made to stand out, by his own words, as someone who specifically is not concerned with the values of the others, the values of politics and war, but rather as someone concerned with the things of peace, philosophy, and the education of the young.⁶

This contrast between Socrates' evident lack of passion with respect to the war-fever—associated with his love of philosophy and the young—and the marked passion of his contemporaries is underscored by something else, which informs the narrative though it is not directly expressed. For we know from Alcibiades in the *Symposium* that Socrates not only survived the battle, but he performed with exemplary courage in it, saving Alcibiades' own life (220d–e). Thus Chaerophon's question, which he impulsively failed to consider might have been a cause of intense embarrassment to his friend (e.g., had Socrates saved himself by dropping his armor and running), might have tempted Socrates to embark on a tale of his own heroism. Instead, Socrates' reply is a model of modest reserve; we hear nothing of his courageous deeds, and his silence would seem to underscore the fact that he, unlike the others, simply does not care about those things. But this does not imply that he is not capable, when duty calls, to be courageous. Socrates' moderation is not incompatible with deeds of great physical energy and fearless resolve.⁷ For him the one does not imply the absence of the other. This fact will prove especially relevant, when we come to consider the argument in which the first definition is refuted.

The life and death struggle alluded to in the opening lines of the dialogue relates to the political coloring the ideal of moderation/restraint had come to have in late fifth century Greece. As Helen North has shown in detail, *sophrosune* was a virtue characteristically (and propagandistically) identified with the conservative aristocratic tradition in Greek political thought, and with Sparta in particular—in marked contrast to Athens, which was viewed by many as a deeply immoderate regime.⁸ This tradition is represented in the *Charmides* by the title character and his guardian and uncle Critias, whose individual significance will be discussed shortly. The classic statement of the conservative view is found in Thucydides' *History*, in the passages where the Corinthian delegates to the Congress at Lacedaimon at the beginning of the war contrast the relentless energy and daring of the Athenian people to the phlegmatic conservatism and caution of Sparta (I.68–71).

To this description, which he does not deny, the Spartan king Archidamus replies that what the Corinthians disparage is in fact a quality of wise moderation, which tempers everything the Spartans do, and which renders them more able than other peoples to deal judiciously with both good and bad fortune (I.84). *Sophrosune* in the conservative tradition of Greek thought was a quality of temperament and mind rooted in sound laws, strict educational discipline, piety, and the sense of shame. It was a quality they believed most lacking in the Athenians, who were excessive, bold beyond measure, and excitable in everything they did, much like the democrat Chaerophon (cf. 153b2–3). On Thucydides' account, the Spartan virtue of *sophrosune* was the product of a repressive culture and training not found in fifth-century Athens.

But of course this was the Spartan, not the Athenian perspective. In the Athenian view, expressed in the Funeral Oration, neither Spartan moderation nor even Spartan courage (which Archidamus had said was rooted in their moderation and sense of shame) are virtues, for the simple reason that they are unfree. Genuine virtue, Pericles argues, must arise from choice, not from habits driven by coercion and fear, and it must be informed by intelligence.⁹ These are themes to which we will return in chapters 2 and 3.

Despite Pericles' remarks, it must be acknowledged that moderation was not held up as a *manly* ideal in his Athens, and that elements of the kind of immoderation for which Athens was condemned are present in the Funeral Oration as well. Thus Pericles boasts to his fellow countrymen that they have "forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring and have left everywhere imperishable monuments of our good and evil deeds behind us" (II.41), and he urges them to conceive a passionate love (*eros*) for Athens in their hearts, that they might emulate their fathers' achievements and add to Athens' glory (II.43). This was the kind of ambition that caused Athens to be charged with tyranny and tyrannical *eros*, both in the pages of Thucydides' *History* and by Sophocles in his *Oedipus Tyrannus*.¹⁰ It was also the kind of ambition that would later be associated with Pericles' egotistical young ward, Alcibiades, and with his scheme to seize Sicily, which led to Athens' eventual defeat; see especially VI.24, where Thucydides says that the Athenians conceived a passion (*eros*) for the adventure and for the beautiful island they thought it would bring them. It is no accident, I suggest, that immediately after Plato has depicted the kind of passion the Athenians, particularly Chaerophon, show about the war, he goes on to depict a striking intensity of passion

about the beautiful young Charmides. The drama of the dialogue will recur to this theme of the desire for beautiful or noble things (*ta kala*) and the willingness to use violent means to obtain them. In fact, the erotic intensity attaching to Charmides' beauty in the prologue will be defused in the course of the discussion, and transferred to Socrates' beauty in the end. But there we shall again see how immoderate desire spills over into violence or the threat of it.

Now all of this is related to the widespread chauvenistic or "phallogocentric" Athenian attitude that moderation was more a woman's virtue, or that of a youth such as Charmides, rather than a manly virtue, the virtue of a free citizen and warrior.¹¹ Thus Charmides, who is acknowledged to be *sophron* (or at least his uncle claims that everyone regards him so), is clearly not regarded by the others as fully virtuous. (The word *arete* occurs only once in the entire dialogue, at 158a1, and there innocuously.¹²) That attribute would call for other qualities, such as courage or prudence, but no one claims Charmides possesses either of these (his uncle admits the boy is lacking in *dianoia*, i.e., thinking ability, and his actions will not prove him either thoughtful or brave). Thus the prologue shows us an Athens in which the focus of attention, for almost all of those present, is on what Aristotle calls "the life of action," namely the military and political life of the adult male citizen. This is a way of life in which moderation, at least as it is understood in Athens, is deemed to have a relatively minor role. But this is somewhat puzzling, too, since the Spartans share the Athenian admiration for the life of action, but they nonetheless believe that moderation is an important, indeed central virtue. Clearly the reader will not be able to fully appreciate the arguments of the dialogue, unless the meanings of its terms are considered in relation not only to the context of war and the life of action, but also in relation to the cultural/political context and the way in which the virtue may be structured differently in different societies.

EROS AND SELF-CONTROL (153d2–155e2)

A second function of the prologue is to situate the ideal of moderation in relation to connections in ancient Greek thought and culture between *paideia* and philosophy, *eros* and beauty. The theme of the relation between education and *eros* is developed through the depiction of the beautiful young Charmides and the effect he has on the others present, especially the grown men. Here

again, the initial effect of the prologue is to contrast the Socratic to the conventional attitude, represented by the others present. But the narrative then also offers an internal view of Socratic moderation in *eros*—a view literally without parallel in the Platonic dialogues.¹³ This event will prove to be of crucial importance for understanding the later inquiry, when Socrates and Critias reflect on the nature of self-knowledge.

After the brief opening scene and its allusion to the war, Socrates asks concerning “affairs here,” that is, affairs having to do with the young and education (153d3). To his question who among the young are the most renowned for beauty or wisdom or both, Critias answers that he will soon meet the most beautiful, and Charmides makes his electrifying entrance. Socrates:

In my opinion all the others were in love with him, so excited and confused had they become as he came in. Indeed, many other lovers were also following among those behind him. Now this was not wondrous on the part of us men; but turning my attention to the boys, I noticed that none of them, not even the littlest, looked anywhere else, but all were contemplating him as if he were a statue. (154c2–8)

This description is followed first by Chaerophon’s quip that as striking as the boy is, Socrates would think nothing of his face, were he to see his naked body (*eidos*, 154d5), and then by Socrates’ rejoinder, that they then need to consider only one little thing, to see if Charmides is truly perfect: whether his *soul* is lacking in any respect (154e1).

Chaerophon’s remark reflects the fact that moderation did not conventionally attach as a virtue to the grown male lover in ancient Athens, or at least not as contemporary readers might expect.¹⁴ It certainly did not appear as a voice of moral censure; the *erastes* normally had no qualms about wanting to have the beautiful young lad. On the other hand, moderation did conventionally attach to the beloved, who was expected, within the framework of Athenian sexual morality, to protect his reputation and not let himself be seduced (like the high school girl, in the age of double standards). There is a decidedly “feminine” quality to the conventional virtue of moderation in the context of sexuality in fifth century Athens, in the sense that it is supposed to attach to the passive object of masculine pursuit and be reflected in behavior that neither submits to that pursuit, nor takes advantage of it to behave in a domineering manner

toward the lover.¹⁵ Charmides fulfills this norm; despite being the object of intense sexual pursuit, he is “moderate” and “restrained” in his behavior and demeanor. Thus he is the opposite of the young Alcibiades, who slept with whom he pleased and moreover used his sexuality shamelessly to pursue his ambitions, as we also learn in the *Symposium*. This suggests another dimension of the moderation expected of the beautiful young *eromenos*, a dimension Plato also subtly reflects in the prologue—the relation between *eros* and tyranny. Just as the beloved may in his eagerness for conquest ignore the well-being of the beloved, so the beloved, accustomed to the fawning behavior of his lovers, may take for granted his domination of them (cf. 156a1–3; also *Lysis* 206a, *Meno* 76b).¹⁶ But it is not clear that moderation in this conventional sense is ultimately beneficial to the one who possesses it—at least not if virtue is primarily a function of action and conquest, rather than of resisting such conquest or refraining from taking advantage of another’s weakness.

A second aspect of Charmides’ entrance scene is to contrast once again the attitude of Socrates to that of all the others present. They are stunned by Charmides’ beauty, and the men at least are openly eager for his body; but Socrates is not taken in by the erotic fever for Charmides in the same way, and he remembers to be concerned for the boy’s soul, which they in their passion momentarily forget (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5, 1140b12–20). We soon learn that even Socrates is not entirely immune to Charmides’ charms, however. For he goes on to relate that shortly after Charmides approached him, he happened to see inside the boy’s cloak, with the result that

I was inflamed, I was no longer in control of myself, and I held Cydias to be wisest in erotic matters, who, speaking about a beautiful boy, advised someone that “a fawn coming opposite a lion should beware lest he be taken as a portion of meat.” I myself seemed to myself to have been caught by such a creature. (155d4–e2)¹⁷

Socrates then proceeds to recount the dialogue he shared with Charmides, and how, in the course of that conversation, he regained his composure and “was rekindled to life” (*anezoproumen*, 156d2–3).

The chief value of this remarkable narrative is to depict the inward struggle for self-control in such a way as to link Socrates’ success in that effort with his practice of rational inquiry and with

the reachievement of his personal identity.¹⁸ It is as though Socrates *himself* is extinguished by the impulse of his sudden passion for Charmides, and is not reawakened until that passion has subsided and the familiar Socrates, charismatic teacher/philosopher, is back in charge.

Viewed from the outside, Socrates' behavior toward Charmides is that of a man whom Athenian fathers can trust with their handsome young sons. He is not stunned by Charmides' beautiful physical appearance, in vivid contrast to Chaerophon and the others, who forget Charmides' soul in their absorption in the boy's looks (154d1–e1); and he acts in an altogether seemly manner with the youth during their whole conversation. He is perfectly, naturally moderate.

The personal narrative reveals more. Socrates' moderation is no mere disposition of behavior, natural or otherwise. It is a dynamic, voluntary habit that can require controlling his impulses and enacting his deeper sense of himself, his identity as a lover of wisdom. It includes an element of moral wariness in dealing with beauties such as Charmides, who have a dangerous innocence about their charm. It includes principles with regard to how the other should be conceived and treated—with respect, as a "rational soul," not as a mere means to the satisfaction of his desires.¹⁹ And it is achieved through the process of dialectical engagement, for it is through reasoning with Charmides that Socrates reestablishes the common ground on which their interaction can proceed in a manner appropriate both to his deepest desire and to his and Charmides' rational selves. The connections between Socrates' erotic moderation and his philosophy are complicated and reciprocal. While his practice of philosophy seems to depend on the ability to restrain impulses he perceives as alien to his deeper purposes, in fact that restraint is itself grounded in his love of wisdom, his awareness of "how wise Cydias was." Socrates' erotic quest, stimulated by the beautiful, is nonetheless oriented most of all to wisdom and the potential for it in others. His love of wisdom is in turn dependent, as he will explain and demonstrate later in the dialogue, on his realization of what he does not know. These are themes to which we will return later, when the argument will seem to disconnect self-knowledge from desire.

The depiction of Socratic moderation presented here is also relevant to the concept of the self or rational soul, which is also a focus of later discussion. It is apparent from this example that the rational soul relates implicitly to the impulses of a potentially

unruly body. Clearly, a person must become aware of those impulses and of the nature underlying them; but just as clearly, she must distinguish herself from them. They are not simply alien; but they are also not "her own," unless she succumbs to or embraces them.²⁰ The structure of the self depicted in the prologue involves a hierarchical relation between the second-order desire of the rational self and the first-order desire of immediate impulse. To "know himself" in this situation, Socrates must preserve his rationality in the situation of erotic temptation; but he must also realize his lack of perfect substantive rationality, his need for wisdom and its relevance to his relations to others. His success here suggests the larger pattern of the whole: the love of the beautiful is moderated and transformed by the rational pursuit of wisdom.

Note, however, that the public events of the dialogue do not reflect Socrates' inner drama at all. They simply display Socrates in easy conversation with Charmides. Perhaps a close account of Socrates' behavior would reveal something different (the "I was inflamed" may imply that he had an erection), but that would not have been observed by anyone else present, and at any rate there would be no suggestion from an outside observer that *Socrates* had somehow lost his identity, only to regain it later on. The narrative contrast between the objective and subjective points of view, and the relevance of that contrast to the nature of personal identity, is crucial to the meaning of the dialogue. Lacking this perspective, we might not be aware of the elements of self-consciousness and self-determination in the moral situation; we might view it merely from the perspective of behavior, rather than agency. Plato presents the reader with a depiction of a familiar moral experience, one part of which is easily suppressed in thought, because it does not have the significance in the world of public action that it has in the world of moral life. Narrative, however, allows the reader to move between the objective/behavioral and subjective/reflective points of view, somewhat as we may in real life, and thus be reminded of the dynamic, self-reflective, and self-formative character of moral life, which is easily forgotten, and of which the other participants in the drama seem not to have any intimation.

CHARMIDES AND CRITIAS

A third purpose of the prologue is to introduce the interlocutors, whose opinions inevitably shape the direction of the conver-

sation, and who would also, if they were well known, raise specific questions in the minds of Plato's ancient readers. Now, this brings up an interesting point that is relevant to all of the aporetic dialogues. It is obvious that Socrates' interlocutors are especially selected by Plato for the particular virtue under discussion, and the strange thing is that they appear so often to be uniquely ill-suited to it. Why, for example, did Plato select Euthyphro, such an unorthodox man, for the dialogue on piety? Why a pair of defeated generals, Laches and Nicias, the latter accused by some of cowardice, to examine courage? Why begin the discussion of justice with a resident alien? Why discuss friendship with a pair of mere boys? Why choose Charmides and Critias to talk about moderation?

Plato would appear to have had two main reasons for selecting these individuals to be Socrates' interlocutors in a dialogue on *sophrosune*. The first has to do with the above-mentioned association of this ideal with the aristocratic class in ancient Greece. Charmides is a character-type of the Young Gentleman, and one of the clearest representatives of this type in the dialogues.²¹ As a young gentleman, Charmides was expected to be *sophron*, self-restrained in his moral behavior, and we learn in the prologue that he so well fulfills this expectation that he is regarded as the most moderate (*sophonestatos*, 157d6) of the young men of his generation. Critias, his uncle and guardian, was a character-type of the Laconist or Oligarch: of aristocratic lineage, critical of Periclean democracy, closely associated with Spartan values, and excluded from the mainstream of Athenian political life. Moreover, he upheld conservative moral values, and particularly the ideal of *sophrosune*, in his writings. Both Charmides and Critias would appear to have been well qualified to discuss the virtue. There is even Athenian political history at work here, since both could trace their ancestry back to Solon (cf. 157e6), the great statesman of political moderation and legislator of the republican form the Athenian constitution took until the installation of the participatory or "radical" democracy of Pericles and Ephialtes. Both were relatives of Plato, Charmides being the brother of Plato's mother, Perictione.

But Plato clearly also had another reason for selecting these particular individuals for this conversation. Charmides and Critias were not only associated with the "conservative" virtue of moderation, they were also associated with its opposite, the vices of *hubris* and tyranny, and it was thought by many that they came by these qualities through the influence of Socrates.

Charmides appears to be a youth of unusual promise, morally upstanding, noble of lineage, and physically beautiful and charming. Tuckey calls him "the perfect raw material for a true statesman," and Friedlaender goes even further: "His inner being seems to correspond to his outward appearance, for he has both philosophical and poetic talent. This combination must be Plato's own image; it is the stuff of which he wished men to be."²² As we shall see, this impression of Plato's depiction of Charmides is *very* misleading, but it must have been a common view in Athens, which would have made all the more troubling his later failure. We learn also in the prologue that Charmides may be deficient in regard to his thought, and this is what Critias hopes Socrates might help him improve (157c7–d1). Somehow the Socratic method of teaching would seem relevant to the educational task of shaping the mind of this young gentleman of Athens so that he might become a leader in a democratic society. But as we know, this will not occur.

The figure of Critias raises even more sharply the question of Socrates' political and educational influence. Critias is one of the most contradictory figures of his age. He was known to have written poetry in praise of the Spartan constitution and Spartan customs, and the central virtue of his encomia is *sophrosune*. At least one historian of ideas (Doyné Dawson) believes Critias was instrumental in the creation of the "Spartan myth" of the excellence of Lacedaimonian social institutions and values.²³ Yet Critias embodied, by other accounts, the very opposite of the virtue he praised so highly in speech. This is brought out especially by Xenophon, who in his history of Greece depicts Critias as the most politically immoderate and violent of the Thirty (*Hellenica* II.iii–iv; cf. also *Memorabilia* I.ii.12), and who in his Socratic writing depicts Critias as sexually immoderate and hubristic (*Memorabilia* I.ii.29–31). Furthermore, Critias would become infamous in antiquity as the author of the *Sisyphus*, the first Greek play to articulate explicitly the idea of atheism.²⁴ This idea is reflected in his speech on self-knowledge in the *Charmides*, as we will see later. "A curious mixture of *Junkerduenkelt* and sophist" (Tuckey), the historical person Critias was at once a poet of traditional aristocratic values, and an atheist and sensualist; a spokesman for hierarchy and stability, and a bloodthirsty reactionary; a student of the Sophists, and—this is the key point—a companion of Socrates.²⁵

Both Charmides and Critias are associated, each in his own way, with the notion of moderation and especially with the Laconizing notion of moderation, and both are famous companions

of Socrates. But the political ideals associated with Sparta were deeply authoritarian, and it seemed to many of Socrates' Athenian critics—as it has seemed to contemporary critics such as Ellen and Neal Wood, or popular writers such as I. F. Stone—that it was Socrates who must have induced in these men their antidemocratic, authoritarian, and self-aggrandizing attitudes.²⁶ If Xenophon is right, it was perhaps primarily for reasons of his association with Critias (and that other immoderate pupil Alcibiades) that Socrates was condemned (*Memorabilia* I.ii.12; cf. also Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 173). It will turn out that the definitions of *sophrosune* offered by Critias in our dialogue may derive from Socrates himself, and he and Critias seem at the end to be about to take over the education of Charmides—who will turn out to be his guardian's henchman in the Thirty! This raises urgently the question, whether Plato can show us that his teacher was *not* responsible for the future crimes of these, two of his most famous companions.

These factors make it likely that Plato intended to examine Socratic *paideia* in the *Charmides*, both with regard to his method of education he employed (the elenchus) and with regard to the doctrines he advocated, especially the ones that seemed to valorize rule by an educated, dictatorial elite over rule by persuasion and majority consent. If Socrates was in fact the positive influence his admirers claimed him to be, why did he not have a more benign influence on these two future tyrants, who spent so much time with him and seemed to be so taken with his thought? And what was the content of that thought, to which they were so attracted? Did he not advocate the possibility of a political statecraft, based on wisdom and operating through coercion rather than persuasion? Socrates does speak, in the *Charmides*, of his "dream" of a society run by knowledgeable experts, and it appears that Critias is not only familiar with, but deeply attracted to this notion. Was Socrates not the defender of a Laconist, authoritarian model of the ideal society, albeit one based on a slightly different concept of rule in which "knowledge" was the justifying criterion? Did he perhaps teach this authoritarian ideal to Critias, who later in his life sought to impose it violently on Athens? Is there not solid evidence that the Socratic circle was "surrounded by an atmosphere of authoritarian elitism, which nourished the most reactionary, aristocratic, even crypto-oligarchical views"?²⁷

The *Charmides*, by the choice of its theme and characters, is *the* Platonic dialogue to explore and defend Socrates against the charges against him, and to raise the question of his educational

influence. As we shall see, it does this in a way that reflects on the very puzzling fact that Critias could exhibit such a striking contradiction between his words in praise of moderation and his immoderate deeds and life. The *Charmides* will suggest a reason for this contradiction, and for Socrates' failure to effect a positive influence on Critias and Charmides. It will show why Charmides could not break free of his uncle's influence, and why Critias was immune to Socratic education. In particular, it will identify Critias as a student not of Socrates, but of the Sophists. This is the quality linking Critias to the other most puzzling characters in the aporetic dialogues, and to the general question of what is most deeply wrong with Athenian cultural life. For the defining characteristic of Plato's depiction of Socratic philosophy in the early dialogues is to show him struggling intellectually not only with the traditional Greek ideals and values that have come under attack, but also with Sophistry in all its manifold and subtle forms. Again and again, as if wrestling with Proteus, Socrates reveals Sophists beneath their outwardly deceptive guises—the self-certain Critias, the self-pious Euthyphro, the self-admiring Ion, the self-protective Nicias. The overall effect is to display Sophistry as a “disease of the soul” in Athenian public life, a disease that renders its victims unable to know themselves and live a life in harmony with their ideals. The drama of the *Charmides* will take us a long way toward understanding Plato's view of the relation between Sophistry and Critias' future tyranny, and of why Socrates did not have a more benign effect on him and his ward.

SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE SOUL (155e2–158c4)

This brings us to the final purpose of the prologue, namely, to introduce the ideal of philosophy that Socrates represents in relation to the scientific context of Athenian life, as the background in relation to which the definition of *sophrosune* at 167a1–7 and the arguments involved in the examination of that definition should be understood.

On Socrates' request that they examine the young man's soul, Critias reports that Charmides has been suffering of late from headaches.²⁸ To draw Charmides into letting Socrates question him, Critias suggests that Socrates pretend to be a doctor (155b1–7).²⁹ Socrates gladly agrees to the game, but he tells Charmides that before he can give him the drug for his head, he must be certain the

boy is already healthy in his soul. For he has learned from a certain Thracian priest-physician, during his sojourn with the army in northern Greece, that one ought not attempt to cure the body without the soul. The Thracian physician taught him that the soul must be treated with certain incantations—"beautiful speeches" (*kaloi logoi*, 157a4–5)—and enjoined him not to treat anyone with the drug for their head before that person first submits to be treated by the speeches for their soul. There is something playful in all this, but something serious as well—and no doubt something attractive to the young man, who now finds himself involved in conversation with the famous, dangerous Socrates, but who also finds himself entranced by a wonderful story of Thracian priests and a charm for the soul. It is when Socrates says that he must first apply the charm to Charmides' soul before he can apply the drug to his head that Critias observes it would be good for Charmides to be treated, if he might improve in his thought (*dianoia*, 157c7–d1). As regards moderation, however, Critias says that Charmides is already the most moderate of all the young gentlemen of his age, and blessed in every other respect as well. Socrates appears to confirm this high opinion of Charmides and of the noble station he is expected to fulfill, but he will not let the young man go without first putting him to the test. To determine whether or not Charmides truly is healthy of soul, he must examine him. The dialogue leaves it ambiguous whether the "beautiful speeches" that induce *sophrosune* in the soul are the same or different from the speeches/arguments used by Socrates in his method of examination. Possibly it is those very same speeches, which test someone and their beliefs for soundness, which induce moderation itself. Or possibly those speeches do not have that effect, but other, more beautiful speeches are needed.

This self-representation offers a distinctive perspective on Socrates' philosophical practice.³⁰ If it is not meant ironically, it suggests that Socrates is a "diagnostician of the soul" who can test the moral health of his interlocutor, which seems to imply that Socrates knows what it is to possess that virtue. The stronger implication would be that Socrates is a "physician of the soul" who can induce moral health in the interlocutor. This stronger claim is of special interest in relation to the later inquiry, where moderation is defined as the "knowledge of what you know and do not know," since if Socrates can bring the interlocutor to that state it would seem he rendered him *sophron*. And this of course is Socrates' claim to moderation and wisdom in the *Apology*, that he alone knew what he knew and did not know, whereas his fellow citizens

thought they knew what they did not know about moral matters (cf. esp. 21a–23b). If Socrates possesses such an art, he would seem to possess the very thing the dialogue will later seek under the title of *sophrosune*, namely a science (*episteme*) that would somehow both constitute and produce or reproduce the virtue in question (assuming that he would re-create it in himself as well as in others). That is to say, he would appear to possess a *technē* of moral virtue; he would appear to possess moral expertise.³¹ Socrates seems to claim something like this in the *Gorgias*, where he presents himself as the only “true statesman” in Athenian life, on the grounds that he alone aims at the formation of virtue in his fellow citizens (521a f.), and where the elenchus is portrayed as a tool of psychic surgery and cathartic punishment (cf. esp. 475d, 505c, 521e). But Socrates also characteristically and expressly disavows possessing anything like a moral *technē*, with all that that implies of rational mastery of its subject-matter and the capacity to teach it to others (cf. e.g. *Apology* 21a–23b, *Laches* 184d–187b, *Protagoras* 319a–320c, *Gorgias* 509a, *Meno* 71a–c). At any rate, it is hardly clear why philosophical inquiry of whatever sort should impart *moral* value to the participants.

A first question arising from Socrates' self-depiction in the prologue to the *Charmides*, then, is whether he really is a “psychic physician” and practitioner of a craft of moral health—whether we are to take his playful self-depiction seriously. At first reading, it might seem that the aporetic ending of the dialogue casts serious doubt on the value of Socrates' “art.” Consistent with this impression, I will argue that Socrates does not possess a *technē* of moral virtue. But I will also argue that the *Charmides* is meant to explain and justify the claim that dialectic has moral import. It shows how the interlocutor may come to deeper self-knowledge by means of the elenchus, and begin to attain the Platonic equivalent of the moral point of view; it also shows how the refusal of cognitive moderation and self-knowledge is a first step toward tyranny and moral vice.

The other idea suggested in the prologue and distinctively associated with Socrates is the notion of the soul (*psyche*). He introduces it in his characteristic, story-telling manner, offering a *mythos* in which he associates this idea with a mysterious cult he encountered during his sojourn away from the city, whose practitioners “it is said, even immortalize people” (156d6). He goes on to contrast the view these Thracian physicians have regarding virtue and health to that of Athenian medical science. The Athenian

physicians, he says, have a deficient appreciation of the causes of sickness and health, and of the overall structure of human life. Their science *ignores the whole*, and treats the body as if it were separate from the soul, but in fact *everything good in the human being derives from the soul*, so that if the soul is in good health—if it truly possesses *sophrosune*—the well-being of the body will follow readily thereafter.

For he said that everything starts from the soul, both bad and good things for the body and for the entire human being, and they flow from there just as from the head to the eyes. (156e6–157a1)

But if this part can be brought to health, then everything else will be well also.

There is a tension built into Socrates' description of the relation of body and soul in these passages. On the one hand, he suggests (1) the body is a part or instrument of the soul, and to think of it as anything else is to misunderstand or ignore the whole (156d8–e6); but he also indicates (2) the soul is the most important part of the person, namely the part that can make it whole, and make all it does or suffers be of value to it (156e6–157a3).³² This tension is relevant to a later discussion in the dialogue, where the question arises as to how one ought to conceptualize the human being. Is *psyche* somehow the distinctive category for conceptualizing the human being, but if so, how is it to be related to the body and to the whole person? Do we translate *psyche* correctly, when we use terms like "mind" or "soul," or is another term sometimes more appropriate? The novel perspective on human life which Socrates has introduced here—deriving from a quasi-mythical origin—suggests that the conventional Athenian ways of conceptualizing the relation of body and soul are inadequate, a theme the *Charmides* will develop in greater detail as the dialogue unfolds. The poetic mode in which Socrates presents these ideas does not gainsay the fact that he appears to call for a new understanding of human life, the relation of appearance to reality, and the relation of body and soul.

Socrates' description of the relation of body and soul is also relevant to Socrates' act of erotic moderation, depicted earlier in the prologue. There, as we saw, Socrates' rediscovery of who he was—his rational self, his identity as a lover of wisdom—enabled him to resist Charmides' charm until he was further able, as their

conversation renewed, to reclaim his identity and restore calm to his body, as well as to his mind. Might the philosophical physician need to practice his therapeutic art not only on others, but also on himself? In other words, might it be the task of philosophy to cure a constitutional defect or excess in the human being, by applying the *logoi* that bring or return both physician and patient out of a condition of unhealthy desire, back to the moral health attendant on rational inquiry?

Socrates' playful, but dramatically and conceptually important story of what he learned (*emathōn*, 156d4) from the Thracian physicians adds an ethical, and possibly even a metaphysical dimension to what he has suggested about his dialectical-therapeutic practice. At any rate, it implies a substantive moral vision comparable to the one Socrates proclaims at *Apology* 28b–30b, where he contrasts his own care for the good of the soul—how it stands with respect to reason and virtue—to his fellow citizens' concern for wealth, honor, and power. Here, too, Socrates uses the term *psyche* for the moral center of the person; contrasts the good of the soul to every other good the person might enjoy; suggests that virtue is sufficient for happiness; and implies that virtue is, if not a function of knowledge, at least directly related to being informed by the right *logoi*. Socrates' use of the term *psyche* suggests, therefore, that he has a particular object in mind when he speaks of self-knowledge later in the dialogue, namely "knowledge of one's rational soul." It also suggests that that knowledge may consist at least in part in the recognition of the absolute priority of the rational soul over the body or other aspects of the soul. To "know oneself," on this view, would require that one know one's rational soul and its needs, as compared to the other things one might be concerned about. By implication, the judgment of secondary or trivial importance might be extended to everything that falls in the realm of appearance, including the things that distinguish the young Charmides, such as his physical beauty and his noble family name (discussed ironically by Socrates at 157d9–158b4).³³ From the standpoint Socrates has introduced here, such things are mere accidents, in no way essential to the kind of self-knowledge he is challenging Charmides to display. For Socrates to know Charmides, and for Charmides to know himself, it would be necessary to determine whether he possessed something of real value, namely *sophrosune*. Even if he possesses all the other good things, but not this, he would from the perspective of this kind of self-knowledge or self-estimation have nothing of value. Even if he knows himself in all his contingencies

of historical relations and physical aspect, he would still not know himself, if he did not know how he stood with respect to this universal human virtue. It is from this radically unconventional perspective that Socrates says he must test Charmides, to see if he has a sufficient share in moderation, or if he is still in need (*endees*, 157c4).³⁴



The prologue displays an Athens in which politics, private life, and even science is inordinately attracted to appearances. It introduces a young man who seems to have surpassing promise, but who will become a traitor and tyrant. It introduces another man, Critias, who seems to be a close associate and follower of Socrates, but who will become the most violent and immoderate man in Athenian political history. The dialogue will examine the beliefs and values of these two men, and they will be found wanting. But it also introduces in word and deed the Socratic idea of the *psyche*, as a moral reality in comparison to which the merely outward aspect of things must be understood. This idea, and the correlated idea of a moral-rational therapy, applied somehow both to disorderly *eros* and disorderly thought, hold out the possibility that the dialogue might present us with a true understanding of moderation and its place in a good human life.