



The Implicit Refutation of Critias¹

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Abstract

At *Charmides* 163, Critias attempts to extricate himself from refutation by proposing a Prodician distinction between *praxis* and *poiēsis*. I argue that this distinction leads him further into contradictions.

Keywords

Plato; *Charmides*; Critias; refutation; distinctions; semantics; Prodicus; temperance

1. Introduction

Many critics have written about the distinction that Critias makes at *Charmides* 163a, between *poiēsis* and *praxis*. They have discussed its implications for Critias' anti-democratic leanings.² They have discussed its rich intertextual connections to Hesiod, Prodicus, and Xenophon.³ And they have dismissed the distinction itself as unimportant to the dialectic,

¹ I first studied the *Charmides* intensively in a seminar that I co-taught with M. M. McCabe at King's College in the early '90s. I am grateful to her and to other members of the seminar, including Rafe Woolf and Charles Brittain, for the inspiration behind this paper. And as always, my deepest thanks go to Liz Karns.

² Hazebroucq 1997, 216: Critias 'utilise un argument de fait qui revient à dire, sans prendre la responsabilité de le dire, que les métiers des *dēmiourgoi* ne sont pas, le plus souvent, de belles occupations, conformément au préjugé aristocratique.' Wolfsdorf 2008a, 222, explores the 'sociopolitical significance' of the distinction, while his 2008b, 3 says that Critias' distinction 'has an ideological edge'. Tuozzo 2011, 176 n. 31: Critias' 'aristocratic sentiments here . . . would be deeply offensive to proponents of Athenian democracy.'

³ Both in Wolfsdorf 2008b, and in Graziosi 2010, esp. discussion at 120-5.

referring to it as a ‘sophistical distinction’, ‘Prodician wordplay’, or ‘une distinction insignifiante’.⁴ But no one seems to have asked the simple question: does it work?

Critias introduces his distinction because Socrates has just threatened his definition of *sophrosunē* with refutation. Critias is coming to the defense of his definition, and trying to show that it is not vulnerable to Socrates’ objection, provided that one keeps in mind the proper use of terms. So the distinction has a very specific job to do: it must rescue Critias’ definition from a charge of incoherence. Does it succeed in doing that job?

I shall argue that the distinction does not work; it does not help Critias extricate himself from the contradiction that Socrates had pointed out. Indeed, it is positively damaging to Critias’ position; far from allowing him to escape the contradiction, it actually plunges him into a new one. Given what Critias has to argue, the distinction itself renders his position inconsistent.

2. The Context of the Distinction

In this stretch of the dialogue, Critias is defending the view, first advanced by Charmides at 161b, that temperance should be defined as *ta heautou prattein*, roughly ‘doing one’s own thing’. If that definition is right, then those who do their own thing are temperate, and those who do not do their own thing are not temperate. As the sequel shows, Critias and Socrates treat ‘doing the things of someone else’ as one way of ‘not doing one’s own thing’ – we might balk at the move, but the dialogue never registers any concerns over it.⁵

⁴ Tuckey 1951, 22; Roochnik 1996, 111: ‘such Prodician wordplay does not address the serious questions attending the definition.’ Hazebrucq 1997, 224, and 218: ‘Socrate répond à la distinction faite par Critias en la négligeant, en la tenant pour littéralement insignifiante: il est indifférent d’employer tel ou tel terme, pourvu que Critias en explicite chaque fois le sens...’

⁵ And yet the inference from ‘X does the things of others’ to ‘X does not do X’s own thing’ is surely fallacious in general. Compare: Society frowns on adults who do not support themselves; but adults who support their children are supporting someone else, and therefore not supporting themselves; therefore, society frowns on adults who support their children. The point here is not simply that it is possible to do one’s own thing in addition to doing the things of others; it is also possible to do one’s own thing exactly by doing

Thus the existence of people who do the things of others and yet are still temperate in so doing constitutes a *prima facie* refutation of Critias' definition. But Charmides (161e2, 162a9) and Critias himself (163a5) share the intuition that there are such people, e.g. shoemakers who make shoes for others and so in some sense 'do not do their own', and yet are temperate in so doing.

So this is the problem that Critias faces: to maintain his definition in the face of the contrary intuition from craft-cases, and to vindicate his own consistency in the face of his own acceptance of the craft-cases.

The maneuver that Critias employs is to distinguish two kinds of 'doing': *poiein* and *prattein*. Then he can say that the examples from the crafts do not refute his definition. For they show people *poiein*-ing things that are not their own, while remaining temperate, whereas his definition never said otherwise. His definition only claimed that those who *prattein* things that are not their own are not temperate.⁶

Critias outlines this strategy in a rhetorical question at 163a: 'For have I somehow agreed that those who *prattein* the things of others are temperate, if I agreed that those who *poiein* [sc. the things of others are temperate]?'⁷ He grants that the craft-cases show the compatibility of temperance with *poiein*-ing the things of others. But he denies that this undermines his

the things of others. These complications lead away from the *Charmides*, towards the *Republic*.

⁶ I apologize for the inelegance of such barbarisms as '*poiein*-ing'. But it is the best way to keep the relevant Greek words before the reader's eye. The alternative of introducing fixed translations (e.g. *poiein* = 'do', *prattein* = 'make' etc.) requires the reader to keep track of distinctions that must always be arbitrary in English (which one was 'do': *poiein* or *prattein*?). In addition, the English words in this case are so ubiquitous that it is hard to avoid using them in the metalanguage, and thus courting more confusion ('When Critias makes the distinction between making and doing, as he does at 163b, what is he doing by making such a distinction?'). A second apology is needed for my use of the Greek infinitive as the equivalent of finite verbs in English, both in the singular and plural. I could have adjusted every instance to context (*prattousi* here and *poiouontes* there), but this too would distract from the distinction.

⁷ I follow Burnet (following Heindorf) in reading *ei* in 163a11: on this see Murphy 2007. Murphy's advocacy of interrogative *pou* for the indefinite *pou* strikes me as plausible, but with either reading the same sense can be had: Critias asks a question of the form: 'Did I say Q if I said P?' and expects the obvious answer to be: 'No; P does not entail Q.' But of course P would entail Q if *prattein* and *poiein* were synonymous, and this thought then provokes Socrates' next question.

definition. So long as he does not grant that the temperate craftsmen are *prattein*-ing the things of others, he has not granted anything that damages his definition.

So there is a coherent position for him to occupy, which reconciles the craft-cases with the definition. It is possible to *poiein* things that are not your own and remain temperate (as the intuition from craft-cases indicates), so long as you are not thereby *prattein*-ing things that are not your own (which the definition forbids).

So far so good, or at least so non-contradictory. Critias' definition survives the *prima facie* counterexample, provided that the craft-cases meet three criteria:

- 1) the craftsmen *poiein* something not their own;
- 2) they are temperate in so doing;
- 3) in *poiein*-ing something not their own, the craftsmen are not *prattein*-ing something not their own.

Clauses 1 and 2 answer the intuition that shoemakers (e.g.) are temperate; clause 3 shows that it does not refute the definition.

And so far, cases of that description are perfectly coherent. Indeed, at first glance, that looks like a fair description of the shoemaker cases, provided that they are somehow *poiein*-ing without *prattein*-ing. We don't yet know what that distinction is, but at least so far there is no contradiction in what we do know about these cases.

But Critias needs to say *something* about how he distinguishes *poiein* from *prattein*, and what he goes on to say will create a contradiction with what he has said so far.

'Tell me,' I [Socrates] said, 'do you not call *poiein* and *prattein* the same thing?'

'Surely not,' he [Critias] said. 'And neither, for that matter, *ergazesthai* and *poiein*.⁸ For I learned from Hesiod that no *ergon* is a reproach [*oneidos*]. And do you think that if

⁸) Thus Critias first denies that *poiein* is the same as *prattein*, and next denies that *poiein* is the same as *ergazesthai*. This is consistent with his already believing what he will soon say, that *prattein* and *ergazesthai* are the same. Wolfsdorf 2008a, 221 seems not to understand this when he accuses Critias of confusion in the presentation of his distinction: 'he claims that there is a distinction between doing (*prattein*), making (*poiein*), and working (*ergazesthai*) . . . [H]e explains that things made (*poioumena*) finely and usefully are works. In other words, working is a kind of making. However, Critias then identifies works (*ergasiai*) and

he were in the habit of calling the sort of cases you were just now mentioning *erga* and *ergazesthai* and *prattein*, that he would say it is no reproach to anyone to be a shoemaker or a seller of dried fish or a prostitute? Don't you believe it, Socrates. No; I think that he too would consider *poiēsis* to be different from *praxis* and *ergasia*: a *poiēma* does sometimes become a reproach, when it comes about not well [*mē meta kalou*], but an *ergon* is never any sort of reproach. For he called things done well and beneficially [*kalōs te kai ōphelīmōs poioumenā*] *erga*, and he called *poiēseis* of that sort *ergasias* and *praxeis*.⁹ And what we should say about him is that he believed only things of that sort are 'one's own' [*oikeia*], and all harmful things are 'alien' [*allogria*]. So we should conclude that Hesiod, and anyone else who is wise, calls the man who *prattei* his own things temperate.'

On the view that Critias espouses – which he attributes to Hesiod, but Socrates soon attributes to Prodicus (163d) – *poiēin* is the generic term, and *prattein* is one species of it. And the differentia is goodness: when something is *poiēin*-ed well [*kalōs*], then it is a *praxis*. However, when something is *poiēin*-ed not well [*mē meta kalou*], then it becomes a reproach [*oneidos*]. The options are exclusive and exhaustive: a *poiēsis* is a *praxis* when and only when it is done well, and otherwise it is an *oneidos*. (*Ergasia* and *ergon* are synonyms for *praxis*, as *ergazesthai* for *prattein*, and obey the same genus-species structure: a *poiēsis* or *poiēma* is an *ergasia* or *ergon* if and only if it is done *kalōs*, and is otherwise an *oneidos* if it is done *mē meta kalou*.)¹⁰ This means that the only cases in which there is a *poiēsis* that is *not* a *praxis* will be cases in which the *poiēsis* is an *oneidos*, instead.

things done (*praxeis*). Thus, Critias initially claims that working and doing are distinct, but then identifies the two.' This charge is misplaced. Critias never initially claimed that *ergazesthai* and *prattein* were distinct from each other, only that each was distinct from *poiēin*.

⁹ Critias says that Hesiod calls things that are done admirably and beneficially *erga*. In most contexts, this assertion would be compatible with his calling other things *erga* as well, e.g. things not done admirably and beneficially. But what he must mean here is that he calls *only* such things *erga*. For in the prior sentence he said that no *ergon* is ever any kind of reproach. The syntactical subject of the Greek sentence is functioning as the logical predicate, an effect we can reproduce in English with cleft constructions such as: 'It is things done admirably and beneficially that he calls *erga*.' The sentence is not answering the question: 'What does he call the things done admirably and beneficially?', but rather the question: 'Which are the things that he calls *erga*?'

¹⁰ In other contexts it might be germane to distinguish *poiēsis* and *ergasia* from *poiēma* and *ergon* as process-words from product-words. But nothing is made of any such distinction here.

But given that semantics for *poiein* and *prattein*, we see that the three criteria above entail a fourth. Now Critias has to countenance a case in which:

- 1) the craftsmen *poiein* something not their own;
- 2) they are temperate in so doing;
- 3) in *poiein*-ing something not their own, the craftsmen are not *prattein*-ing something not their own;
- 4) but since they are *poiein*-ing without *prattein*-ing, their *poiēsis* must be an *oneidos*, done *mē meta kalou*.

And here is the fatal flaw in Critias' stratagem: for if they are doing an *oneidos*, and acting *mē meta kalou*, then they cannot also be acting temperately in so doing. For temperance is an admirable [*kalon*] thing; this is a general Hellenic truism in any case, and Socrates explicitly affirms it, to general acceptance, at 159c1 *ff.* So they are both acting temperately and not acting temperately: acting temperately because the intuition from craft-cases requires it, and not acting temperately because their *poiēsis* is not a *praxis*. Contradiction. Or, to vary the contradiction, we may show they are both *prattein*-ing and not *prattein*-ing: *prattein*-ing since their *poiēsis* is temperate and therefore done well and therefore *meta kalou*, and not *prattein*-ing since Critias insists that they are *poiein*-ing without *prattein*-ing. Whichever contradiction we saddle him with, the upshot is that, given how Critias distinguishes *poiein* from *prattein*, it is not possible to do a *poiein*-that-is-not-a-*prattein*, and still do it temperately.

Thus I conclude: Critias' position at 163d is not coherent, and the distinction does not help. If Critias were to accept Socrates' permission at 163d to 'stipulate each of the words in whatever way you like', then he would have to redescribe the earlier cases as cases in which craftsmen were *poiein*-ing, not *prattein*-ing. But given the distinction he introduces, that commits him to saying that they were both temperate and not temperate at the same time.

3. A Third Way?

Or is that too hasty? Perhaps I am being unfair to Critias and misunderstanding his semantic proposal. Perhaps, for instance, the division of kinds of *poiēsis* into *praxeis* and *oneidē* is not really exhaustive. If it is done *kalōs*,

then it is a *praxis* and an *ergon*: so much is explicit. And if it is done *mē meta kalou*, then it is an *oneidos*. But perhaps the *mē* here should read more strongly, not as a mere negation of the *kalōs*, but as some sort of contrary-operator amounting to *kakōs*, leaving some logical space in between the two extremes.¹¹ So if you do something *kalōs*, then it is a *praxis*, if you do it *mē kalōs* in the sense of *kakōs*, then it is an *oneidos*, but if you do it neither well nor badly, then it is a neutral doing, neither a *praxis* nor an *oneidos*.¹²

If the *mē meta kalou* is not the mere negation of *kalōs*, but rather its contrary, then there is a *tertium quid* between *praxis* and *oneidos*. If this is possible Greek, and if it would enable Critias to maintain a consistent position, then charity urges us to entertain the possibility.

Alas for Critias, it is not a possibility he can profit from. For now we have to augment the first three criteria with a different set of entailments, but ones that will lead to contradiction all the same:

- 1) the craftsmen *poiein* something not their own;
- 2) they are temperate in so doing;
- 3) in *poiein*-ing something not their own, the craftsmen are not *prattein*-ing something not their own;

¹¹ This certainly happens with verbs, where *ou phēmi* means ‘I deny’ and *ou didōmi* means ‘I withhold’. And something like this can happen with urbane accusations, e.g. ‘stranger, this was not done well’, implicating that it was done badly. Cf. Herodotus 5.39, when the Spartan king complains that the ephors advise him *ou kalōs*, i.e. badly.

¹² Hazebroucq 1997 assumes that Critias rules out a *tertium quid* between good and bad, and she condemns his distinction both for that reason, and because it characterizes the extremes by negation of their opposites: ‘La division est cependant mauvaise parce que le critère en est un jugement normative procédant par exclusion, sans qu’on pense ce qui caractérise positivement chacune des deux espèces distinguées: un *ergon* n’est jamais honteux, un *poiēma* l’est quelquefois, donc l’*ergasia* ou *praxis* est belle et honorable quand la *poiēsis* n’est pas honteuse, et la *poiēsis* est honteuse quand elle n’est pas belle’ (216). In a footnote on the same page (216 n. 2) she compares Critias’ error to the mistake that Socrates makes in *Symposium* 201e-202a, when he responds to Diotima’s assertion that Eros is not beautiful and good, by inferring that Eros must be ugly and bad. Hazebroucq’s comments here are helpful, and I think that she is right that Critias imagines only two options (sc. that every *poiēsis* is either positively bad or positively good). In the main text, I offer him an additional option simply to show that it will not help him escape from the central incoherence.

- 4) but since they are *poiein*-ing without *prattein*-ing, their *poiēsis* must be done *mē meta kalou*, either in the sense that it is positively bad (and thus an *oneidos*), or in the sense that it is neither good nor bad.

But whether their action is positively bad, or merely not good, the same action cannot also be temperate. If it is a temperate action, it must be a good action, not merely a neutral action (and *a fortiori* not a bad action).

Their action is thus both not-good (since it is a *poiēsis* without being a *praxis*) and yet good (since it is temperate). Contradiction, once again, even when we help Critias by trying out the possibility of a *tertium quid* in between *praxis* and *oneidos*.

And seeing this should give us another way of thinking about the incoherence of Critias' position. He wants to say that it is possible for e.g. shoemakers or grammar-teachers to be temperate, even when they are not doing one's own: those are the cases he has to describe coherently, in order to justify his acceptance of the intuition from craft-cases, and avoid the refutation. But if they really are cases of acting temperately, then they are cases of acting *kalōs* (from the general truism). And if they are cases of acting *kalōs*, then they are cases of *praxis*, by his own semantics.

Critias' position is still incoherent: the exploration of a *tertium quid* does not help.

4. A Further Problem

But we encounter a different sort of incoherence when we define a virtue as 'doing one's own', and then also introduce a non-trivial notion of 'doing'. This problem is not unique to temperance; it would apply just as much to the *Republic's* definition of justice as 'doing one's own', if Socrates in the *Republic* were foolish enough to follow Critias' lead.

A non-trivial notion of 'doing' is one that it is possible for an agent to fail to meet, on occasions when their actions are apt for ethical assessment. Conversely, a trivial notion of 'doing' is one that every agent will automatically meet, whenever their actions are assessment-apt.

So, for instance, we might say that whenever Socrates is alive he is 'doing' something or other, even when he is sleeping or in a coma. And then we will proceed to assess his virtue by looking at the details of what he is doing. But we will never encounter a situation in which it is appropriate to ask whether Socrates is being temperate, but Socrates is not 'doing' anything.

We might have more demanding requirements on ‘doings’, e.g. they might require consciousness, or volition, or *prohairesis*, or rational ratification. However, they will all be trivial in the current sense, if occasions when they are not met are also occasions when the agent is not apt for ethical assessment. So, e.g., we might say that sleeping Socrates is not ‘doing’ anything, because he is not conscious. But if we also say that, when he is not conscious, his actions are not apt for ethical assessment, then our notion of ‘doing’ is still trivial, even though it is demanding. It is no more demanding than the preconditions for ethical assessment, so it will still always be satisfied whenever the agent can be ethically assessed at all.

Here is why it is a good thing to have a trivial notion of ‘doing’, if you want to define some virtue in terms of ‘doing one’s own thing’. If you have a non-trivial notion, then there will be occasions when the agent is apt for ethical assessment, when they are also not ‘doing’ anything. E.g., suppose you said that Socrates is apt for assessment even when he is asleep, but that he is not ‘doing’ anything when he is asleep. In that case, your semantics of ‘doing’, combined with your definition, will force you to say that Socrates is vicious, *ipso facto*, for failing to meet the definition. After all, the definition says that you are temperate if and only if you are ‘doing’ your own thing. But if you are not ‘doing’ anything at all, because you haven’t met the standard of ‘doing’, then you are *a fortiori* not doing your own thing. So you are not temperate. And so, sleeping Socrates will be intemperate.

Far better simply to stick with a trivial notion of ‘doing’, i.e. one that is automatically met whenever the agent is apt for assessment. Which seems, as far as I can tell, to be what Socrates does in the *Republic*.

But not Critias. He, instead, builds a very demanding notion of ‘doing’ (*prattein*) into his definition – so demanding that the shoemakers do not meet it: they are not *prattein*-ing at all. But it is also a non-trivial notion, since the shoemakers are still apt for assessment (indeed, he claims that they are temperate). So in their case, they are apt for assessment, but not ‘doing’ anything, in the sense specified by the definitions. So then it follows *ipso facto* that they are not temperate, after all. For one’s action is temperate if and only if one is *prattein*-ing one’s own. And the shoemakers’ actions fail to be *prattein*-ings at all. So for that very reason, they are not ‘doing their own thing’, since they are not ‘doing’ anything at all.

Here is a different way to make the same point. If we introduce a non-trivial semantics for ‘doing’, then our definition of the virtue suddenly becomes conjunctive in structure. To be temperate, the agent must meet

two conditions: 1) they must be 'doing' in the stipulated sense, and 2) what they are 'doing' must meet the further condition of being their own. Since the virtue is conjunctive in structure, one can be vicious by failing to meet either conjunct, i.e. either by 'doing', but doing the wrong thing, or by not 'doing' at all.¹³

Now, this concern may not strike the reader of the dialogue, because it is natural to assume that the question of whether the shoemakers (e.g.) are temperate or not when they make other people's shoes, should be determined entirely by the character of their activities and objects, i.e. by looking at how and in what ways the making of other people's shoes (or the writing of one's enemies' names) is or is not 'one's own'. On this view, the virtue does not have two conjunctive criteria, but only one criterion: is the thing that they are doing (since they are trivially doing something or other) the right sort of thing? That way of viewing the situation is so natural, that it can be hard to realize that it is actually ruled out by Critias' semantics. That way of viewing the situation presupposes that there is really no question about whether the shoemakers are doing something in the relevant sense, only whether what they are doing is the right sort of thing. But to say that is also to say that it is natural to assume a trivial notion of 'doing' in this sort of context. Natural and indeed absolutely vital if we are not to wind up with absurd results.

So another way to think about this passage is this: the examination of Critias' distinction illustrates the importance of avoiding any semantic elaboration of a notion of 'doing', if one wants to define a virtue as 'doing XYZ'. Luckily, Plato seems to have seen that point.

5. Making it Explicit

In this piece I have tried to draw attention to several features of Critias' position that, I believe, have not attracted much notice from readers. But

¹³ If one has an account of 'doing' that is demanding (e.g. that one is 'doing' only when one is acting from a *prohairesis*) but trivial (in that it is automatically met whenever the agent is assessment-apt), then one can fail to meet the conditions for being temperate, by failing to meet the conditions for performing a demanding doing (e.g. one walks, but not from a *prohairesis*). But by the same token, one will also fail to be assessment-apt in that regard – one will not be judged intemperate merely for failing to be 'doing' anything. That absurdity is avoided.

they have not attracted much notice, in part at least, because Plato does not seem to draw much attention to them. After all, if Plato had wanted us to notice that Critias was guilty of a contradiction, then he could have had Socrates discuss the contradiction, draw it out, or pounce upon it. But far from pouncing, Socrates is very mild and obliging in his response – it might even seem that he did not notice that there was any incoherence to pounce upon. And if Socrates did not notice, then is it really in the dialogue at all?

Yes, I think it is. For all of the ingredients are present in the dialogue, if we only take the time to work backwards, from the Prodician distinction, through the dialectical situation, to see whether Critias has a coherent position to maintain. True, Socrates himself does not take the time to lead us through that exercise: he is more interested in picking up on Critias' introduction of goodness. But the work is there to be done, and Socrates invites us to do it, when he says at 163d5-7:

But I grant you license to impose each of these names in whatever way you like. Only make it clear, whenever you apply a name to something, what you mean by it. And now, starting over again from the beginning, define more clearly.

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