An-Other Socratic Method: Socratic *mimēsis* in the *Hippias Major*

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ABSTRACT

There is another Socratic method, Socratic *mimēsis*, and an instance of this is when Plato has Socrates play 'the annoying questioner' in the *Hippias Major*. Other interpreters have suggested that the reasons for Socrates' dramatic play are depersonalization and distance. I argue for viewing Socrates' role-playing as a way to dramatize the inner dialogue that happens inside one's mind in what we may call conscience. Hippias the sophist lacks a conscience: his focus is acquisitive as opposed to inquisitive. Plato has staged a pedagogical theater of Hippias' failed lesson for the benefit of Plato's audience, the listeners/readers of the dialogue.

Keywords: Socratic *mimēsis*, *Hippias Major*, performance, performative contradiction, conscience, beauty, dramatization of philosophy, pedagogical theater

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The[1] term "Socratic method" is ubiquitous, but what exactly it is and if it is a single method or many methods has been much debated (Scott, 2002; Benson, 2009; 2010; Tarrant, 2006; Cain, 2007; McPherran, 2007; Futter, 2013; Young, 2009; Rodriguez, 2016). As a tentative definition of Socrates' method, we could say that it involves questioning his interlocutors, and it often leads them to contradictory conclusions. This method sometimes goes by the name of *elenchus* or "dialectic." In this paper, however, I want to highlight another method Socrates uses in philosophical conversations, what I call "Socratic *mimēsis*" (Duque, 2020). At crucial moments in several dialogues, Socrates takes on a role, a *persona*, and speaks as someone else. Socrates' dramatic imitation of others is a way of teaching in a voice separate from his own, and it is also a way for Plato to speak to and educate different kinds of audiences. Some examples of Socratic *mimēsis* are:

> [1] in the *Crito* Socrates plays the part of "the Laws" (50a–54c);
> [2] in the *Theaetetus* he acts the part of "Protagoras" (166a–168c); and
> [3] in the *Menexenus* he recites a funeral speech learned from "Aspasia" (236d–249c).
> I will consider another instance, and the focus of this paper:
> [4] in the *Hippias Major* Socrates takes on the persona that I will call 'the annoying questioner' (287d–304e).

In the *Hippias Major* Socrates encounters Hippias, a traveling sophist from Elis who is a kind of jack of all trades. There is a prologue to the main question in which Hippias and Socrates discuss Hippias' journey to Sparta, their laws, and law more generally. Right before Hippias can demonstrate his *epideixis*, or display speech, that he gave the Spartans, Socrates asks Hippias, "what is τὸ καλόν?" The ancient Greek word καλός has a broad semantic range, most often it means "beautiful," but it can also mean "noble," "fine," or "admirable" (Sider, 1977; Barney, 2010; Lear, 2006; 2020; Fine, 2018). For this paper I will most often refer to τὸ καλόν as "the beautiful," with the definite article, but please keep the other meanings in mind. In the course of their conversation, Hippias offers three definitions (really, examples) of the beautiful: a beautiful girl; gold; and a rich, healthy, and honored life. Then Socrates, via his questioning of Hippias, offers some other definitions: the appropriate; the useful; the beneficial; and the pleasures of sight and sound.[2] The dialogue ends in *aporia*, that is, they are not able to answer "what is τὸ καλόν?"

The character of 'the annoying questioner' that Socrates will role-play makes his first appearance at 286c5–d2, and Socrates uses the character to ask Hippias "what is the beautiful." Socrates says to Hippias:

> For recently, my excellent friend, someone really threw me into a confusion when I was censuring some words as ugly and praising some as beautiful. Thus, he questioned me very *insultingly*: "From where, Socrates, tell me, do you know what sorts of things are beautiful and ugly? And then, come now, would you be able to tell me what the beautiful [τὸ καλόν] is?"[3]

We can imagine that Socrates most likely changes his voice and maybe even his posture

when he speaks as 'the annoying questioner,' but we do not have to imagine that Plato makes it obvious that Socrates is playing the role of another person because, first, Socrates addresses comments made by the character in the third person to "Socrates."[4] Furthermore, Socrates makes it clear that this is a case of Socratic *mimēsis*—that is that he is imitating another—when he tells Hippias, "Nevertheless, without hindering you, I'm going to imitate [μιμούμενος ἐγὼ ἐκεῖνον] that man" (287a3). And Socrates comments only a little later, "Come now, so that I may become that person as much as possible to try to ask you questions" (287b5). The person is the character that I call 'the annoying questioner.' Lastly, Plato has Socrates reiterate the point: "I'll speak to you the same way as before, imitating [μιμούμενος ἐκεῖνον] that man." (292c2–4).

Socrates characterizes 'the annoying questioner' at various moments by heaping scorn on him: "He is not clever but garbage [οὐ κομψὸς ἀλλὰ συρφετός]" (288d4); "He is very annoying [μέρμερος πάνυ ἐστίν]" (290e4); "imitating him in order that the words that I say are not directed against you; they're the sorts of things that he says toward me: harsh and grotesque [χαλεπά τε καὶ ἀλλόκοτα]" (292c4–5). And in a bit of an over-the-top, comic ribaldry, Socrates also insinuates that this person may even beat [τύπτειν] Socrates: "I think if I answered in this way he would be justified in beating me" (292b9–10).

The two most common reasons given by interpreters as to why Socrates takes on the persona of 'the annoying questioner' are distance and depersonalization.[5] By asking his questions in character, Socrates puts some distance between himself and the harsh and strange criticisms directed against Hippias' replies. By having Socrates speak as 'the annoying questioner,' Plato also makes the conversation less about a personal confrontation between Socrates and Hippias, and, instead, Socrates is able to recruit Hippias in a joint venture against this common antagonist. There is an episode in the dialogue, however, where the mask of the character seems to slip, and Socrates may be breaking character and going against the distance and depersonalization implied so far.

This is the moment in the dialogue when this 'annoying questioner' might actually be named and revealed. Hippias at 298b5–6 implies that many of the things they have been saying might slip the notice of this 'annoying questioner,' and Socrates, at 298b7–9, responds, "By the dog, Hippias, not to the one I'd be most embarrassed to say foolish things and to pretend to say something while saying nothing." Hippias asks who it is that Socrates would be the most embarrassed to say these things in front of, and Socrates replies, "Sophroniscus' son" (298b11).[6] This is the big reveal. Since Hippias is a foreigner from Elis, he might not know that Socrates' father is Sophroniscus (*Alc*. 1 131e3; *La* 180d7, 181a1; *Euthd*. 297e7,8, 298b2). Thus, it is Socrates who is "Sophroniscus' son," and Socrates is actually talking about himself and, perhaps, admitting that everything said previously in the voice of 'the annoying questioner' was himself the entire time! The Sophroniscus reference has a special bite, given that one of Hippias' areas of expertise is genealogy. Hippias brags about his knowledge of the genealogies of heroes and men at 285d–e.[7]

This rejoinder would seem to complicate and eradicate the "distance and depersonalization" that Socrates has thus far carefully maintained. It is likely that Plato left it in as a signal to his audience, and it is not one that Socrates necessarily expects his interlocutor, Hippias, to understand as evidenced by the

fact that Hippias never seems to acknowledge that Socrates is 'the annoying questioner.'[8] Just a few lines later, Socrates continues, "I hear every insult from some others around here and from that very person who is always refuting me" (304d1–3). Adding another turn of the screw to see if Hippias will comprehend, Socrates discloses that, "he happens to be a close relative of mine and he lives in the same house" (304d3–4).

Instead of distance and personalization, I contend that Socrates in the *Hippias Major* creates a double in order to represent, or, better, to *dramatize for Hippias* both *what* an inquisitive moral conscience is and *how* it functions.[9] In fact, this is a recurring Platonic idea—the analogy of thought as if having a silent internal conversation with oneself—and it shows up in the *Theaetetus* 189–190a and in the *Sophist* 263a–264b. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes the soul engaged in thinking as "simply carrying on a discussion in which it asks itself questions and answers them itself, affirming and denying" (189e8–190a2).[10] In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger gets Theaetetus to agree to the following two points: "Thought and speech [are] the same, except that what we call thought is speech that occurs without the voice, inside the soul, in conversation with itself" (263e3–5); and, a few lines later, "Affirmation or denial occurs as silent thought inside the soul" which is belief (264a1–2).[11] This Platonic way of conceiving of thinking as internal dialogue between a questioner and a respondent is very close to how Sorabji (2014) defines conscience as "sharing knowledge with *oneself*, not with another, as if knowledge of the guilty secret had split one into two people, one fully self-aware, the other reluctantly sharing."[12]

This inquisitive conscience is in contrast to Hippias' acquisitive stance as a sophist. Hippias brags about how much money he makes: "Socrates, you know nothing of the beauties [τῶν καλῶν] of this [sc. sophistry]. If you knew how much money I've made, you'd be amazed." (282d6–7). Money is repeatedly brought up in the prologue. In fact, Socrates sarcastically quips, "It seems right to many that the wise man ought to be wise, most of all for himself. And the mark of this is whoever makes the most money." (283b2–3). This quote encapsulates Hippias' standard that money is the marker of wisdom. (There are people today who still think this way.) There are surface similarities between Socrates and a sophist like Hippias. They both teach, but, whereas the sophists' ultimate aim was money, Socrates does not accept payment; and his ultimate goal is wisdom and (moral) self-knowledge, both for his interlocutor and himself. This ethical self-knowledge is arrived at by the questioning inner voice of conscience that Socrates is modeling with the character of 'the annoying questioner.' As Sandra Peterson (2000) puts it "Hippias is depicted as having a conceit and self-satisfaction that make him impervious" to Socrates' pedagogical interventions (272).[13]

At 295a4–6, Hippias expresses the desire to go away by himself to investigate the beautiful in solitude, and he boasts that he thinks it will not be hard to find it and that he will be able to give Socrates "a more accurate account of it than absolute accuracy." But Hippias going off by himself would lack this inner voice that Socrates is performing. If Hippias were truly to learn from Socrates, he would have to imitate Socrates' method of doubling himself and of doubting and asking *himself* questions.[14]

Socratic *mimēsis* can also give us insight into Plato's own use of *mimēsis* in writing the dialogues and filling them with diverse characters. Socrates' doubling, which is internal to the action of the dialogues, mirrors what

Plato does as an author to present his ideas: he creates different characters with varying points of views and plays them off each other. In the *Hippias Major,* we get Hippias, Socrates, and then Socrates-as-the-annoying questioner. One difference between Socratic and Platonic *mimēsis* is the audience of each. Socrates' audience, Hippias, does not get Socrates' pedagogy. He misses the lesson that Socrates is trying to teach. He misses Socrates' reference to Socrates himself as the son of Sophroniscus. He does not get that Socrates' annoying and questioning role-playing is meant to be illustrative. He has not learned anything in the end. Hippias is, however, only the *internal* audience; the ultimate audience is *external*—it is us, the readers and listeners of Plato's dialogue.[15] Furthermore, *if* it can be shown that Socrates is not fully committed to everything he has his characters say and do (as in the case of the *Hippias Major* with Socrates' character of 'the annoying questioner') and that Socrates' imitation is more of a provocation aimed at his interlocutor, *then*, perhaps, in a like manner, Plato is not committed to everything his characters say and do (not even to Socrates!), and what is represented in the dialogues is more like a provocation to its listeners and readers.

Additionally, Plato's analogy of thinking as having a dialogue with oneself seems to imply a simple two-person conversation between an interrogator and a respondent. But an imagined conversation could also be more elaborate. Perhaps an internal dialogue could even be more like one of Plato's own multi-character dialogues with shifting voices, perspectives, and intentions.

On the point about the listeners/readers of the *Hippias Major* being the ultimate audience, I agree with Sonja Tanner (2022). She, however, emphasizes the comic aspects of the dialogue much more than I do. And, while I do think there is a tremendous amount of comedy in the dialogue, that has not been my focus. Although Socrates fails to teach Hippias, ultimately, Plato, the hand and the mind behind the whole drama, is staging this play-within-a-play for the benefit of his readers/listeners. Tanner and I both agree that what I call "Socratic *mimēsis*" and what she calls "an instance of "metatheatre" has as its philosophical aim to provoke the reader/listeners of the dialogue to further self-knowledge and self-reflection. Plato has set up a kind of pedagogical theater; Plato has staged a failed educational exchange between Hippias and Socrates, but Plato hopes that his external audience will learn the real lesson about the dramatization of conscience.

I was inspired to call Socrates' performance of 'the annoying questioner' a representation of 'conscience' by Hannah Arendt (1979).[16] I agree with her that, in the *Hippias Major*, Socrates dramatizes reason, or better, conscience. However, what I do not follow is that, for her, this Socratic doubling implies a return back to a unified, single consciousness. This is the 'one' in her formulation 'the two-in-one.' Instead, I emphasize that Plato, through Socrates' doubling, is highlighting the multiplicity and the diversity of voices and characters in our moral thinking. A conscience is at least One other voice (maybe more) within us, questioning and interrogating us, trying to make us better.

I want to address one final suggestion by Sandra Peterson (2000); she proposes that "Socrates is reporting *quite accurately* how he talks to himself" (p. 267, emphasis added). However, while I do think that Socrates is *dramatizing* the kind of internal questioning that he inflicts on himself, I do *not* think that Socrates' performance is a completely accurate depiction of *how* he talks to himself or *what*

he says. The act is stylized and overblown. It is meant to be funny, and it is directed more at Hippias than at Socrates. Peterson (2000) wants to treat Socrates' roleplaying in the dialogue as a kind of genuine confession.[17] Even if I were to grant this point, Socrates' words are aimed at Hippias, and there is still very much a public-performative element to his "confession." There's a moment in the dialogue where Socrates says of the annoying questioner that "he thinks of nothing other than the truth" (288d5). As Peterson (2000) points out there is a problem: Socrates "imitates" the annoying questioner, and this imitation involves deception or untruth (p. 271). Later, Socrates reveals himself to be the annoying questioner. So, does Socrates "think of nothing other than the truth?" I think he uses the fictionality of *mimēsis* and acting to try to help his interlocutors arrive at a higher philosophical, ethical truth. As Kierkegaard (2009 [1859], p. 53) writes, "Do not be deceived by the word *deception*. One can deceive a person out of what is true, and—to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true."

THE PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTION OF BEING A DUO BY ONESELF

By having Socrates perform the role of 'the annoying questioner,' Plato is also showing us something about performance and performative contradiction. By 'performative contradiction' I mean an inconsistency between one's words and one's deeds. Performative contradiction is similar to the kind of contradiction that Socrates elicits with his *elenchus*: what an interlocutor says at one moment—the content of an espoused view—conflicts with some other thing that an interlocutor says at another moment. In a performative contradiction, the conflict comes not just from a difference in the content of my views, but it arises from the *form*: from *how* I say it. The very manner or method in which I am expressing myself undermines the view I am trying to espouse. Sometimes this distinction is explained as a conflict in the semantic as opposed to the pragmatic dimension of an utterance. So, for example, there is nothing contradictory in the content of the statement, "There is no yelling in the library." But, if someone were to shout this in a library, the pragmatics of the utterance—the way in which they express it—would be in contradiction with the content of what is being communicated. Another example: "I may in fact be modest. But I cannot say, 'I'm modest' without negating the statement. The performance belies the truth-content."[18] What I am calling a 'performative self-contradiction' would be classed as J.L Mackie's (1964) "pragmatic self-refutation" (p. 196).

Toward the end of their conversation, (at 301d–303c) Socrates finds a quality that can be attributed to *both* Hippias and Socrates collectively but that cannot be attributed to *each* individually (without the other)—namely that they are a duo. This example is ironic because Socrates has been doubling himself this entire time throughout their conversation. So, there is a sense in which Socrates *is* capable of being a double or a duo *by himself*. By performing the role of 'the annoying questioner,' Socrates has doubled himself, and thus undermines or contradicts what he asserts: that 'being double' or 'being a duo' cannot be attributed to an individual. Indeed, it can in cases of *mimēsis* where the imitator is split between the actor and the role being represented. In this case, Socrates has presented himself as a kind of rhapsode/actor, as a messenger, and the "real poet" (so to speak)

or author is this annoying questioner that is a relative of Socrates and who lives with him. However, when Socrates reveals that this man is "Sophroniscus' son" the listener or reader of the dialogue should understand and recognize that it is Socrates himself who is really the author of these views and that he has been acting as both poet and rhapsode this entire time.

Some very literal reader of the dialogue might vehemently disagree with my interpretation and say that Socrates is still just one person, that Socrates is not *really* a duo or two. Even if I were to grant this point and accept that Socrates does not performatively contradict himself, at the very least, my simple critic would have to admit that Socrates' *mimēsis* definitely *complicates* the claim that Socrates is merely one, a singleton. Socrates has maintained throughout the dialogue two different perspectives, two different registers, and two ways of communicating. Acting, imitating, and role-playing make us question our simplicity, integrity, and unity—but not necessarily for the worse. This questioning can force us to reflect on the various parts of ourselves and help us to better understand ourselves. This kind of internal dialogue can be a model of conscience: the kind of conscience that Hippias lacks, but Socrates attempts to enact for him.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have demonstrated that there is another Socratic method, Socratic *mimēsis*. An instance of this is when Plato has Socrates play 'the annoying questioner' in the *Hippias Major*. Other interpreters have suggested that the reasons for Socrates' dramatic play are depersonalization and distance. I argued for viewing Socrates' role-playing of this other character as a way to dramatize the inner dialogue that happens inside one's mind, in what we may call conscience. Hippias, the sophist, lacks a conscience. His focus is acquisitive as opposed to inquisitive. So, even when he claims that he wants to go off alone by himself in silence to try to find the beautiful (295a3–6), he will not be able to do it because he does not have the capacity to question and interrogate *himself*. Plato has staged a pedagogical theater of a failed lesson for the benefit of his audience, the listeners/readers of the dialogue. I also showed that Socrates performatively contradicts himself (but I think it is something Plato wants the astute reader/listener to catch). Socrates contradicts himself by saying that 'duo' cannot be attributed to either himself or Hippias, each alone by themselves. However, Socrates, in playing the role of 'the annoying questioner,' has effectively doubled himself, and so it would not be inappropriate to call him a 'duo' by himself.

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ENDNOTES

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and from our class discussion of that dialogue. I would also like to thank the organizers of "From *Logos* to Person," the 2021 5th Interdisciplinary Conference at Polis, the Jerusalem Institute of Languages and Humanities. I was not able to make it to the conference in person, but I learned a lot from it and from my fellow panelists. I want to acknowledge Hasse Hämäläinen and Joseángel Domínguez for their questions. My replies during the conference were overly brief, but I hope to have answered them here in print.

2 The prologue runs from 281a–286c. Socrates' main question, "what is the *kalon*," begins at 286c. Discussion of Hippias' examples/definitions of: young maiden 287e–289; gold 289d–291d; and a life well-lived 291d–293c. Discussion of Socrates' definitions of: 'the appropriate' 293c–294e; 'the useful' 295c–296e; 'the beneficial' 296e–297d; 'pleasant sights and sounds' 297e–301b.

3 Translations for the *Hippias Major* are my own in consultation with Fowler, 1926 and Woodruff, 1982.

4 While I do think the *Hippias Major* is genuinely by Plato, I cannot defend that view here. I take it for granted, and it is outside of the scope of this paper. For some discussion of the dialogue's authenticity, see Tarrant 1928; Kahn, 1985; Woodruff, 1982, p. 94–103; Trivigno, 2016, p. 56–62; Tanner, 2019, p. 3. For a wonderful essay that develops the question of authenticity within the drama between Socrates and Hippias of the *Hippias Major* itself, see Duvoisin, 1996.

5 For some examples of the claims of what I term "distance and depersonalization," see Woodruff 1982, p. 107–108; Trivigno, 2016, p. 53–56; Tanner, 2019, p. 8–9.

6 This is reminiscent of Odysseus' self-revealing and hubristic epic boast against the cyclops Polyphemus in *Odyssey* 9.366–506.

7 I owe this point to Nickolas Pappas (personal communication).

8 *Pace* Woodruff, 1982, p. 108, who writes: "It is impossible to read the dialogue and believe that Hippias did not recognize the Questioner. Either the dialogue is badly contrived, or Hippias does, from the very start, understand what Socrates is doing. He must have recognized the Questioner."

9 I recognize that the use of the word 'conscience' here can be contentious. As I will discuss later, the choice of 'conscience' was inspired by Hannah Arendt's analysis of the *Hippias Major*. For the history of the concept of 'conscience,' especially in the ancient Greek context, see Sorabji, 2014, particularly chapter one "Sharing Knowledge with Oneself of a Defect"; Langston, 2010, p. 7–20.

10 This is from the translation by M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat in Cooper, 1997.

11 These lines are from the translation by Nicholas P. White, in the Cooper, 1997.

12 Sorabji, 2014, p. 1, emphasis in the original. On p. 18-20, Sorabji hunts down all the uses of the Greek words "*suneidôs*" and "*suneidenai*" from which the Latin word "*conscientia*" is derived (from where we get 'conscience') that occur in Plato. He also discusses on p. 21-2, Socrates' "*daimôn*" as a precursor to conscience, but he points out incongruities. For example, in Plato, Socrates' "*daimôn*" is infallible since it is divine, and it also only instructs Socrates negatively, that is, it only tells him what not to do. Sorabji misses this Platonic concept of thinking as internal dialogue of the soul that I am highlighting with the *Hippias Major* (and that is also in the *Theaetetus* 189–190a and the *Sophist* 263a–264b). A book that covers this idea of conversation in the soul in Plato is Long 2013; for discussion of *Hippias Major*, see p. 46–63, for a discussion of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, see p. 109–38. I am sorry that I do not have the space here to properly engage with this engaging secondary work. Long, p. 111n5, also acknowledges that the soul of the cosmos speaks to itself in *Timaeus* 37a2–c3. I owe a reminder about this book and the reference to *Timaeus* to Sara De Leonardis.
This is a form of conscience that can instruct you on what you should do, and that occurs through discussion and reflection with and upon oneself. One does not need another outside interlocutor. According to Sorabji, this form of reflective conscience only comes later—as late as Roman times. I owe thinking on this point to a question by Hasse Hämäläinen.

13 Peterson [originally published as Olson], 2015. Although I disagree with it, her paper is probably one of the best and most insightful on the *Hippias Major*. She makes an interesting proposal as to *why* Socrates might question Hippias even though he is incorrigible: "In another person Socrates can observe more clearly the bad effects of total self-satisfaction. So we have learned that Socrates has reason to converse with Hippias" (p. 274). I will have more to say about this paper later.

14 This detail confirms my claim that Plato's seemingly merely aesthetic or literary choice of having Socrates double himself and create a character also has a *philosophical* and an ethical or moral foundation. It is not just mere style and play. The manner in which Socrates presents this idea of conscience by acting out the role of 'annoying questioner' is constitutive of the lesson he wants to teach. The form of this pedagogical theater is also part of its content. I owe this point to a question by Joseángel Domínguez.

15 A lesson I have learned from many, but I want to single out Miller, 2017; Altman, 2020; Schultz, 2013; and Trivigno, 2016, p. 32, 62.

16 From a chapter entitled "The Two-in-One" in *The Life of the Mind*, p. 179–193.

17 I find it incredibly telling that Sandra Peterson used the pseudonym 'Halsten Olson' in order to publish

her paper. She hand-wrote a note on the first page of the scanned, uploaded version of the paper on her academia.edu page: "I used a pen name for this because I submitted to a journal that did not do blind refereeing, and I submitted it to a conference whose program would appear online while the paper was still under review."
https://www.academia.edu/6593504/Socrates_talks_to_himself_in_Platos_Hippias_Major
(last accessed February 15 2024).
I think that Peterson's experience of pseudonymity has perhaps inspired her own views of Socrates' use of the character of the 'annoying questioner' as accurate and genuine. Her and Halsten Olson's views are identical, and she would endorse everything she wrote under that name. I do not think that the same is true of Plato's Socrates and his 'annoying questioner.' It's too bad that more scholars do not know that this article was penned by Peterson.

18 I owe this example to Nickolas Pappas (personal communication), who got it from his late colleague, Jonathan Adler.