

Of Pots and Plato's Aesthetics

Jonathan Fine
Georgetown University
jonathan.fine@georgetown.edu

Forthcoming in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*
Please cite published version

Ask a toad what beauty is, absolute beauty, the *to kalon*.
He will answer that it is his toad wife, with two large round eyes sticking out of her little head...
– Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 1764

Among the many ways to begin aesthetic inquiry, the first argument of Plato's *Hippias Major* might seem a spectacularly poor start.¹ Asked what beauty (*to kalon*) is, Hippias answers that a beautiful maiden is beautiful. Socrates, speaking in the persona of an imaginary Questioner, does not object that a mere example provides no account of beauty itself, as he often does when his 'What is X?'-question is first met with examples (*Euth.* 5d–6e; *Tht.* 146c–e, 148d; *Men.* 72ab). Rather, he introduces more examples: a beautiful mare, lyre, and cooking pot. Hippias accepts the first two but retorts that a pot is not worth judging beautiful by comparison. Only then does Socrates argue that, likewise, a beautiful maiden is ugly compared to gods, and therefore cannot be beauty itself (*Hip. Mai.* 287d–289d).

At first glance, this exchange does not command philosophical attention. It is often taken to show little more than Hippias's unintelligence and, perhaps for this reason, seldom treated in

¹ While its authenticity has been doubted since Schleiermacher 1810, most scholars now attribute the dialogue to Plato; one recent exception is Heitsch 2011. My argument is largely independent of this debate insofar as it depends upon contours of the classical Greek concept of beauty. Yet it supports the case for authenticity indirectly. Thesleff (1976: 106), for example, thinks Plato would not have made Hippias so dense. My interpretation renders Hippias more sensible and the first argument continuous with Plato's critique of aristocratic values elsewhere.

detail by scholars of Plato or the history of aesthetics.² But on closer inspection, the examples deployed by Socrates raise perplexities. It is unclear not only what purpose they serve, since they are tangential to the structure of the argument, but also why Hippias objects to a beautiful pot. There are also deeper questions. Why does Plato begin inquiry into beauty with examples – and these specific examples? What might this early episode in aesthetics show about how to conduct inquiry into beauty?

As I shall show, in the above exchange Plato interrogates the association of beauty with class to expose the dangers of relying on cultural examples in inquiry into beauty. The examples in the first argument have a sociopolitical function that has not been appreciated. Socrates invokes the pot to contest an *aristocratic* conception of beauty presumed by Hippias. By beginning with this strategic series of examples, Plato illustrates the need to critique cultural norms that guide inquiry into beauty.

My argument proceeds by analyzing Hippias's answer and then the examples in Socrates's argument against it ('the first argument'). Section 1 reconsiders Hippias's example of a maiden to motivate the need to attend to the cultural resonances of Socrates's examples. When Hippias cites a beautiful maiden, he appeals to a cultural paradigm of beauty in ancient Greek thought. His answer is not simply foolish, as 'the dominant view' claims (§1.1), nor an attempt to define beauty by an exemplar, as a recent 'exemplarist view' proposes (§1.2). Rather, his answer begins to reveal a methodological assumption that central cases of beauty in a culture set the bounds of what is beautiful. Section 2 shows that Socrates's examples challenge this assumption by contesting

² See *e.g.*, Grube 1927: 171; Konstan 2014: 117; Trivigno 2016: 46; Gold 2021; Haas 2021: 13. Notable exceptions include Politis 2018, 2021; Gold 2021; and, in aesthetics, Sider 1977. Woodruff (1982: xiii) notes a tendency to judge the dialogue a 'disappointing treatise in aesthetics'.

Hippias's view that beauty correlates to aristocratic class. I show that Hippias denies that the pot is beautiful because it is a lower-class item, whereas beautiful mares and lyres are aristocratic status symbols (§2.1). This reading is confirmed by a Socratic pattern of using lowly examples to critique aristocratic values (§2.2). Section 3 concludes by suggesting why Plato emphasizes the limits of examples when inquiring specifically into beauty.

1 Hippias's example: a beautiful maiden

The Socratic question 'What is the beautiful?' (*ti esti to kalon*) is doubly ambiguous. First, the concept *to kalon* is notoriously vexing. It expresses admiration for attractive people and pleasurable art but also for virtuous character and conduct worthy of esteem (e.g., *Hip. Mai.* 286a3–b4, 291d9–e2). Due to its breadth, the term *kalon* is often translated *fine*, *admirable*, or *noble*. But the *Hippias Major* is most intelligible as an inquiry into *beauty*, albeit a concept of beauty with an ethical and social valence; its class connotations (suggested by *noble*) will prove important to Hippias.³ Second, Socrates's question itself is ambiguous. In ordinary Greek 'the beautiful' (*to kalon*) can refer to

- (i) a token beautiful object, for example Aphrodite;
- (ii) a type of beautiful object or quality, for example goddesses or brilliance; or
- (iii) what it is to be beautiful, the nature of beauty.

It eventually becomes clear, as readers of Plato expect, that Socrates seeks (iii) in a sense that precludes (i) and (ii): what makes all beautiful things beautiful and is in no way ugly (288a8–11, 291d1–5, 292c10–d4, 294b1–c3). However, Plato first calls attention to the ambiguity of the

³ Woodruff (1982: 110) and Konstan (2014), among others, argue that *kalon* should not be translated as *beautiful* because it applies beyond physical appearance. This presupposes a narrow concept of beauty, however.

question. Hippias has some sense of (iii) in view when he agrees that all beautiful things are beautiful ‘by means of’ or ‘on account of the beautiful’ (*tō(i) kalō(i)*, 287c8–d1).⁴ Yet he asks for clarification whether the question ‘What is *the* beautiful?’ concerns what is beautiful (*ti esti kalon*) and he denies that these are distinct (287d4–9). Evidently, he hears the question in a sense compatible with (i) or (ii). Thus, Hippias defines *the* beautiful as follows: ‘*Parthenos kalē kalon*’ – literally, ‘A beautiful maiden is beautiful’ (287e2–4). We may say that Hippias cites an example of beauty. The issue is why Plato has Hippias answer precisely as he does.

1.1 *The dominant view*

Most scholars assume that Plato wants to show simply how foolish Hippias is: he confuses (i) a token object for (iii) beauty and so ‘completely misses the point’ (Konstan 2014: 117; cf. Grote 1885: 40; Grube 1927: 271–72; Sider 1977: 467; Haas 2021: 13).⁵ We may begin to appreciate the philosophical stakes of the exchange that follows, however, if we notice that Hippias’s answer is

⁴ Translations are mine, modifying Woodruff 1982. Note the ambiguity of the dative *tō(i) kalō(i)*. Woodruff (1982: 49) assumes it is causal (and spatial) and so has Hippias expect a maiden ‘in’ beautiful things. But Hippias need not and does not understand the dative causally. This may be why Socrates asks whether beautiful things are so on account of (*dia*, 288a10) a beautiful maiden (cf. Politis 2021: 18n4) and why, once that answer is refuted, he reformulates the question to emphasize that beauty is a cause (*kosmeitai*, 289d3; *prosgenētai*: 289d4, 292a1, 292d2; *poiein*: 294a2, 294c1, 294d8–e6). I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this interpretation.

⁵ Trivigno (2016: 42–6) claims the example reflects how Hippias is a ‘self-ignorant’ fool: he wrongly thinks himself *kalon* because he wrongly thinks of the *kalon* in ‘aesthetic’ terms and gives answers that please and appear *kalon* to the many. While sympathetic to much of Trivigno’s excellent analysis, I cannot agree that, for Plato, it is a mistake to conceive of the *kalon* in aesthetic terms, as beauty.

sensible in context. Since the question is ambiguous, Hippias cannot be expected to understand it in its distinctively Socratic sense, much less accept the ontological commitments of Socratic inquiry (Palmer 1999: 62–4). Moreover, his answer has more general force than initially appears: the neuter adjective *kalon* allows Hippias to refer beyond (i) a token maiden, be she Pandora or Parthenos herself, to (ii) *any* beautiful maiden as a type (Nehamas 1975: 297–303).⁶ Socrates, for his part, does not correct the form of the answer. While he queries whether all beautiful things are so on account of (*dia*) a beautiful maiden being beautiful (*Hip. Mai.* 288a9–11) and introduces the mare, lyre, and pot, he does not object that one example is insufficiently general to explain all cases of beauty.⁷ Rather, he objects that a beautiful maiden is ugly compared to gods (289b8–9), refuting Hippias’s thought that it is ridiculous (*katagelaston*) to say one is ‘not beautiful’ (*ou kalon*, 288b1–3). This objection makes it only more puzzling what work the examples of the mare, lyre, and pot are supposed to do in the first argument. I provide an explanation in Section 2. For now, we must consider with what reason Hippias cites a beautiful maiden and assumes, as Socrates’s argument requires, that she is nowise ugly.

The maiden is not a random example but a cultural paradigm of beauty in ancient Greek thought. It is not simply that persons, more than art or nature, are the central cases of beauty. It is that the maiden (*parthenos*), the female youth on the cusp of marriage, is a figure chiefly characterized by and illustrative of beauty in archaic and classical Greek culture (Calame 1977:

⁶ This is not to agree with Nehamas that Hippias means ‘To be a beautiful maiden is (to be) beautiful’ (1975: 300).

⁷ *Pace* Nehamas 1975: 300–2; Sider 1977: 467; Woodruff 1982: 168–69; Hyland 2008: 13–6. It would be odd were the objection implicit since it is irrelevant to the main argument (Lee 2010) and explicit elsewhere (*Euth.* 5d; *Men.* 72ab, 74ab).

447; Sissa 1990: 73–123; Blondell 2013: ch. 1). Sometimes her beauty spells deception or harm, as when Aphrodite appears as a maiden to seduce Anchises (*Homeric Hymn* 5.82) or when Pandora, with the ‘beautiful form of a maiden’ (*parthenikēs kalon eidos*), unleashes ills onto humanity (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 62). Yet a maiden is not thereby ugly. So strongly associated is the type with beauty that the adjective ‘beautiful’ only intensifies what ‘maiden’ already connotes. This cultural background helps to explain why someone asked about beauty might refer to a beautiful maiden and think it ridiculous to call her ugly. As Hippias claims, he says what is true and ‘what everybody thinks’ (*Hip. Mai.* 288a3).

Hippias’s select example and appeal to convention together suggest a certain methodological orientation. As his reference to a cultural paradigm intimates, Hippias assumes that cultural use of the concept of beauty sets the limits of what is beautiful.⁸ He assumes cases at the centre of the concept – widely considered beautiful in his culture – are uncontestable and so have privileged epistemic status in guiding inquiry. This assumption will emerge more fully in Section 2, where I show it animates Hippias’s substantive view that beauty correlates to aristocratic class; Socrates will use *his* examples strategically to expose and to contest this aristocratic view and the methodological assumption behind it. At this stage, I should like simply to note that such a methodological approach offers a genuine alternative to Socrates’s. Its closest theoretical articulation may be Wittgenstein’s view that one can sometimes define something by enumerating examples – for Wittgenstein, a sounder approach to beauty that counteracts the Socratic ‘craving for generality’ at the expense of ‘the particular case’ (1958: §§27–30). One might indeed think that because the concept of beauty is contested (*Hip. Mai.* 294d2–3), an uncontroversial example is

⁸ Politis (2015: 230–34) suggests similarly that Hippias gives a ‘paradigmatic’ example; however, by ‘paradigmatic’ Politis means an ‘exemplar’ in the sense defined in §1.2.

needed to ensure people are disputing the same thing and not talking past one another (Gallie 1955–56: 176). My suggestion is not that Hippias holds such general theories of definition. It is simply that his answer is more sensible than is often thought. If we recognize this, we can better see the philosophical interest of its refutation.

1.2 *The exemplarist view*

Impressed by this thought, at least one other scholar has proposed that Plato engages methodological issues through the first argument of the *Hippias Major*. According to Vasilis Politis, Plato has Hippias refer to the maiden as an *exemplar* in order to show, ultimately, that beauty and other values cannot be defined in this way. While George Grote commented in 1885 on Hippias’s ‘particular conspicuous exemplifications of the Beautiful’ (1885: 47–8), Politis has developed this view into arguably the most sophisticated interpretation of our passage.⁹ My concern in the remainder of this section is to show its limitations. In doing so, I hope both to sharpen by contrast the methodological assumption that, in my view, Hippias adopts and to illustrate the need to probe the class resonances of Socrates’s examples in Section 2.

In Politis’s view, the first argument demonstrates implicitly that Socratic ‘What is X?’–questions cannot be answered with reference to exemplars. By an exemplar, Politis means a distinctive sort of example: a particular thing that is conspicuously X and can thereby serve as a standard of what it is to be X (2021: 17). This sense of an exemplar tracks one use of the Greek

⁹ Politis 2021: chs. 1–2; ch. 1 reprints with slight modification Politis 2018. Above, ‘exemplar’ abbreviates Politis’s ‘example and exemplar’. Politis (2021: 17 n2) cites Balaudé 2004: 154, 159, 184 as a lone precedent. This reading is followed without argument by Wesselinoff (2024: 38). Compare Lee 2010: 13: Hippias believes ‘an adequate explanation of the girl’s fineness can begin and end by pointing to the girl herself’.

term *paradeigma*, according to Politis (2021: 2); but it is likely familiar in aesthetics from Goodman's notion of exemplification (1978: 63–70).¹⁰ To take a well-worn case: a tailor's swatch of maroon fabric is an example of something maroon. It also exemplifies, or conspicuously shows forth, its maroon colour, as a maroon guitar or a maroon bowl typically does not. Asked what colour maroon is, the tailor can point to the swatch. It serves as a standard with which to determine whether some suit on the rack is maroon. Similarly, for Politis, Hippias refers to a particular beautiful maiden as an exemplar of beauty. He answers the question 'What is beauty?' by answering 'What is beautiful?'; that is why he does not distinguish these questions (Politis 2021: 18). Importantly, this is not to say what beauty is by giving a series of examples, as for Wittgenstein, but to assume one conspicuous example can *show* the nature of beauty.¹¹ Hippias thinks this is possible, Politis suggests (2021: 29–31), because he thinks beauty is evident to the senses. The refutation of Hippias's answer, according to Politis, then provides an argument that beauty cannot be defined by an exemplar and, therefore, that the form of beauty cannot be perceived, an argument that Plato extends to other forms (2021: 32–48).

¹⁰ For *paradeigma* in Plato, see Patterson 1985: 12–23; pre-Platonic precedent for this sense at pp. 13–15. This sense of exemplar should not be confused with another from the German aesthetic tradition (*e.g.*, Kant, *Critique of Judgment* §46), in which something exemplary (*exemplarisch*) of X is *not* an example (*Beispiel*) of X. It creates a rule to follow and cannot be subsumed under existing concepts.

¹¹ This difference is obscured by Politis's view (2021: 17) that Plato addresses *avant la lettre* Geach's famous charge that Socrates fallaciously assumes examples are useless in arriving at a definition; cf. the title of Politis 2018. Yet Geach (1966: 371) claims with Wittgenstein that 'a set of examples', not one exemplar, can be 'more useful than a formal definition'.

While this interpretation rightly pays philosophical attention to the first argument, it misconstrues the text and its methodological point. The most basic difficulty is that Hippias does not clearly appeal to an exemplar. It is true that Socrates seeks a standard of beauty and that the term *paradeigma* can be used of an exemplar bearing a standard. But the term does not occur here; and if it did, one would expect some indication that it is used in this specific sense, since it is also the term for an ordinary example.¹² The strongest indication would be that Hippias does not distinguish the questions about beauty and what is beautiful. Yet this is better explained by the ambiguity of Socrates's question. After all, Hippias *asks* what it is about (*Hip. Mai.* 287d5–6). Nor does Plato seem particularly motivated to refute the idea ascribed to Hippias that beauty is conspicuous and evident to the senses. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is explicit that beauty is an aesthetic, phenomenal property: the form of beauty itself is 'most apparent' or 'most self-disclosive' (*ekphanestaton*, *Phdr.* 250d7), shining out to be seen in sensibly beautiful things (250b–d). As Gabriel Lear has observed, beauty for Plato has the unique role of 'appearing, manifesting, or showing' itself to human awareness and 'catching the mind's attention' (2019: 45).¹³ So when a

¹² I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion. It is notable that, when Plato wants to distinguish the use of *paradeigmata* as exemplars in the methodological discussion at *Plt.* 277d1–278e2, he explains this sense at some length. Our passage makes no comment.

¹³ See further Lear 2019: 42–52; cf. Kosman 2010: 254–55. One might object that *Hip. Mai.* 294c8–d7 implies that the *kalon* cannot be phenomenal: if what is beautiful *appeared* so, people would not dispute what is beautiful (so, Trivigno 2016: 42–3; Politis 2021: 29–31). That inference depends on Hippias interpreting 'to appear' (*phainesthai*) as 'to be seen'. But it can also mean 'to show itself', an ambiguity Socrates immediately exploits (295a1–3), as Moreau notes (1941: 32: '*les belles choses peuvent être dites des manifestations de la beauté*'). The dialogue repeatedly connects the *kalon* to appearance (281a, 289d–

philosophical lover encounters a beloved who ‘has made a likeness of beauty well’ (*kallos eu memimēmenon*, *Phdr.* 251a3), he glimpses the divine form of beauty appearing in the human realm. This does not mean that a beautiful beloved constitutes a standard of beauty or that this standard is perceptible in itself. To the contrary: the phenomenology of beauty ‘down here’ can disclose that its source lies elsewhere, beyond sensible things. That phenomenology depends on beauty being conspicuous.

Difficulties follow for Politis’s reconstruction of the first argument. On his view, when Hippias accepts the beautiful mare and lyre, he grants that there are exemplars of beauty for different kinds of things – mare for animals, lyre for artifacts – and denies that there is a single standard with which to determine, for all things, whether it is beautiful. Yet he presupposes this standard when he compares the pot, as an exemplar of beauty, unfavorably to these other exemplars. This inconsistency, Politis proposes (2021: 19–21), entails by *reductio* that beauty cannot be defined by an exemplar. However, the text suggests nothing so intricate. Hippias merely grants that a beautiful mare and lyre are beautiful (*Hip. Mai.* 288b8–c6); even if considered exemplars, this is not to reject a single overarching standard of beauty. More problematic is that

291d, 297e–299c); in the first argument, a maiden’s appearing ugly implies that she is ugly (289b3–7; compare *Rep.* 479ab). This motif, I would suggest, reflects the conceptual point emphasized by Lear that part of what it is to be *kalon* is to appear or show itself. I am grateful to Gabriel Lear for sharing an unpublished manuscript, ‘Forms and Appearances: The Epistemological and Normative Dimensions of Plato’s Ontology’, which develops the point that Platonic forms make their appearance. If beauty is conspicuous in this sense, one must still be educated to see it, especially beauty of soul (on which, see Woodruff 2022).

Politis obscures the meaning of Hippias's response to the beautiful pot – the claim on which the first argument pivots:

[a] Even this utensil [the pot] is beautiful if beautifully made, [b] but on the whole this is not worth judging as beautiful compared to a horse and maiden and all the other beautiful things.

[a] καλὸν μὲν καὶ τοῦτο τὸ σκευῶς ἐστὶ καλῶς εἰργασμένον, [b] ἀλλὰ τὸ ὅλον τοῦτο οὐκ ἔστιν ἄξιον κρίνειν ὡς ὄν καλὸν πρὸς ἵππον τε καὶ παρθένον καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα τὰ καλά.
(288e6–9)

Socrates fastens on the comparison in [b] to argue by analogy that a maiden is no more beautiful than ugly (289c5). But what does Hippias mean? It strains the text to claim as Politis does that Hippias means, confusedly, that [a] the pot is an exemplar of beauty but [b] it is not beautiful compared to other exemplars.¹⁴ [a] calls the pot beautiful only if it is beautifully made, and [b] further qualifies, or perhaps retracts, this conditional claim. When Hippias refers to ‘all the other beautiful things’ (*talla panta ta kala*), he must refer to things other than the maiden and mare, excluding the pot because it is ‘not worth judging as beautiful’. Even if Hippias considered the other examples exemplars, then, he more likely *denies* the pot this status. Indeed, if the pot is ‘on the whole’ not worth judging beautiful, Hippias suggests it is not even an example of beauty.¹⁵ It remains to explore why not.

¹⁴ Politis (2015: 230–34) suggests that Hippias considers the pot a ‘borderline’ example of beauty. See §2.1 for further reservations.

¹⁵ Two other objections are noteworthy. (1) If Socrates understood Hippias to be citing an exemplar, he could object much more directly that an exemplar cannot cause other things to be beautiful. (2) As Politis acknowledges (2021: 22), an inconsistency does not entail that Hippias's method is unsound or that Plato

I have argued that, when Hippias gives the example of a maiden, he cites a cultural paradigm of beauty that opens a methodological dispute about the status of examples in inquiry. But Plato's point is not to show that beauty cannot be defined by an exemplar. What, then, is it? I shall now argue that Plato illustrates the need to critique cultural examples of beauty that Hippias takes as uncontested guides. This methodological point comes into view if we pursue a question seldom asked: why does Hippias object to a beautiful pot, unlike the maiden, mare, and lyre?¹⁶ We miss much in the text unless we examine the examples, so heavy is their sociopolitical weight.

2 A Concept Contested

The argument against Hippias's first definition is, roughly, that (P1) if a beautiful maiden is a standard of beauty, then she is in no way ugly; but (P2) a beautiful maiden is ugly compared to gods; therefore, (C) a beautiful maiden is not a standard of beauty. Between the major and the minor premises come the mare, lyre, and pot. These examples, we saw, play no obvious logical role in the argument. Hippias's objection to the pot opens the door to the minor premise, but

rejects it. Hippias could abandon another of the inconsistent claims. Politis replies that Plato invites readers to consider whether an interlocutor's beliefs are true, not how to make them consistent. But if so, it is premature to conclude which belief Plato rejects. If Plato were concerned with exemplars, perhaps it is in the dialogue's opening frame. The first line – 'Hippias, *the* beautiful and wise!' (281a1) – refers to Hippias in the nominative, as though an incarnation of beauty and wisdom. This is ironic. The opening frame makes a problem of who is wise and on what grounds. Hippias thinks beauty indicates wisdom, whether through the beauties of his wealth (282d6) or his beautiful speech at Sparta (286a5). But beauty itself needs interrogation.

¹⁶ Notable exceptions include Sider 1977: 467; Woodruff 1982: 53; Gold 2021. My account is most indebted to Kurke 2011: 347–53, though our concerns are different.

Socrates could have made the comparison in (P2) directly. Our interpretive challenge, then, is to explain the role of these specific examples. This section shows that, through these examples, Socrates strategically exposes and contests a conventional aristocratic conception of beauty presumed by Hippias. The exchange thereby illustrates that central cultural examples of beauty are not uncontested, as Hippias assumes, but must be interrogated. The first argument lays bare the need to critique cultural norms that influence, and may distort, aesthetic inquiry.

2.1 *The importance of class*

Let's return to Socrates's first example, the mare. The Greek, *thēleia hippos*, plays on Hippias's name and hometown, Elis, famous for horse-breeding (288c4–5). But there is a serious point. Horses are symbols of status. In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon offers twelve mares among other gifts as compensation after he takes Achilles' war prize, the maiden Briseis (*Il.* 9.123–32). They are quarrelling over honour: the beautiful maiden and mares are tokens of recognition of Achilles's status and worth as a warrior. Their quarrel over Briseis is mirrored at *Iliad* 23 by a quarrel over (what else?) a mare, second-place prize in the chariot race at the funeral games. We might recall the prizes at the race. The winner gets a woman and a tripod, the runner-up a mare. Next come a cauldron, gold, and a two-handled bowl (23.261–70, 539–611). The similarity to our passage is remarkable (though has passed unremarked), especially as Socrates will soon re-describe the pot as two-handled and Hippias will next define beauty as gold. Whether or not this Homeric echo is intentional, the point remains that in archaic and classical Greek culture mares are commonly prized for their beauty and prized as symbols of status. At classical Athens, they symbolize *aristocratic* status. A luxury animal that once only aristocrats could afford, horses are short-hand for aristocratic values (Spence 1993: 202–10; Nicholson 2005).

The lyre further evokes this dense background. There is, of course, that ‘beautifully wrought’ lyre played by Achilles when Agamemnon’s embassy comes promising his gifts (*Il.* 9.186–89). But in a trio with a beautiful maiden and mare, the lyre strongly suggests lyric poetry, and lyric poetry brings us into the aristocratic context of the symposium. This we should expect. The symposium is a main setting in classical Greece for reflecting on beauty and educating desire for it. In this eroticized political context, aristocratic males (mainly) would define themselves *as* aristocrats, drinking, conversing, and singing as they learn to enjoy beautiful things (*kala*) in the ‘right’ way. They would sing lyric poetry, including verses that, in a common metaphor, compare beautiful young women to beautiful horses (Platte 2017: ch. 3). Alcman’s *Partheneion* (Maidens’ Song) figures two dancing girls as gorgeous prize-winning horses (ll. 45–59). Anacreon likens a beautiful maiden to a mare to be ‘ridden’ (417 *PMG*). If the mare connotes aristocracy, the lyre conjures the aristocratic setting in which mares and maidens are imagined together. As Leslie Kurke has pointed out (2011: 347–53), the context of the symposium is the thread that connects the three examples to one another and to beauty. All three can have erotic connotations.¹⁷ But the class association of beauty is uppermost, as the next example makes clear.

¹⁷ As Gold (2021) emphasizes. On Gold’s reading, Socrates thinks Hippias’s answer reflects a perverse erotic desire; Socrates must ‘debase’ the exchange by using the mare, lyre, and pot as sexual metaphors in Old Comedy (2021: 139). While these metaphorical connotations may be in play, they are secondary to class connotations. If they were primary, we must explain away the evidence of class and explain why Socrates resorts to metaphor. That he must debase the exchange is doubtful. Hippias’s answer is culturally salient and less offensive to Socrates’s views of erotic desire in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* than Gold claims (2021: 137–38), even if we allow these other dialogues to bear so heavily on *Hip. Mai.* 287d–289c.

The pot undercuts this association. It is no fine specimen of Greek pottery. Nor is it an elegant Le Creuset. A *chytra* is a jug-like rough clay pot used to heat water, soups, or stews. Beyond the kitchen it is sometimes used for exposing infants. Undecorated and indecorous, ‘to paint pots’ (*chytran poikillein*) is synonymous with futile effort (Sider 1977: 467). The term *chytra* occurs nowhere else in Plato, though regularly in Aristophanes to signify lower-class life and, metaphorically, female genitalia.¹⁸ In a dialogue known for comedic tropes, the pot is not out of place as an object of ridicule. Indeed, there is something ridiculous about the suggestion of a *beautiful chytra*: this is the only instance in extant classical Greek literature.¹⁹ It comes across as a category mistake, as though one does not know how to use the concept of the *kalon*. For the concept has ties to the upper-class, the pot lower-class.

Hippias’s immediate reaction to the pot clarifies these class considerations. He disparages the character of someone who mentions a *chytra* among beautiful things: he must be ‘uncultured’ (*apaideutos*) to ‘speak such vulgar words [*phaula onomata*] in so dignified [*semnō(i)*] an affair’ (*Hip. Mai.* 288d1–3). Notice his concern with culture and propriety. It may be that Hippias takes offence at the sexual connotation of *chytra*. Yet the contrast with what is dignified or august (*semnos*) shows that the word is vulgar less because it is metaphorically obscene than because it literally names a lowly object. (Hippias, prissily, will not so much as say *chytra*: ‘This utensil’

¹⁸ See *Acharnians* 284, *Birds* 43, *Frogs* 983, *Peace* 923, *Wealth* 1197; sexual metaphor: *Thesmophoriazusae* 503–9; *Assemblywomen* 845–47, 1091–92; *Frogs* 504–7; *Birds* 76–9; *Knights* 1168–76.

¹⁹ Compare with *Hip. Mai.* 288b–d Xenophon *Oeconomicus* 8.19: someone refined (*kompsoi*) might laugh at the claim that *even* pots (*kai chytrai*) arranged in good order is *kalon*. The order is beautiful, not the pots.

(*skeuos*), he sniffs at 288e6.)²⁰ Socrates confirms this when he replies that the Questioner is ‘not refined’ (*ou kompsos*, 288d4). If earlier Hippias said that wealth is ‘worth much’ (*pollou axion*, 282d2) and has many ‘beautiful things’ about it (*tōn kalōn*, 282d7), he now implies that only someone without taste for the supposedly finer things in life would esteem a cooking pot. When he goes on to complain that the Questioner has no feeling for ‘beautiful possessions’ (*kalōn ktēmatōn*, 289e1–2), he clearly has in mind conspicuous displays of aristocratic luxury, including horses, lyres, and gold. In rejecting the pot, Hippias has unlikely forgotten that beautiful bowl in Homer, as David Konstan suggests (2014: 117). He is all too aware of the sociopolitical divide between that beauty and rustic cookware.

Faced with this response, Socrates recasts the pot in rich aesthetic terms, presupposing its beauty in order to contest Hippias’s aristocratic view. We are to imagine it turned by a good potter, smooth, round, and ‘beautifully fired’ (*kalōs optēmenē*), one of those ‘beautiful, *very* beautiful pots [*tōn kalōn chytrōn... pankalai*] with two handles’ (*Hip. Mai.* 288d7–10). The pot has been transformed into an artistic achievement, an entirely different vessel not unlike Homer’s libation bowl. Socrates must reimagine how the humble pot *looks* because it is not regarded as beautiful in his culture. This strategy elevates what is denied esteem to level a social hierarchy. The point is to puncture the prejudices that limit one’s view of who or what deserves admiration.

This sociopolitical subtext suggests we should resist the temptation of some scholars to draw from this passage Plato’s positive aesthetic views, for example that beauty consists in properties of well-made objects or resides even in humble crafts (Sider 1977: 467–69).²¹ We do

²⁰ I follow Kurke 2011: 352–53 in connecting the diction to sociopolitical status.

²¹ Porter (2010: 259–60) concludes, conversely, that Plato rejects Hippias’s ‘materialist’ tendency to locate beauty in the smallest of things.

not have a compressed argument that smoothness, roundness, and such make pottery or anything else beautiful. Not only is the nature of beauty still in dispute, but Socrates simply presupposes that there *are* beautiful pots. In context, the purpose of the presupposition is negative and critical: to contest a conventional aristocratic conception of beauty. It is more judicious to conclude that Socrates treats the concept of beauty as an open concept, as he forces the question whether to extend it to a novel case.²²

The obvious response for Hippias is to reject the presupposition. That, I propose, is what his claim at 288e6–9 does. As we saw, [a] states not that the pot is an example of beauty but that it is beautiful *if* beautifully made. [b] qualifies further: but ‘on the whole’ (*to holon*) the pot is ‘not worth judging’ (*ouk estin axion krinein*) beautiful compared to the maiden and the rest. What it means to judge the matter ‘on the whole’ is admittedly obscure.²³ Hippias presumably means this hypothetical pot is not beautiful *all things considered* even if an aspect of it is. This is because he thinks no *chytra* can be beautiful when beauty is associated in his culture with aristocratic class.

²² On open concepts in aesthetics, see Weitz 1956.

²³ While Hippias later complains that Socrates neglects ‘the wholes of things’ (*ta hola tōn pragmatōn*, 301b2–3) and divorces beauty from beautiful things, the ‘wholes of things’ refers to a highly theoretical view of properties. More helpful is Hippias’s language of *worth* and *judgment* in the opening frame. He invites Socrates and others ‘who are able to judge’ (*hikanoi krinai*) to listen to his speech about beautiful pursuits and other things ‘worth hearing’ (*axia akoēs*, 286b7–c3). Socrates then conjures the boorish Questioner, which calls into question who is wise enough to judge what is beautiful. Socrates denies that he can, since he could not say what beauty is, and suggests the same of Hippias. Hippias denies that the Questioner can, due to his lack of culture.

Despite being invited to treat the concept of beauty as open, Hippias treats it as closed, fixing its boundaries to exclude common objects.

2.2 *The pattern continued*

I have evoked the class resonances of Socrates's examples to explain their role in the first argument. These examples work to expose – and the pot to contest – Hippias's aristocratic conception of beauty. If this reading is persuasive, it deepens the impression formed by Hippias's first answer (the maiden) that Plato broaches the limits of relying on central cultural examples in inquiry into beauty. Because this reading concerns the subtext of the argument, however, one might object that the issue of class requires further support. We should therefore observe that the first argument belongs to a pattern of anti-aristocratic examples both in the dialogue and elsewhere in Plato.

The above reading gains support from the fact that the second argument follows precisely the same course as the first. Hippias next defines beauty as gold.²⁴ As before, Socrates introduces two examples of beautiful things, ivory and stone; Hippias rebukes a third associated with Old Comedy; and Socrates responds with an imaginative redescription. Hippias concedes that ivory and stone are beautiful where appropriate, for example for different parts of Pheidias's chryselephantine sculpture of Athena (290b–d). Then the pot returns. Only now it is filled with beautiful pea or bean soup, a *kalos etnos*. Asked whether a fig-wood or a golden ladle is more appropriate to stir the soup, Hippias calls the Questioner stupid (290d8–e3). It offends Hippias's fancy taste to rank wooden spoons alongside art and precious materials. But it is also that, like

²⁴ In fairness, Socrates asks what form (*eidos*), when added, makes all things adorned (*kosmeitai*) and appear (*phainetai*) beautiful (289d3–4). A form of beauty being 'added' (*prosgenētai*) is unusual; but see *Phd.* 100d6 (manuscripts BTPQ).

with the pot, calling this soup *kalos* is highly irregular. As the later discussion of sensory pleasure suggests, the adjective applies more naturally to sights and sounds than food and drink (299a2–4).²⁵ And to my knowledge, this rustic dish is called *kalon* only one other time in classical literature, in comedy (Aristophanes, *Knights* 1171). It is certainly not the ‘noble relish’ (*opson gennaion*) Socrates pretends it to be as he imagines why the fig-wood ladle is more appropriate, so more beautiful, than the golden one: while fig-wood adds fragrance, the golden ladle would break the pot, spill the soup onto the fire, and deprive those about ‘to be entertained’ of their meal (*hestiasthai*, *Hip. Mai.* 290e8–11). This, too, is a joke with a serious purpose: it further contests a conventional aristocratic conception of beauty. For one place to be ‘entertained’ with ‘noble relishes’ is a symposium.²⁶ There one finds, not pots with pea soup, but some familiar objects.

Consider this drinking song in which two symposiasts imagine themselves as dueling answers to the question ‘What’s most beautiful?’

Symposiast 1: I wish I were a beautiful ivory lyre,

and beautiful boys would bring me to the Dionysiac dance.

Symposiast 2: I wish I were a big, beautiful, unsmelted golden ring,

and a beautiful woman would wear me, whose mind was made pure.

(Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* 15.695cd = *PMG* 900–1)²⁷

²⁵ Hence the joke when Euripides’s *Cyclops* mentions a wine’s *kalos* bouquet: “You can see it, then?” (*Cyclops* 153), cited by Sider (1977: 466).

²⁶ Cf. *Rep.* 404b on Homeric banquets but with implications for symposia; *aneu opson*, *Rep.* 372d, referenced below.

²⁷ I owe this passage to Kurke 2011: 347–53. Kurke proposes, intriguingly, that Hippias and Socrates enact a version of this sympotic game.

The overlap in examples with the *Hippias Major* – beautiful woman, lyre, ivory, gold – is not coincidental. Plato may not have had these verses in mind, but he could draw, and evidently did draw, on symbolic motifs of the symposium to evoke an aristocratic conception of beauty. Alongside a basic pot of rustic fare, the counterexample of a fig-wood spoon subverts that conception, displacing beauty, as it were, from the symposium to the commonplace of the comic stage.

These arguments belong to a pattern of ‘vulgar’ examples through which Socrates challenges aristocratic values.²⁸ He has a well-known habit of using what are deemed low examples: ‘He talks about pack-asses, smiths, cobblers, and tanners’, says Alcibiades (*Symp.* 221e4–5), not to mention itches (*Phlb.* 46a) and pastry-bakers (*Gorg.* 462e–465d). Sometimes these examples attempt to deflate aristocratic ideology. At *Gorgias* 490a–491b, Callicles claims the better man should rule and have a greater share than others. Socrates mockingly takes him to mean that a doctor should get the most food, for instance, or a cobbler the biggest and most shoes. This is ‘nonsense’ to Callicles, as are moderation, justice, and contracts valued by the many (490c8–d1, 490e4, 492c7). Callicles admires the power and freedom of the manly few who are able to satisfy their appetites without restraint (491e–492c). So it is cunning when Socrates likens this hedonism to the life of a catamite, a sexually receptive male that stands opposed to the ideal statesman. When Callicles asks whether Socrates is ashamed to discuss such things, he reveals his own sense of shame and tacit commitment to a distinction between pleasure and the good (494e). Beyond its logical role, Arlene Saxonhouse explains (2013: 363), the example cuts against an antidemocratic ranking of ‘the great’ above ‘the average man, the one whom Callicles is so eager to subdue and exploit’.

²⁸ I thank two referees for emphasizing this point.

Sometimes, though, Socrates rejects aristocratic examples of beauty directly. After Glaucon insists at *Republic* III that people cannot live well ‘without relishes’ and the furniture of the symposium – a passage resonant with the comedic scene above – Socrates appeases him by adding to the ideal regime such conventional beauties as gold, ivory, and adornments or embroidery, *poikilia* (*Rep.* 372c–373a). This luxurious city then becomes moderated, the sympotic institution reformed. Notably excluded is a ‘Sicilian variety [*poikilēn*] of relishes’ (404d), a subtle strike against an aristocratic Athenian conception of beauty as sensuous variety (*poikilia*), as I have discussed elsewhere (Fine 2021: 161–62).²⁹ In light of this pattern of critique, it is fitting that a first step in the *Hippias Major* is to contest a prevailing class-based view of beauty.

3 Concluding Remarks

The examples with which inquiry begins in the *Hippias Major* have been widely ignored or dismissed. I have shown that they work to expose and to contest an aristocratic conception of beauty. Through this exchange Plato illustrates the need to critique, rather than take as uncontested, central examples of beauty in a culture. On this reconstruction, the first argument offers an object lesson in the way examples in aesthetics may be ideologically laden.³⁰ This point is of course not unique to Plato or to aesthetics. But I should like to conclude by suggesting why it is worth placing before our minds, as Plato does, when inquiring into beauty.

Consider the following rationale. Beauty is a phenomenal property. As such, one might reasonably think one cannot understand what beauty is without reference to some object of

²⁹ The aesthetics of *poikilia* was affiliated also with democracy and criticized by Plato also in this connection. See Fine 2021: 157–64.

³⁰ A point developed brilliantly by Goehr (2021), whose ‘*micrology of telling details*’ (xli) has influenced my orientation here.

experience, whether perceived, imagined, or grasped intellectually. If asked what beauty is, a formal definition, whether harmonious proportion or unity in variety, can feel flat and unilluminating. It is thus tempting and perhaps necessary to point to examples. This, however, courts the risk that the examples one picks reproduce cultural prejudice but pretend to greater generality.

The risk is compounded by the fact, familiar from Bourdieu (1984), that beauty is conceptually interlocked with *culture*, indeed with social distinctions of class, status, and wealth. These connections have touched modern aesthetics, as when Kant introduces disinterested judgment by contrast to the interest of Iroquois sachem in the food, not the palaces, at Paris (*Critique of Judgment* §2). We have seen these connections are equally ancient. Hippias could assume that someone acquainted with beauty is not ‘uncultured’ and so spends their time at symposia listening to lyre music, not at the stove cooking bean soup in a pot. He is pretentious, surely; yet he betrays the fact that the *kalon* is associated with the sphere of cultural activity, especially the arts, through which one becomes receptive to beauty. Because culture shapes judgments about beauty, often in misleading ways, Plato reminds us at the outset to examine critically the examples that incline our reflection upon beauty. The point may be lost on Hippias. It should not be lost on us.³¹

³¹ For helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay, I am grateful to Mateo Duque, Lydia Goehr, Gabriel Richardson Lear, Laura Martin, referees at this journal, and audiences at meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics, the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, and the University of Chicago Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Workshop. Some of these thoughts began at a conference on Plato and Comedy at Durham University. I thank Anthony Hooper for the invitation to participate.

References

- Balaudé, J.–F., ed. (2004) *Hippias mineur. Hippias majeur*. Paris: Le Livre de poche.
- Blondell, R. (2013) *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*, Oxford: OUP.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Calame, C. (1977) *Les Chœurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque*. 2 vols. Rome: L'Ateneo and Bizzarri.
- Fine, J. (2021) 'Plato and the Dangerous Pleasures of *Poikilia*', *The Classical Quarterly*, 71: 152–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838821000318>.
- Geach, P.T. (1966) 'Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary', *Monist*, 50: 369–82.
- Goehr, L. (2021) *Red Sea–Red Square–Red Thread: A Philosophical Detective Story*. Oxford: OUP.
- Gold, S.L. (2021) 'The beautiful girl: An erotic reading of Socrates's first argument in Plato's *Hippias Major*', *The Classical Quarterly*, 71: 135–51. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838821000276>.
- Goodman, N. (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Grote, G. (1885) *Plato and Other Companions of Sokrates*, vol. II, 3rd edn. London: John Murray.
- Grube, G.M.A. (1927) 'Plato's Theory of Beauty', *The Monist*, 37: 269–88.
- Haas, B. (2021) *Le beau et ses traductions: Des quatre définitions du beau dans le Hippias majeur*. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne.
- Heitsch, E. (2011) *Platon, Größerer Hippias. Platon Werke. Übersetzung und Kommentar, VII 1*. Göttingen; Oakville, CT: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Hyland, D. (2008) *Plato and the Question of Beauty*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

- Konstan, D. (2014) *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea*. Oxford: OUP.
- Kosman, A. (2010) 'Beauty and the Good: Situating the *Kalon*', *Classical Philology*, 105: 341–57. <https://doi.org/10.1086/657025>.
- Kurke, L. (2011) *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lee, D.C. (2010) 'Dialectic and Disagreement in the *Hippias Major*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 38: 1–35.
- Lear, G.R. (2019) 'Plato on Why Human Beauty is Good for the Soul', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 57: 25–64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198850847.003.0002>.
- Moreau, J. (1941) 'Le Platonisme de L'“Hippias Majeur”', *Revue des Études Grecques*, 54: 19–42.
- Nehamas, A. (1975) 'Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato's Early Dialogues', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 29: 287–306.
- Nicholson, N. (2005) *Aristocracy and Athletics in Archaic and Classical Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Palmer, J. (1999) *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*. Oxford: OUP.
- Patterson, R. (1985) *Image and Reality in Plato's Metaphysics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Platte, R. (2017) *Equine Poetics*. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies. Available at: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_PlatteR.Equine_Poetics.2017 (Accessed 21 March 2024).
- Politis, V. (2015) *The Structure of Enquiry in Plato's Early Dialogues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2018) 'Plato's Geach Talks to Socrates: Definition by Example-and-Exemplar in the *Hippias Major*', *Phronesis*, 63: 223–28. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685284-12341349>.

- (2021) *Plato's Essentialism: Reinterpreting the Theory of Forms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Porter, J.I. (2010) *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saxonhouse, A. (2013) 'Freedom, Tyranny, and the Political Man: Plato's *Republic* and *Gorgias*, a Study in Contrasts' in R. Balot (ed) *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, pp. 353–66. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schleiermacher, F. (1810) *Platons Werke*. 5 vols. Berlin: Reimer.
- Sider, D. (1977) 'Plato's early aesthetics: *The Hippias Major*', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35: 465–70.
- Spence, I.G. (1993) *The Cavalry of Classical Greece: A Social and Military History with Particular Reference to Athens*. Oxford: OUP.
- Thesleff, H. (1976) 'The Date of the Pseudo-Platonic *Hippias Major*', *Arctos*, 10: 105–17.
- Trivigno, F. V. (2016) 'The Moral and Literary Character of Hippias in the *Hippias Major*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 50: 31–65.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198778226.003.0002>
- Weitz, M. (1956) 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 15: 27–35.
- Wesselinoff, C. (2024) 'Apophantic Beauty in the *Hippias Major* and the *Symposium*', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 82: 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpad063>.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958) *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Woodruff, P. (1982) *Plato: Hippias Major*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

—— (2022) ‘Finding Beauty in the Soul’, in K. Corcilus, K. and R.M. Irmgard (eds) *Tübinger Platon-Tage 2: Platon und das Schöne*, pp. 111–20. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.