

**‘We Don’t Need No (Foreign) Education’:  
Plato’s *Hippias Major* as a Critique of Spartan Law<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract:* After a long discussion in which the foreign sophist Hippias proves unable to define the beautiful, Plato’s *Hippias Major* ends with Socrates proclaiming he has benefitted from their conversation for he now understands the proverb ‘beautiful things are difficult.’ To make sense of this puzzling conclusion, I argue that we must connect Socrates’ claim to have ‘benefitted’ from conversing with Hippias to the dialogue’s opening discussion on why it would be ‘more beneficial’ for the Spartans to allow Hippias to educate them. Investigating this link, it becomes clear that the dialogue aims to critique the Spartan ban on foreign education.

At the conclusion of Plato’s *Hippias Major*, Socrates maintains he has benefitted from being abused on one side by the sophist Hippias and on the other by an imaginary third protagonist (later revealed to be Socrates himself), for he thinks he has learned the meaning of the proverb ‘beautiful things are difficult (χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ)’ (304e). Yet, given Hippias’ inability to identify what ‘the beautiful (τὸ καλόν)’ is during the conversation preceding this remark, most scholars struggle to see how Socrates could have learned anything from him.<sup>2</sup> At best, Socrates seems to have learned that the sophist’s method of disseminating knowledge through long

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Richard Avramenko, Susan Bickford, Susan Collins, and Shawn Welnak for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Paul Woodruff asks, ‘What good has Hippias been to Socrates, except to be the occasion for an amusing and instructive display of Socrates’ questioning?’ Plato, *Hippias Major*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, 1982), p. 89. It should be noted that the meaning of *to kalon* is a matter of dispute in the scholarly literature. Though most scholars translate it as the ‘beautiful,’ they disagree about whether it refers to utilitarian, aesthetic, or moral beauty, or all of the above; other scholars prefer to translate the term as ‘noble.’

speeches does not lead to wisdom.<sup>3</sup> Scholars miss the connection, however, between Socrates' claim to have 'benefitted (ὠφελῆσθαι)' (304e) from his conversation with Hippias and the dialogue's opening discussion on why it would be 'more beneficial (ὠφελιμώτερον)' for the Spartans to allow Hippias to educate their children (284e). Though scholars often treat the discussion of the Spartans as an insignificant prelude to the 'real' conversation on the beautiful, I argue that Plato's inclusion of this discussion helps to raise the question that Socrates' final line answers: Why should a city risk allowing in foreign teachers knowing they may turn out, like Hippias, to lack wisdom?<sup>4</sup>

If I am correct in interpreting Plato's *Hippias Major* as a critique of the Spartan ban on foreign education, then this reading poses a serious challenge to traditional interpretations of Platonic political thought as endorsing an exclusionary form of education. Within Platonic scholarship, three main arguments support the view that Plato promotes an isolationist approach to education in his dialogues and therefore likely approved of the Spartan ban on foreign

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<sup>3</sup> As Ivor Ludlam argues, 'Socrates *knows* that τὰ καλὰ are difficult, because the sophists and the Questioner are poles apart in their approach to the subject. This knowledge is the benefit Socrates has derived from talking to both parties. Of course, Socrates is not letting on how much he actually does know — what τὸ καλόν itself is, for example — but is merely emphasizing here that knowledge is benefit, and that such knowledge is gained not parrot-fashion from the lips of wise men, but through independent dialectic thought.' Ivor Ludlam, *Hippias Major: An Interpretation* (Stuttgart, 1991), p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, not all interpreters pass over the opening exchange between Socrates and Hippias. Christopher Bruell, for one, sees the dialogue as 'an investigation of nobility framed by a consideration of sophistry or a consideration of sophistry whose heart is an investigation of nobility — a consideration that, in part through its depiction of its own recourse to what at least looks like sophistry, explores the question of Socrates' connection or relation to sophistry.' Christopher Bruell, *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues* (Lanham, 1999), p. 76. Another notable exception is David Sweet's interpretation, which finds in the opening exchange an illumination of 'a possible conflict between the true and the beautiful.' David R. Sweet, 'Introduction to the *Greater Hippias*,' in *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Ithaca, 1987), p. 344. Both of these interpretations mention, but do not focus on, the role of foreignness in the dialogue's consideration of sophistry.

education. First, some make the simple argument that Plato demonstrates high regard for the laws of Sparta across his dialogues. For example, to support his assertion that Plato's Socrates 'probably approved of Sparta's restrictions on teaching,' Woodruff brings up the line in Plato's *Crito* where it is mentioned that Socrates always said Lacedaemon was well governed (52e).<sup>5</sup> Woodruff neglects the fact that Socrates does not say this directly, but rather speaks about himself in the third person through the voice of 'the Laws.' Consequently, this evidence is indecisive because it is unclear whether Socrates agrees with the Laws or, for that matter, whether Plato agrees.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, myriad dialogues draw on Spartan beliefs or practices in a way that would suggest Plato approves of certain aspects of Spartan life. Yet, the dialogues are also unmistakably critical of Spartan culture at numerous points. For instance, though the barrack life of the soldiers in Plato's *Republic* seems to be modelled after Spartan practice, the dialogue explicitly casts timocracies or honor-loving regimes—citing Lacedaemon as a key example—as second-best. Another dialogue, the *Laws*, explicitly and severely critiques the very purpose of the Spartan laws of winning victory in wars against foreigners. Hence, we cannot safely assume that Plato was a Laconophile and therefore supportive of bans on foreign education.

Second, some argue that Plato advocates the censorship of corrupting influences on the city, including educators. In his interpretation of *Hippias Major*, Woodruff makes this point with respect to *Euthyphro* 2c, where Socrates, speaking of one of his accusers, says, 'He seems likely

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<sup>5</sup> Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> As some commentators argue, it is possible Socrates does not wholly concur with the Laws, and merely uses them to voice a perspective that will convince the unphilosophic Crito to accept his decision not to flee execution. Among other pieces of evidence supporting the thesis that Socrates' own views diverge from that of the Laws, scholars cite the Laws' concern with life itself rather than living well, the Laws' belief that law-abidingness and not philosophy and virtue is a proper pursuit for Socrates, and the Laws' characterization of the citizen as a slave. See, *viz.*, Gary Young, 'Socrates and Obedience,' *Phronesis*, 19.1 (1974) pp. 1-29; and Roslyn Weiss, *Socrates Dissatisfied: An Analysis of Plato's Crito* (New York, 1998).

to be a wise man, who, perceiving my ignorance and how I am corrupting his peers, comes to the state to accuse me just as if to his mother.’<sup>7</sup> This, for Woodruff, shows that Socrates thought one should prevent corrupt teachers from teaching. Woodruff does not explain, however, how this line fits with Socrates’ admonition of his accusers in the *Apology* for taking him to court rather than dealing with him privately as the law commands (26a). While it may be in the *Apology* that Socrates is being ironic, the comparison of his accusers to boys—tattletales, at that—suggests a derisive tone to the statement in the *Euthyphro*. We cannot therefore take it at face value without additional evidence. A second piece of evidence that Woodruff cites is a line in the *Crito* where the Laws say to Socrates that if he flees to a well-governed city, such as Thebes or Megara, he will go as an enemy and destroyer of laws (53b). Again, Woodruff sees this as evidence that Socrates thinks a good city will keep out bad influences, but, as stated above, he fails to consider the interpretive problems with assuming Socrates’ voice and the voice of the Laws are one and the same, and that this voice is reflective of Plato’s own views. Difficulties also arise with Woodruff’s conclusion that, ‘Socrates does not object in the *Crito* or anywhere else to the principle on which he was condemned. He does not, apparently, believe in the freedom of speech.’<sup>8</sup> This claim clashes with Socrates’ propensity for brazenly challenging commonly held beliefs. Indeed, as Arlene Saxonhouse demonstrates, ‘Socrates is the great advocate of free speech—irreverent in his questioning of others and their ingrained beliefs.’<sup>9</sup> We should therefore also be careful about assuming that Socrates truly endorses the censorship practiced in the ‘beautiful city’ (*kallipolis*) of the *Republic*, given that the very act of constructing Kallipolis

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<sup>7</sup> All translations from the Greek are my own. Translated passages from *Hippias Major* were developed in consultation with the translation of W.R.M. Lamb, *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (Cambridge, 1925).

<sup>8</sup> Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Arlene Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (New York, 2006), p. 14.

depends on freedom of speech.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, even if Socrates does endorse shielding citizens from corrupt teachers, we should be careful about assuming that Socrates serves as Plato's mouthpiece.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in a related vein, someone might offer as evidence that Plato supports the Spartan practice of banning foreign education the largely unfavorable treatment of sophists throughout the corpus, particularly given the various derogative references to their foreignness (*e.g.*, *Euthydemus* 288a-b; *Lysis* 223a-b; and *Republic* 500b).<sup>12</sup> Yet, if Plato considers the sophists' influence so corrupting, why does he repeatedly depict Socrates interacting with them and bringing students to them? While some contend that he shows Socrates engaging in conversation with sophists so as to discredit their teaching methods and to reveal how to defend oneself from sophistry, this does not explain why in multiple dialogues, including *Hippias Major* and *Euthydemus*, Socrates insists it is beneficial to engage sophists or why, at times, he demonstrates respect for sophists such as Prodicus.<sup>13</sup> Resolving the contradiction by proclaiming statements in

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<sup>10</sup> David Roochnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's 'Republic'* (Ithaca, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> For extended discussion, see Gerald A. Press, ed., *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Plato's attacks on the sophists are so notorious that numerous scholars have attributed their bad reputation to him. See, for example, George Grote, *A History of Greece*, vol. VIII (London, 1850), p. 483; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, 1945), p. 225, n. 52; G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (New York, 1981); Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale, 1998); and Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia, 2003). As Christopher Tindale points out, Plato's treatment of the sophists is more nuanced than usually recognized. Yet, even he agrees Plato's response to the sophists 'is still largely negative.' See Christopher W. Tindale, *Reason's Dark Champions: Constructive Strategies of Sophistic Argument* (Columbia, 2010), pp. 10-11, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> For the argument that Plato seeks to discredit the sophist's teaching methods, see, *e.g.*, Thomas Chance, *Plato's Euthydemus: Analysis of What Is and Is Not Philosophy* (Berkeley, 1992), p. 206; Ann N. Michelini, 'Socrates Plays the Buffoon: Cautionary Protreptic in 'Euthydemus,'" *The American Journal of Philology*, 121.4 (2000) pp. 516-17; and Catherine Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago, 2009), p. 493.

favor of engagement with sophists to be instances of Socratic irony may be easy, but, as Socrates puts it at the end of *Hippias Major*, beautiful things are difficult. Careful reading demands that we give due consideration to the possibility that Socrates is serious before labeling a remark ironic. The general perception that Plato is hostile to sophists in myriad dialogues is therefore insufficient for proving that he wished them to be banned from Athens or even found it harmful to engage them.

Advocates of the position that Plato supports the Spartan ban on foreign education must further contend with various pieces of evidence that suggest Plato was *in favor of* foreign education. For instance, without exception, all of the philosophers who lead Plato's dialogues are either—from the Athenian viewpoint—foreigners (Parmenides, Timaeus, the Eleatic Stranger) or, to some extent, presented as such (Socrates and the Athenian Stranger). For proof that Socrates is on more than one occasion presented as a foreigner we need look no further than the *Apology*, where he asks the jury to sympathize with him just as if he were a foreigner (ξένος) being asked to speak in another dialect (17d-18a), or the *Phaedrus*, where he describes himself as a foreigner in need of a guide (ξεναγουμένω) (230c-d). There is also Socrates' paradigmatic expression 'by the dog,' which connects Socrates with the Egyptian god Anubis who, like Socrates, can discern the true nature of souls. Thus Jacques Derrida writes, 'Sometimes the foreigner is Socrates himself.'<sup>14</sup> The *Laws* goes so far as to recommend that foreigners be brought in to teach the children in all subjects, including music and gymnastics (804c-d). Moreover, in the *Cratylus*, the word σοφία (*sophia*) or 'wisdom' is said to be ξενικώτερον, 'of foreign

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (Stanford, 2000), p. 13.

origin' (412b).<sup>15</sup> Philosophy is even presented in dialogues such as the *Republic* as involving a kind of metaphorical travel away from one's native culture.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, one might note the tendency throughout Plato's dialogues to draw on the practices of other Greek cities as well as non-Greek cultures. Plato himself is said to have travelled in search of knowledge to Cyrene, Egypt, Italy, Sicily, and perhaps even farther east.<sup>17</sup> Finally, one cannot forget Socrates' claim in the *Apology* to question anyone he meets, 'both foreigner and citizen,' in his attempt to disprove the oracle's proclamation that no one is wiser than him (30a). If Plato is hostile to foreign education, how do we explain these frequent positive linkages between foreigners and philosophic education?

Given the complexity of Plato's dialogues and the enormity of evidence on both sides, this essay cannot hope to resolve once and for all the question of whether Plato supports or rejects foreign education. What I aim to accomplish, instead, is to advance the conversation by developing a reading of *Hippias Major* that makes sense of both the presentation of Hippias as someone not concerned with the welfare of the people in the many places in which he teaches, and Socrates' declaration at the end of the dialogue that he benefits from Hippias' abuse. Ultimately, I will argue that these two ideas can be reconciled without evoking Socratic irony.

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<sup>15</sup> To be sure, the attribution of words to foreign cultures often seems to function in the dialogue as a convenient escape from having to explain why the word is appropriate for the thing it describes. Nonetheless, many of Socrates' explanations for the names of things are such a stretch that it seems strange that with a word as central as 'wisdom' Plato would not take pains to have Socrates invent an explanation.

<sup>16</sup> See Andrea Nightingale, 'On Wandering and Wondering: 'Theôria' in Greek Philosophy and Culture,' *Arion*, 9.2 (2001) pp. 33-9; and Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago, 2005), esp. chap. 7.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent account of Plato's travels (and the problems with relying on the anecdotal record for information about Plato's life), see Alice Swift Riginos, *Platonica: The Anecdotes Concerning the Life and Writings of Plato*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1976), chap. VI-VII.

My argument is that though Hippias or other foreigners may have no wisdom to impart, it is beneficial for the Spartans to engage them in conversation as a means of testing their own wisdom and awakening their desire to learn. In other words, just as Spartans develop their martial prowess by facing physical pains and challenges, they must confront intellectual challenges if they wish to develop strong minds or souls. As the dialogue reveals, in seeking wisdom in isolation from others, the Spartans' educational approach resembles that of Hippias, making their knowledge as superficial as Hippias'. Instead, they should follow Socrates' example and seek out opportunities to learn from outsiders, for there is a greater risk that they will cling to their own false opinions than that they will be seduced into taking up the false opinions of foreigners.

This argument is developed as follows. First, I show how the opening conversation on the Spartans' prohibition of education serves to establish a central problem the dialogue explores: the role of foreigners in education. Next, I analyze the discussion of the beautiful, showing how it deepens readers' sense of sympathy with the Spartans by depicting Hippias as a pseudo-intellectual with a fear of learning. Finally, I turn to the puzzling last line of the dialogue, arguing that from it emerges a critique of Sparta's isolationist approach to education. The essay concludes by briefly reflecting on the beauty of the *Hippias Major* as a foreign text.

### **I. Hippias in Sparta: Harmless Entertainer or Cunning Ambassador?**

Though commentators often focus on the discussion of the beautiful that occupies the major portion of *Hippias Major*, this discussion does not commence until 286c—almost a quarter of the way into the dialogue. Assuming Plato practices the concept of logographic necessity expressed later in the *Phaedrus*, readers should regard such a lengthy preface to the discussion of

the beautiful as significant to the meaning of the whole.<sup>18</sup> In what follows, I will argue that Socrates' initial exchanges with Hippias serve to direct the careful reader's attention to the question of the role of foreigners in education. By highlighting Hippias' weaknesses as a teacher—specifically, the potential perils that arise because he is a *foreign* teacher—the dialogue leaves readers wondering if the Spartan prohibition against foreign education might in fact be wise. Later we will see that the dialogue ultimately answers this in the negative by demonstrating that Socrates himself benefits from engaging the sophist Hippias. However, it is through the prelude to the discussion of the beautiful that we discover why the role of foreigners in education is an issue worth investigating.

Plato highlights Hippias' relationship to foreign cities from the beginning of the dialogue. For, upon seeing him, Socrates remarks that it has been a long time since Hippias has been in Athens, to which Hippias responds that he has been busy conducting business as an envoy for his native city, Elis. Such business has taken him 'most often and concerning the most numerous and important matters to Lacedaemon' (281b). Though the dramatic date of *Hippias Major* cannot be precisely determined, the fact that Elis was allied with Sparta both before and after the Peace of Nicias suggests that the dialogue is set in the interim, between 421 and 416.<sup>19</sup> Otherwise, Hippias' presence in Athens would be unlikely due to the war. It would make sense though during the Peace of Nicias, when Elis temporarily formed an alliance with Athens and Argos due to Sparta's failure to support the Eleans' claims against Lepreum, a city that used the

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<sup>18</sup> Socrates introduces the idea of logographic necessity at *Phaedrus* 264b. It was Leo Strauss who first made a compelling case for interpreting Plato's dialogues according to the principle of logographic necessity. See, *viz.*, Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1960), p. 29; Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, p. 94; and Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis, 2002), p. 313.

Peloponnesian War as an excuse to stop paying them tribute. Hippias' remark that he has 'just lately (ἔναγχος)' gained a reputation in Sparta suggests that the dialogue takes place near the beginning of the Peace of Nicias (286a). Accordingly, Hippias could be part of the diplomatic mission that negotiated the treaty with Athens in 421.

As the conversation unfolds, Hippias' frequent visits to Sparta prove strange for three reasons. First, as Socrates soon establishes, Hippias is not one to conduct public affairs unless some personal benefit—namely, money—is involved. This comes to light when Socrates praises Hippias for being able 'to manage public along with private affairs' (282b). According to Socrates, while ancient sages such as Pittacus, Bias, Thales and Anaxagoras were found to 'refrain from civic affairs (πολιτικῶν πράξεων),' men such as Hippias, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Protagoras travel to other states as envoys and, while there, receive a great deal of money from the city by giving private displays of their wisdom (281d-282c). This difference between the wise men of old and their present-day counterparts suggests to Hippias that the art of wisdom has progressed, as it now encompasses more realms of activity (281d). Yet, more than this, the wisdom of present-day wise men is shown through their recognition of the value of money. As Hippias attests, there are untold 'beauties (τῶν καλῶν)' to the current practice of making money while on official state business (282d). He himself made so much money on one trip that when he brought it home and gave it to his father, 'he and the other citizens marveled at this and were amazed' (282e). Given Hippias' express criticism of the ancients for not taking advantage of state affairs for personal gain, it is strange to discover that the Spartans—whom he has visited most often—have not paid Hippias anything. By Hippias' own logic, this is either evidence of his lack of wisdom or there is something he is not divulging to Socrates about his trips to Sparta—perhaps that he expects to receive some other benefit from them.

A second oddity of Hippias' visits to Sparta involves the subject of his lectures there. The Spartans, Hippias admits, do not permit him to lecture on any of the subjects in which he specializes, including astronomy, geometry, logic, letters, and harmony. Rather, for their sake, he has been forced to learn by heart 'the genealogies of heroes and men, and of the settlements, as the cities were founded in ancient times, and, in sum, about antiquity' (285d). Though Hippias insists his memory is up to the task, his exchange with Socrates about the ancients' lack of wisdom reveals a major shortcoming in his performance as a history teacher. For, contrary to Socrates' suggestion that the ancients refrained from state affairs, all of the ancient sages he mentions were actually *distinguished* for their involvement in public affairs.<sup>20</sup> In the mind of the typical ancient Greek reader, professing that the likes of Pittacus, Bias, Thales, and Anaxagoras refrained from state affairs would probably produce a similar effect to someone today telling an American that George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln all refrained from state affairs. Socrates' description of the ancients is, in short, outrageously inaccurate. In failing to correct Socrates, Hippias comes across as ignorant of the subject in which he claims expertise. Yet, the truth is far worse, for the dialogue makes clear that Hippias is aware that the true distinction between himself and the ancients lies, as Socrates puts it, in the fact that 'none of those ancients ever thought to exact money as payment nor to make exhibitions of his wisdom among all sorts of people' (282c-d). By assenting to this statement, which establishes that what the ancients refrained from was personal profit, Hippias reveals his moral

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<sup>20</sup> Pittacus, Bias, and Thales were among the 'Seven Sages,' a title given to seven early sixth century B.C. philosophers, statesmen and lawgivers renowned for their wisdom. Various ancient accounts attest to the political involvement of these sages. Pittacus ruled Mytilene for ten years, Bias is spoken of for his statesmanship and legal assistance, and Thales was a political leader of the Ionians. The only person cited who was not one of the Seven Sages is Anaxagoras, a philosopher who was put on trial for impiety though in all likelihood the trial was directed at Anaxagoras' close friend Pericles, the prominent Athenian statesman and general.

ineptitude as a teacher. For, rather than correct Socrates on his mistaken view that the ancients refrained from public affairs, Hippias remains silent because Socrates' inaccurate portrayal of the ancients paints a flattering picture of Hippias himself. As Woodruff puts it, Hippias wants to advance his reputation so desperately that he is willing 'to proceed as if this absurdity were true, rather than to refuse Socrates' praise.'<sup>21</sup> It seems odd that the Spartans—whose lives revolve around heroic actions and time-honored battles—would be so unconcerned with historical truth as to allow such a vain person to lecture on ancient history.

As the dialogue soon reveals, Hippias' frequent visits to Sparta are strange for another, more obvious reason: foreign education is unlawful there. This comes to the fore when Socrates begins questioning Hippias about his lack of monetary success in Sparta. Together, he and Socrates determine that it was not owing to Hippias' lack of ability in teaching virtue, the Spartan's lack of desire to become virtuous, the Spartans' lack of money to pay him, or the Spartans' superior ability to teach their own children. The cause, as Hippias concludes, is that 'it is not the inherited custom of the Lacedaemonians to change their laws, nor to educate their children contrary to custom [...] it is not lawful to bring them up with a foreign education (ξενικήν παιδείουσιν)' (284b-c).<sup>22</sup> If it were lawful for them to pay foreigners to teach, Hippias is

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<sup>21</sup> Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, p. 37. Jacques Duvoisin makes a similar point regarding Socrates' remark that Bias would be a laughing-stock in comparison to Hippias, just as Daedalus would look ridiculous in comparison to modern sculptors if he were born in the same era (281d-282a). Again, the praise is based on a ridiculous notion—here, that the talents of real, known sculptors could ever measure up to those of a mythological character. Thus, Duvoisin concludes, the opening scene establishes '...Hippias' willingness to accept any praise, no matter what absurdity it may entail. He is not deterred by the historical inaccuracies concerning the ancient wise men, or even the apparent categorical anomaly involved in comparing a legendary figure to actual historical individuals.' Jacques Antoine Duvoisin, 'The Rhetoric of Authenticity in Plato's *Hippias Major*,' *Arethusa*, 29.3 (1996) p. 369.

<sup>22</sup> According to Plutarch, the Spartans learned how to read and write, but 'practiced *xenelasia* (ξενηλασίαν) towards other subjects, *xenelasia* no more of men than of ideas (λόγων).' Plutarch, *Instituta Laconica*, 237a.

confident he would have earned by far the most money, given how they applaud when hearing him speak (284c). This leads one to wonder, is it not inconsistent with their laws that they allow Hippias to speak at all? Socrates offers one possible explanation: the Spartans make use of Hippias ‘just as children make use of old women to tell stories pleasingly (τὸ ἡδέως μυθολογῆσαι)’ (286a). The image of an old woman amidst a community of manly Spartans, or even their hardy children and wives, conveys a sense of harmlessness. From the Spartan perspective, or so Socrates supposes, Hippias offers a pleasant form of entertainment. In their eyes, he is not an educator, but merely an enjoyable teller of tales.

The idea that storytellers are not educators is wildly out of harmony, however, with Socrates’ insistence in the *Republic* that the stories we hear as children tend to play a formative role in molding our character.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, anyone who tells stories to children can exert a significant influence on that society. For this reason, Socrates and his interlocutors conclude that the guardians of the ideal city, Kallipolis, must pay special attention to the kinds of stories told to citizens, for myths help to habituate citizens towards a certain way of viewing the world. Indeed, this is a central function of myth, which, as Luc Brisson writes, ‘always evokes a recollection preserved in the memory of an entire community, which has orally transmitted it from generation to generation, over a long period of time.’<sup>24</sup> Hippias’ role as a storyteller is thus not as innocuous as it might seem from Socrates’ comparison of him to an old woman. As Ludlam argues, Hippias does in fact teach something to the Spartans. However, whereas Ludlam concludes from this that ‘[w]hat is unlawful in Sparta [...] is not foreign education—in which Hippias indulges—but

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<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 376e-377b.

<sup>24</sup> Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, trans. and ed. G. Naddaf, paperback ed. (Chicago, 2000), p. 17.

payment for such education,’ this is not clear from the text.<sup>25</sup> Rather, Socrates’ comparison of Hippias to an old woman suggests that the Spartans simply may not regard him as an educator even though—as the understanding of the power of myth developed in other Platonic dialogues suggests—he actually is.

Moreover, Hippias’ own report of the stories he tells betrays his role not as a harmless storyteller, but as an educator. According to Hippias, he has ‘just lately gained reputation there by expounding on beautiful pursuits, declaring those which a young man should pursue’ (286a). The discourse he has arranged on this subject takes the form of a story, set after the fall of Troy, wherein the young Neoptolemus asks the elderly Nestor what the noble and beautiful pursuits are through which a young man can become famous. The story is of Hippias’ invention, for no such scene exists in Greek myth. The Spartans thus grant him more artistic latitude than would the rulers of Kallipolis, augmenting the possibility that Hippias will introduce novel ideas into their society. Though the fluid nature of oral storytelling itself allows narrators significant artistic liberty, the fact that Hippias is not bound to any specific plot points or well known exchanges between the characters increases the likelihood that Nestor can serve as a mouthpiece for communicating his own ideas about beautiful pursuits. Hippias’ lectures on antiquity thus offer him a perfect guise for conveying certain teachings.

When one considers Hippias’ choice of characters, it seems likely that he does treat mythological characters as a cover for expressing his own views. As Kathryn Morgan argues, if Hippias wanted to construct a story in which youth learns from age, myriad other mythological characters present themselves as more obvious choices than Neoptolemus and Nestor. Indeed, Neoptolemus figures as an unlikely character, for at the end of the Trojan War he mercilessly

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<sup>25</sup> Ludlam, *Hippias Major*, p. 32.

executes the Trojan king Priam, who had taken refuge at the altar of Zeus. Hence, at the dramatic date of Hippias' story, just after the fall of Troy, Neoptolemus would have sacrilegiously-shed blood on his hands, making him an unpromising pupil. Yet, perhaps this serves to underscore the value of the sophist's teaching: 'Neoptolemos is an unusual pupil, but there may be an implication that Hippias education can tame even the intransigent, or at least reconfigure them publicly.'<sup>26</sup> Such a message may be thought especially well suited for the Spartans, whose way of life revolves around violence and bloodshed. Son of the famed warrior Achilles, Neoptolemos reenacts the rage of his father through his killing of Priam, reminding of the tendency for war heroes to overstep their bounds. Coincidentally, just as his father found himself embroiled in conflict over a woman, so Neoptolemos is later killed owing to a conflict over a woman—the Spartan princess Hermione, daughter of Menelaus and Helen (the woman whose face launched a thousand ships). These connections between Neoptolemos and the Spartans suggest the choice of character is deliberate. Hippias wishes to position himself as the wise Nestor, there to educate the uncontrolled Spartans.

Considering the dialogue's likely dramatic context near the beginning of the Peace of Nicias, it seems plausible that Hippias is willing to tell these stories for free because he anticipates that, through his lectures, he might persuade the Spartans to assist the Eleans in forcing the citizens of Lepreum to resume their tribute. In other words, Hippias' motive may still be to make money with which to awe his father and fellow citizens. Perhaps, having been unsuccessful at convincing the elders of Spartan society to do Elis' bidding, Hippias has turned

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<sup>26</sup> Kathryn A. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 110.

to their children in hopes of persuading them to overthrow their fathers' rule.<sup>27</sup> Though this conclusion is only speculative, by calling attention from the beginning of the dialogue to Hippias' activities on behalf of Elis and to his drive for personal profit, Plato nonetheless plants suspicions in the reader's mind regarding Hippias' intentions.

Whether the Spartans are deliberately or unconsciously unlawful in allowing Hippias to educate them on noble or beautiful pursuits, these revelations about Hippias imply that the Spartan law itself may be well founded. That is, the opening of the dialogue depicts Hippias as a prime example of a foreigner who presents himself as interested in performing a valuable service in one's community, but who is really concerned only with his private interests and, insofar as they overlap with his own, those of his native city. This lends powerful justification to the Spartan prohibition on foreign education, if not as practiced then at least as an ideal. Though Hippias may have something valuable to teach the Spartans, it is equally possible that he has an agenda to advance, one that will serve the interests of his native city and potentially harm Sparta. Why should the Spartans take such a serious risk, especially when their own teachings have served them well for generations? In sum, by presenting Hippias as a conceited foreigner with dubious reasons for being in Sparta, the prelude primes readers to question the wisdom of Athens' more liberal policy towards the sophists. As the next section will show, the Spartan law forbidding foreign education seems even more prudent once Socrates actually begins conversing with Hippias about the beautiful. For, through this conversation, it becomes clear that Hippias not only lacks an understanding of the beautiful, but, even more problematically, tends to settle on easy answers rather than undergo the pain of learning.

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<sup>27</sup> For further evidence that Hippias wishes to present himself to the Spartans as a surrogate father, see Duvoisin, 'The Rhetoric of Authenticity.'

## II. Hippias' Approach to Education

In Hippias and Socrates' discussion of the beautiful, Socrates takes on the role of a man who recently threw him into confusion by asking a series of pesky questions about his understanding of the beautiful. He says he hopes to learn from the wise Hippias how to refute this man (henceforth the 'third protagonist'). As later becomes evident, the third protagonist is none other than Socrates himself.<sup>28</sup> For some scholars, the presence of an imaginary speaker indicates the dialogue's spuriousness.<sup>29</sup> Others have argued, however, that the technique is neither unusual nor unfitting. Grube, for instance, points out that similar characters appear in other genuine works of Plato: 'Such a person is introduced when for the sake of politeness (as here and in the *Gorgias*), friendship (*Crito*), or modesty (*Symposium*), Socrates does not like to state his

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<sup>28</sup> This is revealed at 298b-c when Hippias inquires about the man's identity and Socrates replies that the man is 'The son of Sophroniscus, who would no more entrust me to speak carelessly about uninvestigated things than to say that I know what I do not know.'

<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Tarrant, 'The Authorship of the Hippias Major,' *The Classical Journal*, 21.2 (1927) pp. 82-7. Doubts over the dialogue's authenticity were voiced as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the pinnacle of the debate was reached in a series of exchanges in the 1920s between Tarrant, who argued for the spuriousness of the dialogue, and G.M.A. Grube, who defended its authenticity. See Dorothy Tarrant, 'On the Hippias Major,' *Journal of Philology*, 35 (1920) pp. 319-31; G.M.A. Grube, 'On the Authenticity of the Hippias Major,' *The Classical Quarterly*, 20.3/4 (1926) pp. 134-48; Dorothy Tarrant, 'The Authorship of the Hippias Major,' *The Classical Quarterly* 21.2 (1927) pp. 82-7; Dorothy Tarrant, *The Hippias Major* (Cambridge, 1928); and G.M.A. Grube, 'The Logic and Language of the Hippias Major,' *Classical Philology*, 24.4 (1929) pp. 369-75. More recently, several scholars have argued in support of the dialogue's authenticity. See, e.g., M. Soreth, *Der platonische Dialog Hippias major* (Munich, 1953); John Malcolm, 'On the Place of the Hippias Major in the Development of Plato's Thought,' *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 50 (1968) pp. 189-95; W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1975); and Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, which provides a good summary of the authenticity debate. The most recent challenge to the dialogue's authenticity has been made by Charles Kahn, 'The Beautiful and the Genuine,' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 3 (1985) pp. 261-87.

objections bluntly.’<sup>30</sup> Zuckert offers another possibility: given that Socrates has seen that Hippias will not contradict him even when he is wrong, he knows that to incite the sophist to argue with him he must invent an absentee enemy.<sup>31</sup> Along similar lines, Bruell proposes that Socrates ‘has recourse to a device that enables him to take upon himself the brunt of the criticism, in place of Hippias, while or by attributing responsibility for it to a nameless individual whom he invents for the purpose and who takes his own place, as something like another Socrates.’<sup>32</sup> Whatever his motivation, Socrates does not challenge Hippias directly. Rather, he presents himself as a student hoping to learn from Hippias how to defeat an opponent in argument. Significantly, the third protagonist refers to Hippias as ‘stranger (ξένε)’ (287d) or ‘stranger from Elis (ξένε Ἠλείε)’ (287c, 292e). Could it be, then, that the third protagonist represents some part of Socrates that shares or, at least, pretends to share the Spartans’ wariness of foreign education? In any case, Socrates plays to Hippias’ ego, effectively goading him into demonstrating his superior wisdom—an act which should serve to clarify why it would be more beneficial for the Spartans to allow him to educate their children.

Unfortunately, from the beginning Hippias fails to appreciate either the difficulty or the value of understanding the beautiful. This is seen early on when Socrates entreats Hippias to share his knowledge of the beautiful, remarking, ‘For you doubtless know clearly, and this would doubtless be but a small example of the many things you know’ (286e). To this, Hippias responds, ‘Small indeed, by Zeus, Socrates, and practically worth nothing’ (286e). A bit later, he repeats this assessment of the beautiful, maintaining that ‘the question is no great matter, but

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<sup>30</sup> Grube, ‘On the Authenticity,’ pp. 136-37. Also see Seth Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato’s Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman* (Chicago, 1984), p. xxiv.

<sup>31</sup> Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*, p. 260.

<sup>32</sup> Bruell, *On the Socratic Education*, p. 79.

much harder ones than this I could teach you, so that no human being could confute you' (287b). As we see from the way Hippias refers to the question of the beautiful as 'small,' 'worth nothing,' and 'no great matter,' not only is he confident in his ability to identify the beautiful in such a way that no one can pose legitimate challenges to his definition, but he also treats the beautiful as something not really worth knowing, the subject simply of pleasant speeches.

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Hippias' confidence stems from his tendency to settle on easy, superficially pleasing answers rather than to seek the actual truth. Asked to define the beautiful, Hippias, claiming he will 'never be confuted,' avers, 'a beautiful maiden is beautiful' (287e). The third protagonist responds that it can be said of many things that they are beautiful—of mares, of lyres, even of pots—but knowing *what is beautiful* does not tell us *what the beautiful is*. He attempts to prove this by eliciting Hippias' agreement that just as a beautiful pot is ugly in comparison to a mare or a maiden, a beautiful maiden is ugly in comparison to a god. The problem, we see here, involves the discovery of that which is always beautiful, no matter the circumstances. As the third protagonist explains, what they seek is 'the beautiful itself, by which all other things are adorned and made to appear beautiful, when its form (ἐκείνο τὸ εἶδος) is added to them' (289d).<sup>33</sup>

Despite this challenge to his method of defining the beautiful, Hippias proceeds in the same vein with his next two definitions. First, he tries defining the beautiful as gold. The third

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<sup>33</sup> I take this line as the clearest evidence of a theory of the Forms in *Hippias Major*. For more on the theory of the Forms in *Hippias Major*, see John Malcolm, 'On the Place of the Hippias Major in the Development of Plato's Thought,' *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 50.3 (1968) pp. 189-95; Paul Woodruff, 'Socrates and Ontology: The Evidence of the 'Hippias Major,'' *Phronesis*, 23.2 (1978) pp. 101-17; Michael L. Morgan, 'The Continuity Theory of Reality in Plato's Hippias Major,' *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 21.2 (1983) pp. 133-58; and David Wolfsdorf, 'Hippias Major' 301b2-c2: Plato's Critique of a Corporeal Conception of Forms and of the Form-Participant Relation,' *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science*, 39.3 (2006) pp. 221-56.

protagonist responds, again, by showing that Hippias' definition does not hold absolutely. After all, if gold is what makes something beautiful, then we must call Pheidias a bad sculptor, for he made Athena's eyes, face, hands, and feet not out of gold, but out of ivory (290b).<sup>34</sup> Similarly, he argues, a ladle of fig wood would be more appropriate than a ladle of gold because it would make the soup smell better and would not break the pot. Convinced, Hippias offers another definition of the beautiful, this time prefacing it by expressing why he thinks his first two definitions of the beautiful did not hold up to the third protagonist's scrutiny. As he explains, 'You seem to me to be seeking to reply that the beautiful is something such as this, that which will never appear ugly anywhere to anyone' (291d). According to Socrates, now Hippias 'understand[s] beautifully (καλῶς)' (291d). Hippias continues, 'I say, then, that for every man and everywhere it is most beautiful to be rich, healthy, and honored by the Greeks (ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων), to reach old age, and, to finish with beautifully burying one's parents, and by one's own offspring being beautifully and magnificently honored with funeral rites.' (291d-e). The beautiful, in short, is a long life of wealth and honor, honor from *the Greeks*.<sup>35</sup> Hearing this definition, Socrates exclaims, 'Bravo, bravo, Hippias, how wonderfully (θαυμασίως) and greatly (μεγαλείως) and worthily (ἀξίως) of you have you spoken' (291e). He does not say he has spoken beautifully.

As if to remind the reader that Hippias' ideas on the noble and beautiful pursuits are normally presented through the voice of Nestor speaking to Achilles' son Neoptolemus, the third protagonist critiques this third definition by asking if, for Achilles, it was beautiful to be buried

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<sup>34</sup> Pheidias was an Athenian sculptor famous for his work in bronze, ivory, and gold, and for the marble statues of the Parthenon.

<sup>35</sup> I emphasize 'the Greeks' because this in itself indicates why Hippias' third definition of the beautiful does not succeed. Like the previous definitions, it does not apply universally, but only to a select group of people.

later than his parents. As any Greek would know, Achilles died during the war, *before* his parents died. Yet, this was precisely what made him a hero in the Greeks' eyes. For the Homeric hero does not run away from battle, even if that would ensure he lives a long life. Instead, he faces battle bravely, sacrificing his life if necessary. For Achilles to bury his parents rather than to die before them would have been extremely disgraceful in the eyes of the ancient Greeks, as it would imply that he ran away from battle. The Spartans especially would find this abhorrent, not beautiful. After all, it is said that Spartan mothers would tell their sons to 'come back with your shield or on it.'<sup>36</sup> For his part, Hippias takes the third protagonist's suggestion as an affront to religion. As he cries out, 'What's that? Go to Hades! They are not reverent, Socrates, these man's questions.' (293a). Hippias' notions of the beautiful are far from universal; they are not even shared by all the Greeks.

Maintaining that sometimes the third protagonist takes pity on him and offers definitions of his own, Socrates now proposes that they consider whether the beautiful is the appropriate (293e).<sup>37</sup> This definition arguably arises from Hippias' first three definitions, as each item (a maiden, gold, and a long life and splendid funeral) is beautiful in the appropriate context. Articulated now as itself a definition of the beautiful, the appropriate is taken by Hippias to refer to one's exterior, as indicated by his comment that the appropriate clothes or shoes can make someone look more beautiful (294a). This leads Socrates to argue that if the appropriate makes someone appear more beautiful than they really are, then the appropriate 'would be a deceit with respect to the beautiful, and would not be that which we are seeking' (294a). What they are looking for is what *is* in truth beautiful, not what merely *appears* or *seems* beautiful. If the

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<sup>36</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 241.

<sup>37</sup> Curiously, this is the only definition provided in the name of the third protagonist. Hippias provides the first three, while Socrates, in his own voice, provides the last three.

appropriate makes something in its essence beautiful but does not confer beauty on its exterior, then, says Socrates, it would be the sort of beautiful they are looking for—one that is not a deceit—but it would challenge Hippias’ understanding of the appropriate as that which makes something not only be, but also appear beautiful (294d-e). Hippias insists the appropriate makes things *appear* beautiful, so he and Socrates reject the definition of the beautiful as the appropriate.

Despite having now rejected four definitions of the beautiful, Hippias continues to insist that the beautiful is easy. This is seen when Socrates expresses hope that they will still find an answer, to which Hippias replies, ‘Assuredly, Socrates, for it is not hard to find. Now I well know that, if I should go away for a small time into solitude meditating upon it by myself, I could more precisely tell it to you with absolute accuracy’ (295a). Socrates, in turn, remarks that when Hippias is by himself he will of course easily find the beautiful, but he, on the other hand, needs Hippias to stay and help him find it. Yet, as we have seen, Hippias would only find the beautiful easily because he would not find it at all. Rather, he would settle on an easy answer, one that would not hold up to further scrutiny.

Even the ease with which Hippias *rejects* definitions of the beautiful testifies to his unwillingness to do the difficult work of thinking.<sup>38</sup> Let us return for a moment to the fourth definition of the beautiful as the appropriate. Notice that Socrates leaves unexamined what the appropriate really is, and thus leaves open the possibility that it is the beautiful.<sup>39</sup> Is Hippias

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<sup>38</sup> Ironically, the remainder of this section draws substantially on Hoerber and Kyne’s insights into the problems with Socrates’ logic when he challenges the definitions of the beautiful he and the third protagonist put forth. Robert George Hoerber and Estella Kyne, ‘Plato’s Hippias Major,’ *The Classical Journal*, 50.4 (1955) pp. 183-6.

<sup>39</sup> This is an instance of the sixth kind of Socratic irony that Charles Griswold identifies in his essay on irony in Plato’s dialogues: ‘A sixth kind of Socratic irony, evident in many dialogues, occurs when Socrates remains silent about a definition or concept which would significantly

correct in saying the appropriate is what makes things *appear* beautiful? Or is it possible that the appropriate could make things *be* beautiful but not *appear* beautiful? If the latter, then, as Socrates insinuates at 294d-e, the appropriate might be the definition they are seeking. Hence, even though Socrates and Hippias reject the fourth definition of the beautiful, Plato invites readers to carry on the investigation rather than simply letting Hippias' understanding of the appropriate decide the matter. One might say he deliberately makes it difficult for readers to settle on an easy answer or an easy rejection of an answer. In any case, it does not take a lot to see that Hippias gives up on definitions of the beautiful as quickly as he articulates them in the first place.

The same occurs when Socrates offers the fifth definition of the beautiful (now voicing directly, rather than through the third protagonist, all the definitions that follow). Recognizing that beautiful eyes are beautiful because they can see, he suggests that the beautiful is the useful. As he puts it, 'we call the useful beautiful—beautiful in the way in which it is useful, and towards that for which it is useful, and at the time when it is useful' (295d-e). Socrates, we might note, qualifies this definition of the beautiful with phrases such as 'in the way in which,' 'towards that for which,' and 'at the time when.' This language foreshadows what Socrates and Hippias soon realize is wrong with simply saying the beautiful is the useful; the beautiful is the useful, but only when something is useful in the appropriate way, for the appropriate reason, and at the appropriate time. It seems that the last definition of the beautiful—the appropriate—has not completely dropped out of the picture.<sup>40</sup>

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contribute to the success of the dialogue.' Charles L. Griswold, Jr., 'Irony in the Platonic Dialogues,' *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2002) pp. 92-3.

<sup>40</sup> As Bruell notes, 'in turning to this suggestion, Socrates did not so much step outside of the sphere of 'the fitting' as move to another domain within it.' Bruell, *On the Socratic Education*, p. 86.

To uncover the errors with the fifth definition of the beautiful, Socrates enlists Hippias' agreement that for something to be useful it must also be powerful, for we must have the power or capability of doing something to be useful. Consequently, 'power, then, is beautiful, and want of power is ugly' (295e). The example that immediately springs to Hippias' mind is political power: 'in political affairs (τοῖς πολιτικοῖς) and in one's own city to be powerful is the most beautiful of all things, but to be powerless is the ugliest of all things' (296a). This leads Socrates to inquire about whether or not wisdom, for the same reason, is the most beautiful of all things, and ignorance the most disgraceful. Essentially, he wants to know if wisdom is the most beautiful of all things because of its utility, that is, because it allows us to be powerful. As he soon admits, he finds this suggestion terrifying (296a). The reason for Socrates' terror, he reveals, is that power can in fact be used for bad. Thus, to praise wisdom for its utility in helping us become powerful is dangerous, for one might use that power in bad ways. The only way out of the problem is to claim instead that the beautiful is the useful for good. Yet, as Socrates notes, 'Then this assertion, that the powerful and useful are beautiful absolutely, is undone...' (296d).

Revising their definition of the beautiful to incorporate the missing ethical aspect, Socrates now proffers a sixth definition of the beautiful: the beneficial. He goes on to argue, however, that if the beautiful produces the good, then the beautiful is therefore the cause of the good and the good is the product of the beautiful. Because cause and effect are never the same, however, the beautiful could not be good and the good could not be beautiful. Yet, to conclude that the beautiful is not good and the good is not beautiful strikes one as absurd. Accordingly, the beautiful cannot be defined as the beneficial, or that which produces the good.

Though not apparent to Hippias, Socrates' logic here is faulty.<sup>41</sup> Just because the beautiful and the good are not identical does not mean each does not have the other as an attribute. In other words, 'Beauty may be a good thing and the good may be a beautiful thing without implying that each term is identical in essence.'<sup>42</sup> The confusion results because Socrates moves from the premise that the beautiful is not the good, where he is equating one noun with another, to the conclusion that the beautiful is not good, where 'good' is an adjective modifying the noun 'the beautiful.' Hence, just as with the definition of the beautiful as the appropriate, Socrates leaves open the question of whether we can throw out the beautiful as beneficial, which incorporates the beautiful as useful. Again, Hippias fails to pick up on this. Without so much as expressing a vague intuition that they may be too easily throwing out the proposed definition, he proclaims that it seems to be wrong and that he is sure to find the correct definition after meditating on it (297d-e).

There is one more supposed dead end to travel down, however. This is the seventh definition of the beautiful as 'that which is pleasing through hearing and sight' (298a). This definition raises an objection right away. As Socrates points out, we call customs and laws beautiful yet their beauty does not seem to come from hearing or sight (298b). Setting aside this objection, Socrates establishes that the pleasures made possible by sight alone, those made possible by hearing alone, and those made possible by both hearing and sight are all pleasurable because they have 'something identical which makes them be beautiful, this common thing, which belongs to both of them in common and to each individually; for doubtless otherwise they would not both collectively and each individually be beautiful' (300a-b). To understand this

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<sup>41</sup> The use of fallacies is the fifth kind of Socratic irony Griswold catalogues. Griswold, 'Irony,' p. 92.

<sup>42</sup> Hoerber and Kyne, 'Plato's Hippias Major,' p. 185.

better, we might think about television. There is a certain pleasure that comes from watching television with the sound off, a certain pleasure that comes from listening to a show without watching it, and finally a certain pleasure that comes from both watching and listening to a show at the same time. What we need to find, according to Socrates, is the characteristic that makes all these things pleasurable—watching with no sound, hearing with no picture, and watching with sound.

Hippias initially assumes that whatever characteristics any two objects have in common they also possess individually (300e-301a). Thus, if two people are tall or courageous or just individually, they must be tall or courageous or just collectively, and vice versa. Hippias fails to see the logical fallacy here. Just because I am just by myself and you are just by yourself that does not mean that when we get together we are going to act justly. Socrates tries to make this same point using a mathematical example: by myself I am one and odd, and you by yourself are one and odd, but together we are two and even. It is an error to assume that the characteristics belonging to a pleasure produced by both sound and hearing are the same as pleasure produced by sound alone or sight alone. What needs to be determined are what characteristics the pleasures of the eyes and the ears have separately as well as in common.

As Socrates next uncovers, it cannot be that they are both pleasures, because there are other pleasures such as eating that we do not want to call beautiful. Nor can it be that they are pleasures that come through the eyes and the ears, for this would not apply to each of these pleasures taken separately; that is, we see beautiful objects through our eyes alone, not through our eyes and ears, while we hear a beautiful sound through our ears alone, not through our eyes and ears. Socrates therefore dismisses the definition of the beautiful as what is pleasing through sight and hearing because the phrase ‘through sight and hearing’ would not account for pleasures

produced by sight alone or by hearing alone. Yet, perhaps the difficulty is resolved when we change the phrase to ‘sight or hearing.’ Once again, by placing bad arguments in Socrates’ mouth, Plato invites readers to take up for themselves the task of discovering the beautiful. In so doing, he further exhibits Hippias’ tendency to flee from complex thinking.

Given that Hippias has shown himself to be not only unknowledgeable about the beautiful but averse to deep thinking in general, one might expect Plato to end the dialogue with some kind of explicit confirmation that the Spartans were ultimately right not to allow sophists like Hippias to teach in their community. One would certainly not expect the dialogue to end with Socrates proclaiming that he has *benefitted* from his conversation with Hippias. How can we make sense of this puzzling ending? Has Socrates truly benefitted from the exchange, or is this merely another example of Socratic irony? The next section offers a plausible account of the benefit Socrates has received from conversing with Hippias. That benefit involves challenging one of his most dearly held beliefs: the goodness of the philosophic way of life.

### **III. The Benefits of Foreign Education**

*Hippias Major* ends with Hippias inquiring, in a manner reminiscent of Callicles’ condemnation of philosophy in the *Gorgias*, about the usefulness of their conversation:

But now, Socrates, what do you think this all amounts to? It is mere scrapings and trimmings of speeches, the very exact thing I said, divided into short bits; but that is beautiful and of great worth, that ability of arranging a speech well and beautifully in a court of justice or in a council chamber or in some other office, before which the discourse may be delivered, persuading the audience and going off carrying not the smallest but the greatest of prizes, the preservation of oneself, one’s property, and one’s

friends. To these things therefore it is necessary to cling, and to rejoice at renouncing these logic-chopping arguments, in order that one does not seem to be exceedingly foolish, just like now, in dealing with futile nonsense. (304a-b)

Hippias thinks these dialectical investigations amount to nothing because, first of all, they are aesthetically unpleasing. Rather than one long, continuous stream of words, dialectic involves an exchange of generally concise questions and answers. Moreover, such discussion often proceeds in fits and starts, as interlocutors run into dead ends and have to back track. This can make the conversation choppy or difficult to piece together. In addition to finding these investigations aesthetically ugly, Hippias also finds them worthless because they provide no conclusive answers; rather, they leave us in a state of *aporia* or perplexity, unlike a speech, which usually tries to persuade us to accept a particular answer. Consequently, Hippias believes that dialectic cannot secure victory for us when important things, such as one's life, property, and friends, are on the line, and thus it is of little value.<sup>43</sup>

To all this, Socrates responds that whenever he practices dialectic he is rebuked by men like Hippias who say he busies himself with silly little matters of no account. Yet, whenever he tells this to the third protagonist, he in turn yells at Socrates, asking him how he can possibly judge which speeches, or which things at all, are beautiful without knowing what the beautiful is. 'So it has come about,' Socrates concludes, 'that I hear myself abused and reproached by you all, and abused by this man. But perhaps it is necessary to endure all this, for nothing is out of place if only I am benefitted (ὠφελοίμην). So now it seems to me, Hippias, that I have benefitted

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<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that all of Hippias' criticisms seem to apply to *Hippias Major* as a whole: 'The conspicuous incoherence of the *Hippias Major* is enhanced by its absurdity, which, again according to Hippias, signifies its ugliness, for he believes that the laughable and the ugly are equivalent, while the beautiful, like the sacred, is laughter proof and cannot be debunked...' Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*, p. xx.

(ὠφελῆσθαι) from association with both of you; for the proverb that sometimes is said, ‘beautiful things are difficult,’ I seem to myself to know’ (304e).

Socrates’ proclamation that he has benefitted from conversing with Hippias comes as such a surprise given what has transpired that many interpreters assume he is being ironic. Yet, what if we remember that, near the beginning of their conversation, Socrates raised the question of why it would be ‘more beneficial (ὠφελιμώτερον)’ for the Spartans to allow Hippias to educate their children (284e)? By speaking of benefits (using the same root word), the final line seems to provide an answer to this question. It draws us back, in other words, to the dialogue’s opening discussion on the Spartan prohibition of foreign education. Appropriately for the laconic Spartans, the lesson Socrates thinks he has learned from engaging with Hippias comes in the form of a pithy proverb. To understand Socrates’ meaning, then, perhaps we should study his exchange with Hippias within the context of what we have been told about the Spartans and their isolationist approach to education.

Keeping the Spartans in mind while reflecting on Hippias and Socrates’ discussion, a significant parallel comes to light: it becomes clear that the Spartans actually resemble Hippias in terms of their approach to wisdom. Namely, both think that in isolation from others they will arrive at all the important truths. We see this from Hippias at multiple points in the conversation. Each time Socrates challenges his understanding of the beautiful, he retreats to the belief that if only he could meditate on the question alone, then he would easily discover the answer. He is right in one sense: by himself, he will easily discover an answer. His interaction with Socrates demonstrates, however, that his answer will likely be wrong or, at least, poorly understood. What does it mean, then, that, like Hippias, the Spartans prefer to seek wisdom amongst themselves rather than in the company of foreigners? Zuckert’s assessment of Hippias seems equally

applicable to the Spartans. As she puts it, the sophist ‘imagines himself to be all knowing and hence self-sufficient ... because he does not recognize the way differences of opinion, particularly about what is important in human life, raise questions about the underlying unity or intelligibility of the whole. He does not, therefore, seek to test his own opinions or to learn from others in philosophical conversations.’<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the Spartans revere their traditional wisdom so much that they fail to recognize the value in testing their opinions by engaging outsiders in philosophic inquiry. They do not think they can learn anything from foreigners and, as such, their educational approach parallels that of Hippias though on a collective, as opposed to an individual, level.

Interestingly, in Plato’s *Protagoras*, Socrates directly compares the Spartans to sophists. This occurs during Socrates’ interpretation of a Simonides’ poem. Seeking to show that Simonides sought to overthrow Pittacus’ saying that ‘it is hard to be good,’ Socrates explains that in the age of the Seven Sages, ancient philosophy took the form of ‘laconic’ maxims such as ‘Nothing overmuch’ and ‘Know Thyself’ (343a-b). He attributes this to the influence of Spartan culture on the Seven Sages, professing that ‘philosophy (φιλοσοφία) is most ancient and most widespread among the Greeks in Crete and Lacedaemon, and there are the most sophists (σοφισταὶ) on earth there; but they deny it and make pretense of being ignorant, so that it will not be apparent that they are superior among the Greeks on account of their wisdom’ (342a-b).<sup>45</sup> Just like the sophists of old whom Protagoras described as so fearful of inciting jealousies and enmities in the various cities to which they travelled that they often took pains to disguise their activities, the Spartans use athletics as a cover (316d). Consequently, their followers in other

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<sup>44</sup> Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*, p. 268.

<sup>45</sup> The mention of the Seven Sages connects this passage to *Hippias Major*, which was likely written earlier than the *Protagoras*.

cities imitate their gymnastic exercises and clothing, without realizing the true cause of their dominance: philosophy. To protect their secret, the Spartans practice *xenelasia* (ξενηλασία) or the expulsion of foreigners, while forbidding their young from travelling abroad so that they will not unlearn what they have been taught at home (342c-d). The Spartan prohibition against foreign education is thus the product of Spartan sophistry, which is used to safeguard Spartan philosophy.

The image of Spartans as philosopher–sophists is incongruent with the lengthy efforts to delineate the differences between philosophers and sophists in other dialogues, namely, the *Republic* and the *Sophist*. Hence, many interpreters agree, Socrates seems to be mocking Protagoras' example of Iccus of Tarentum using athletics as a cover for his sophistic activities (316d). To this, one might add that in the only dialogue featuring a Spartan interlocutor, Plato's *Laws*, the lead character, an Athenian Stranger, encourages his Spartan and Cretan interlocutors to jettison their traditional policy of *xenelasia* when constructing the new colony of Magnesia, arguing that 'not to receive others or to go abroad is at once not altogether possible, and would appear savage and hard to the other human beings, to whom they will seem to be adopting the harsh words of so-called alien expulsion (ξενηλασία), as well as stubborn and harsh manners' (950a-b). He proceeds to explain how each of the four types of foreigners—seasonal inhabitants, tourists, business people, and knowledge seekers—should be received and what policies should pertain to each. In particular, he stresses the benefits of allowing in the fourth type, from whom they may be able to learn something and to teach something to in return, departing as friends. The Stranger concludes by reiterating his disdain for *xenelasia*: 'These are the laws it is necessary to have regarding the reception of all male and female strangers from another country and the sending out of their own, honoring Zeus god of strangers (ξένιον Δία), and not using

meats and sacrifices for the expulsion of strangers (ξενηλασί(α)ς), just as now the nurslings of the Nile do, nor savage proclamations' (953e). The implication is that philosophy, if not impossible to conduct solely amongst one's own people, is at least benefitted by conversation with foreigners. The Spartans may thus resemble sophists like Hippias in thinking that wisdom is best gained by reflecting in isolation from others, but they are not philosophers; if they were, they would acknowledge the value of conversation with foreigners.

*Hippias Major* shows us why true philosophers will be open to conversations with foreigners. As Socrates makes explicit, he benefits from going out and engaging with a foreigner such as Hippias, and then going 'home to [his] own house' where he encounters the third protagonist, 'a near family member' who 'lives in the same house' (304d). Though it seems that his 'own' family is right to question the lesson Socrates has learned from Hippias and other foreigners—that it is best to be able to produce beautiful speeches and thereby to achieve victory in law courts and the assembly—Socrates indicates that the experience of being questioned, on the other side, by Hippias and his ilk is also valuable. Judging by Hippias' example, we can infer that, without that questioning, Socrates would risk taking the easy route of settling on the answer nearest and dearest to him. That is, he would assume, like the third protagonist does, that a life spent engaged in perpetual philosophic investigation is superior to a life spent studying how to convince others to give one great rewards and not to inflict harm on oneself or one's own. Interacting with foreign sophists like Hippias forces Socrates to approach philosophy philosophically—that is, to question the value of philosophy itself. In true dramatic irony, engaging with outsiders induces Socrates to think and to test himself, *i.e.* to engage in philosophy. The final three words of the dialogue—'I seem to myself to know' (δοκῶ μοι

εἰδέναι)—recalls the search for self-knowledge, suggesting Socrates has learned who he is really is (a lover of wisdom) by exposing himself to the sophist's Siren song.

Exposure to foreign sophists serves, in other words, as a test of Socrates' ability to withstand intellectual pains, with the pseudo-intellectualism of Hippias functioning as a temptation to give up the life of inquiry.<sup>46</sup> The exercise resembles the way Spartans test their ability to withstand physical pains by exposing themselves to difficult conditions.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, the Spartans do not apply to their minds or souls the same practice to which they submit their bodies. By saying he has learned the meaning of the proverb 'beautiful things are difficult,' Socrates can thus be understood as trying to convey that true wisdom comes not from following Hippias' example of thinking one can find the answers on one's own, but rather from facing the difficult realization that often we need others—whether they possess or lack knowledge—to help spark our desire to truly learn. It would therefore be more beneficial for the Spartans to allow Hippias to teach in their community. As Socrates' example shows, this interaction need not lead to one's original beliefs being overthrown; in fact, it can strengthen them. On the other hand, if one is in a state of ignorance, one might benefit by learning something.

## Conclusion

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<sup>46</sup> This is similar to how, in the *Republic*, the final test before one can become a philosopher-king is to go back into the cave, during which time the candidate will be tested to see if they stand firm or are drawn in every direction (539e-540a).

<sup>47</sup> It is more similar, however, to the Athenian Stranger's recommendation in the *Laws* that the Spartans test their courage not only by exposing themselves to pains and fears, but also to pleasures that might tempt them away from exhibiting courage (634a-635d).

Though the *Hippias Major* is usually regarded primarily as an exploration of the definition of the beautiful, I have argued that the dialogue also devotes itself to exploring another important question: why engaging foreigners is epistemologically beneficial. By contrasting Hippias' approach to education with Socrates', the dialogue reveals why a city like Sparta should not forbid foreign education. In brief, foreign education is beneficial because, without it, citizens are more likely to settle on inadequate notions of the truth and less likely to give real thought to the opinions they hold. The citizens of a place like Sparta, which practices an isolationist form of education, are therefore more likely to inhabit a state of ignorance. It is to avoid such a condition that Socrates submits himself to a foreign education.

Of course, as Plato's portrait of Hippias shows, it may sometimes be the case that foreigners are unwise and trying to manipulate us for their own gain. Plato sympathizes with these concerns. He does not present foreigners in an idealistic light, as always on the side of the good. Plato shows awareness of the human condition and a willingness to recognize the potential for good and bad in people of all cultures. Nonetheless, even while acknowledging that some foreign teachers, such as Hippias, will travel to a place like Sparta with their own agenda to advance and no great wisdom to share, Plato illuminates a powerful reason for welcoming them. The pursuit of wisdom, he shows, is worth the risk of handing over victory in battle to foreigners. As the third protagonist asks of Socrates, when you do not even know what the beautiful is, 'do you think it is better for you to be alive than to be dead?' (304e) It is this conclusion above all that makes Plato's *Hippias Major* so foreign to both ancient and modern ways of thinking and, hence, a most difficult text.