Being Good at Being Bad

Plato's Hippias Minor

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2022

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The label "virtue ethics" usually serves to contrast Aristotle's approach to ethical theory with Kantian deontology or Mill-inspired consequentialism, but it would be more accurate to describe Aristotelian ethics as an ethics of "virtue-activation." For Aristotle's view is that (inner) virtue is for the sake of a further thing, namely, (outer) activity in accordance with virtue. The philosopher who valorizes the state of virtue as an end in itself is not Aristotle but Socrates; those looking to understand why he places virtue above virtuous activity should turn to the Hippias Minor.

The Hippias Minor is a short, neglected, strange dialogue; it is about the connection between being able to do something well, and being able to do it badly. In it, Socrates argues that the expert in any domain is also the person who has the power to (deliberately) go wrong in that domain. So, for instance, the expert archer can best ensure that her arrow misses the target; the novice archer, who might accidentally hit the target she's trying to miss, is not as good at being bad. Likewise, claims Socrates, the expert in justice is the only person who can, if he likes, make sure that he does something unjust. Socrates draws the shocking conclusion that if anyone deliberately does what is unjust, it's the just person.

Socrates uses the shock value of such a claim to redirect our attention from outward manifestations of success and failure – how someone behaves – to the inner source of that behavior. Socrates makes the case that the proper object of approbation and disapprobation is not the action but inner power underwriting both deliberate conformity to and deliberate deviation from the norm in question. The value of justice lies not in the just (or unjust!) things just people do, but in the power they have.

The Hippias Minor articulates the conception of power underwriting the distinctively Socratic approach to ethics: one that bottoms out in the value of the virtue one has, rather than the use to which one puts it.

I. Flouting and Flubbing

Even given its short length, the Hippias Minor is, at the level of argumentation, surprisingly simple. It proceeds by way of two waves of argumentation, the first at 365c–373b and the second at 373c–376b, each of which argues in roughly the same way for roughly the same conclusion. I will proceed in the order of the dialogue, discussing each wave; before doing so, however, let me explain the distinction that is central to the dialogue.

Over the course of the dialogue, Socrates and Hippias discuss a wide variety of opposed pairs: the truthful man and the liar, the fast runner and the slow runner, the strong man and the weak man, the archer who hits the target and the one who misses the target, the horse that one rides badly and the horse that one rides well, eyes that see well and eyes that see badly and finally, the just man and the unjust man. Socrates argues that these "opposites" are unified: it is the same man who speaks the truth and lies, the same man who hits and who misses the target. Or rather, it is the same man

who willingly does both actions, because willingly doing something badly presupposes the ability to do it well.

Socrates calls on us to distinguish between two ways of violating the norms of a given activity. The person who lacks mastery with respect to the activity errs by, as I will call it, flubbing the activity. He doesn't control whether he breaks or follows the rule. Consider the norms associated with archery or race-running: hit the target, run fast. The flubber is the one who misses the target because he cannot keep his hand steady, or who runs slowly because he has a lame foot. When the person with mastery violates the norms of the activity, I will say she flouts them. The expert wrestler might lose a match on purpose to conserve energy; the Olympic runner might run slowly on purpose in order to allow his friend to win.

We can contrast intentionally/purposefully/willingly erring and accidentally/unintentionally/unwillingly erring in any domain; and this is exactly how Socrates draws the contrast in cases of running, wrestling, vision etc. But there are domains in which we do not need to introduce terminology to mark the distinction, because we already have the conceptual and linguistic resources to acknowledge the distinctiveness of the flouted activity, or the flubbed one. Examples of the former are losing at a sport because one "throws" the match, cheating at a game, breaking the law as an act of civil disobedience, and the phenomena of disobedience or rebellion more generally. Examples of the latter: negligence (as in a legal context), fumbling the ball (in a sports game), malfunctions, glitches, lapses, mistakes.

The basic principle to which Socrates wishes to secure Hippias' agreement throughout the dialogue is one that I will call flouting over flubbing:

> Those who flout some norm are better in relation to what is governed by that norm than those who flub it.

The first wave of the Hippias Minor discusses flouting over flubbing in the restricted domain of norms governing speech; the second wave covers any norm-governed activity, object, or condition. Both waves conclude by specifying that flouting over flubbing holds for moral norms as well as for nonmoral ones: the person who flouts the norms of justice (by intentionally speaking or acting in the most unjust way) is better with respect to justice than the one whose injustice is only accidental. This conclusion is sensational, and scholars have tried to resist it by faulting Socrates' argumentation: they accuse the first argument of trading on a verbal equivocation, and the second of an illicit employment of the craft analogy. I will defend Socrates on both fronts.

II. The First Wave: Lying vs. Speaking Falsely (365c–373b)

The aim of speaking truly is internal to the practice of speaking, which is why it is appropriate to correct someone who says something false. Successful speech is

truthful speech. But there is a very important difference between violating the norm of truthfulness accidentally, and violating it with the knowledge that what one is saying is false. Socrates' opening argument uses the distinction between flouting and flubbing to distinguish the mathematical falsehoods uttered by a mathematical expert such as Hippias from those uttered by an ignorant person:

> T1: Don't you think the ignorant person would often involuntarily tell the truth when he wished to say falsehoods, if it so happened (ei tuchoi), because he didn't know; whereas you, the wise person, if you should wish to lie, would always consistently lie? (367a2–5)

Those without mastery succeed, when they do succeed, by mere chance (ei tuchoi), and fail, when they do fail, by the same chance. If I say something true by chance, then I am also the kind of person whom chance leads to say false things. Likewise, if I had the mastery to speak falsely about math it follows that I had the mastery to speak truly.

In English, lying is one of those cases where the distinction between flouting and flubbing is built in to our terminology: we use "lie" for the case of flouting the norm of truthfulness; when we want to describe someone violating that norm unintentionally, by accident, without any intent to deceive, we say that they "made a mistake" or "misspoke" or "said something false." Greek does not, however, have two different words for "lie" and "speak falsely": in T1, "falsehood" and "lie" are translations of the same Greek word, pseu- desthai. This creates a problem for Socrates' argument. The problem is not, of course, that Greek speakers lacked the conceptual distinction between lying and merely speaking falsely – that distinction is evident in the passage below:

> T2: HIPPIAS: When Achilles says false things (pseudetai), he's portrayed as doing so not on purpose but involuntarily, forced to stay and help by the misfortune of the army. But the lies of Odysseus (pseudetai) are voluntary and on purpose. (370e5–9)

The linguistic mismatch between Greek and English creates a little bit of awkwardness here, since if Hippias had the word "lie," he wouldn't have had to add the qualifications "voluntary and on purpose." Nonetheless, one virtue of translating the second pseudetai as "lies" is that it makes clear what Hippias is doing, namely, grounding the moral difference between Achilles and Odysseus on our familiar distinction between saying false things and lying. Greek speakers, like English speakers, have ample reasons to draw a conceptual distinction between lies and mere falsehoods.

The worry is not that Socrates and Hippias are unable to distinguish lying from truthtelling due to the fact that they are using only one word, the worry is that that word allows Socrates to slip from the unmoralized case of speaking falsely to the moralized case of lying. In T2, Hippias wants to contrast the case of Achilles

and Odysseus, on the one hand, with the mathematical case described above. Hippias granted the mathematical superiority of the flouter, but he wants to assert the moral superiority of the flubber. Hippias wants to insist that precisely because Achilles merely flubs the rule of truth-telling, whereas Odysseus flouts it, Achilles is morally superior to Odysseus. Socrates responds by insisting that the mathematical and moral cases are parallel:

> T3: SOCRATES : Then it seems that Odysseus is better than Achilles after all.
>
> HIPPIAS : Not at all, surely, Socrates.
>
> SOCRATES : Why not? Didn't it emerge just now that the voluntary liars are better than the involuntary ones?
>
> HIPPIAS : But Socrates, how could those who are voluntarily unjust, and are voluntary and purposeful evil-doers, be better than those who act that way involuntarily? For these people, there seems to be much lenience, when they act unjustly without knowing, or lie, or do some other evil. The laws, too, are surely much harsher toward those who do evil and lie voluntarily than toward those who do so involuntarily. 371e4–372a5

When he compares the voluntary lies of Odysseus to voluntary injustice, Hippias is moved to recognize the distinctiveness of the category of intentional false speech that is immoral. He finds himself a moral context in which the claims he had been moved to agree on in the mathematical domain no longer seem true. He feels the tables have been turned on him, and this is difficult to convey in translation: while it is natural, in Greek, to set aside ethics and ask whether the person who speaks mathematical falsehoods is (mathematically) superior, in English "lies" is automatically moral, and the corresponding question –"is the person who lies about math better or worse?" – might prompt a response clarifying two senses of "better than."

It is not that the word "lie" must signify immoral false speech. For we are able, e.g., to ask a question such as "Are all lies immoral?" But such a use in English requires us to explicitly cancel the negative moral association. In Greek, the situation is reversed.[1] Because the base meaning of the word is false speech, the negative moral assessment must be explicitly attached. Thus it is not surprising that when he granted the superiority of the one who "lies" about math, Hippias allowed the context to present the word pseudesthai in a way that raised no moral questions, and was strictly about mathematical ability. In T3, by contrast, Hippias wants to promote Achilles' unintentional and moral false speech over Odysseus' intentional and immoral false speech. Hippias would not be wrong to protest that he agreed to the superiority of flouters on the assumption that moral norms were not under discussion. He has good grounds to resist extending his conclusion from the mathematical case to the moral one.

[1] See Vlastos 1991: 276, and n. 130.

Many commentators have, consequently, charged Socrates' argument against the superiority of Achilles with equivocation.[2] Panos Dimas has defended Socrates by insisting that he uses "liar" in an exclusively nonmoral sense: "Socrates is not interested in, and, most importantly, not addressing Hippias' moral assessment of these Homeric characters ... he is concerned with the descriptive aspect of the proposition that someone is truthful or untruthful" (2014: 109). But it is clear, surely even to Socrates, that Hippias does attach a moral sense to the *pseudesthai* of Odysseus in T3; if Socrates means to use *pseudesthai* only in a nonmoral sense, he is speaking, at best, misleadingly. Nor can we take the opposite path from Dimas, and insist that Socrates uses *pseudesthai* in a moral sense throughout. For the geometrical example is not naturally heard as a reference to the superiority of clever but evil geometers over decent but stupid ones.

In fact, it seems clear that Socrates holds both the moral and nonmoral position: mathematicians who say false things intentionally are mathematically superior to those who do so unintentionally; and, in addition, people who lie intentionally are morally superior to those who accidentally say what is false. The worry is, does he exploit the flexibility of Greek to use the plausibility of the former claim to secure Hippias' agreement to the latter?

If the dialogue had ended with the first wave, it might indeed have been fair to accuse Socrates of subterfuge in sliding between the nonmoral and the moral case. But as it stands, the exchange in T2–3 exposes a difference that needs to be further explored, and Socrates goes on to do precisely that: the distinction between moral and nonmoral cases of flouting is the central topic of the rest of the dialogue. In the second half of the dialogue, Socrates makes absolutely explicit the fact that he takes the rule that goes for the nonmoral cases to also apply to the moral ones. What might have been an equivocation if the dialogue had ended halfway is vindicated by Socrates' upcoming argument for a principled assimilation of the two kinds of cases.

III. The Second Wave: Moral vs. Nonmoral Flouting

Let us, then, turn to some of the examples featured in the second wave (373c and following) of argumentation in the Hippias Minor:

> Which one is the better runner, then: the one who runs slowly voluntarily, or the one who does so involuntarily? (373d5–6)
>
> So also in wrestling, one who voluntarily has worthless and shameful accomplishments is a better wrestler than one who has them involuntarily. (374a1–2)

[2] See Sprague 1962: 65–70; Hoerber 1962: 127; Mulhern 1968. See also Weiss' (1981) defense of Socrates against these various charges, with special emphasis on Mulhern.

> Isn't the physically better person able to accomplish both sorts of things: the strong and the weak, the shameful and the fine? So whenever he accomplishes worthless physical results, the one who is physically better does them voluntarily, whereas the one who is worse does them involuntarily? (374a7–b3)
>
> What about gracefulness, Hippias? Doesn't the better body strike shameful and worthless poses voluntarily, and the worse body involuntarily? (374b5–7)
>
> So then one statement embraces them all, ears, nose, mouth and all the senses: those that involuntarily accomplish bad results aren't worth having because they're worthless, whereas those that do so voluntarily are worth having because they're good. (374d8–e2)
>
> Is it better to possess a horse with such a soul that one could ride it badly voluntarily, or involuntarily? (375a3–5)

In these passages Socrates tries to establish that the point he made in the first wave – with reference to various forms of mathematical and scientific knowledge – is, in fact, a general point about flouting and flubbing. Those who have the power to act well in some domain don't flub the rule. In fact, insofar as they have the power, they cannot flub it. They can pretend to flub it, using their mastery to act exactly as one would act without it, but their pretend flubbing is real flouting. The flouter cannot violate the norm in a way that would indicate a defect in his capacity to obey the norm. It follows that if I criticize someone for a norm violation, I must be criticizing him for flubbing rather than flouting that norm.[3] For flouting of the norm is a sign of excellence in respect of that very norm. So, for instance, if I criticize someone who runs slowly on purpose, I do not criticize him in terms of his power of running, but rather in terms of getting his priorities straight, or being a good friend. I criticize him for flubbing norms of competition or friendship, not for flouting norms of running. This line of reasoning leads to a shocking conclusion when Socrates extends his argument from these explicitly nonmoral cases to the explicitly moral case of justice and injustice:

1) So the more powerful and better soul, when it does injustice, will do injustice voluntarily, and the worthless soul involuntarily? (376a6–7)

2) Therefore, it's up to the good man to do injustice voluntarily, and the bad man to do it involuntarily. (376b2–4)

3) So the one who voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias – that is, if there is such a person – would be no other than the good man. (376b4–6)

Hippias and Socrates both recoil at the conclusion that associates voluntary injustice with goodness. And yet, this conclusion does seem to follow by analogy with the

[3] Note that the culpably negligent person flubs norms of appropriate caretaking. Someone who knowingly decides not to take appropriate care is guilty of more than negligence.

other cases: real injustice – violating the principles of justice by flouting and not mere flubbing – is the province of the one who has mastered justice. In the ethical domain, flouting over flubbing entails the disturbing conclusion that one who is being (fully, perfectly) unjust is the just person.

The remainder of this chapter constitutes an attempt to grapple with this conclusion. In section IV, I offer a brief overview of how the shocking conclusion has been read by other scholars. The general strategy has been to soften the claims of the Hippias Minor by interpreting them in the light of commitments drawn from other dialogues. I argue that this approach puts the attention in the wrong place: if we allocate the argumentative work elsewhere, we miss out on the dialogue's distinctive contribution.

My methodology is the opposite, in that I think the arguments at the core of the Hippias Minor are poised to shed light on the places where flouting over flubbing can be found outside the Hippias Minor (I present those texts in section V). In section VI I explain what I take to be the Hippias Minor's distinctive argumentative contribution: instead of seeing (1)–(3) as the product of a craft analogy articulated more explicitly elsewhere, I show that the Hippias Minor contains an original argument for the existence of a craft analogy, an argument that gives power pride of place in Socratic virtue ethics. In section VII I offer some considerations to temper our shock at (1)–(3). In section VIII I consider Socratic virtue ethics from an Aristotelian point of view.

IV. Immoralism in the Hippias Minor?

The apparent immoralism of (1)–(3) is so shocking, that, as Paul Friedländer once noted, these statements would long ago have relegated the dialogue to apocryphal status were it not for Aristotle's testimony (1964: 146).

Attention to the precise wording of (2) reveals an escape valve. That sentence is in fact a conditional, one whose antecedent ("if there is such a person") Socrates elsewhere claims to be necessarily false. Thus Taylor:

> On reflection we see that the key to Plato's meaning is really supplied by one clause in the proposition which emerges as the conclusion of the matter: "the man who does wrong on purpose, if there is such a person, is the good man." The insinuation plainly is that there really is no such person as "the man who does wrong on purpose," and that the paradox does not arise simply because there is no such person. In other words, we have to understand the Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge, and the Socratic use of the analogy of the "arts," in the light of the other well-known Socratic dictum, repeated by Plato on his own account in the Laws, that "all wrong-doing is involuntary." It is this, and not the formulated inference

> that the man who does wrong on purpose is the good man, which is the real conclusion to which Plato is conducting us.[4]

Most interpreters follow Taylor in understanding the phrase "if there is such a person" as away of squaring the claim in the Hippias Minor with Socrates' many famous assertions that no one does wrong willingly.[5] Jones and Sharma offer one way to fill out the details of Taylor's rescue strategy: they read the Hippias Minor through the lens of an "interest" thesis that they find in other dialogues (2017: 130–3). Having noted that one would choose to violate a norm of an activity such as archery only because one takes doing so to promote one's interests, they then assert that Socrates holds that injustice never promotes a person's interests.

It is true that if there are no voluntary wrongdoers, this softens (1)–(3): the claim that voluntary wrongdoers are good, or better than involuntary wrongdoers, stops sounding like a paean to wickedness. But it is nonetheless hard to follow Taylor in reading "no one does wrong willingly" as the "real conclusion" of the Hippias Minor.[6] The subject of the Hippias Minor is not the willingness of wrongdoing or the advantageousness of justice, but rather the power to misbehave.

The Hippias Minor is filled with examples of rule-breakers: people intentionally giving the wrong answer to a math problem, running slowly on purpose, choosing to fall down while wrestling, shooting an arrow with the goal of missing the target, etc. Socrates' method of argumentation in the Hippias Minor suggests that he thinks those cases shed some light on the case of the just man – that the just man, too, has a kind of power to be unjust, even if, as Socrates will argue elsewhere, he won't use it. The thesis that no one does wrong willingly is, at best, gestured at in the Hippias Minor. We can invoke it to contextualize the shocking conclusion of that dialogue, but it neither supplants the conclusion nor does it entirely remove its sting. Even if Socrates is not actually claiming that good men do evil, the claim he is making – that good men (alone) are equipped or empowered or enabled to do evil – is difficult enough. Why does Socrates think this?

The standard answer, found in the quote from Taylor above, as well as in more recent work, is to take (1)–(3) as dividends of the craft analogy.[7] Most commentators take Socrates to presuppose that justice is a kind of craft, which opens up the following mode of argument: survey a number of crafts, find that they all have some property, inductively infer that all crafts have that property, then, given that justice is analogous to craft, conclude that justice has that property as well. The Hippias Minor would

[4] Taylor 1937: 37 (emphasis original).

[5] This way of taking the conditional is widespread. See Kahn 1996: 117; Shorey 1933: 471 (Shorey observes with evident relief at the escape clause: "Plato never forgets himself"); Hoerber 1962: fn. 2; Sprague 1962: 76; Irwin 1995a: 69; Penner 1973a: 140. Shorey and Hoerber both point us to helpful parallels at Grg. 480e and Euphr. 7d. See also Cri. 47d1–2 (cited in Weiss 2006).

[6] Gould (1955: 42), criticizing Taylor: "There is more in the dialogue than a rather labored joke."

[7] Jones and Sharma 2017: 123–8, and Penner 1973a: 136, Irwin 1995a: 69, Weiss 2006: 120–47.

derive flouting over flubbing from the cases of archery, wrestling, etc., and then apply it to the case of justice. But this interpretation of the argument of the dialogue makes it mysterious why Socrates does not, instead, run modus tollens and conclude that he has discovered the limits of the analogy between craft and morality.[8] Indeed, one commentator, reading the dialogue ironically, concludes that this is what is happening beneath the surface.[9]

I will argue that the argument of the Hippias Minor does not so much exploit the craft analogy as underwrite it. Before doing so, I want to examine a few places where flouting over flubbing shows up outside the Hippias Minor.

V. Two Instances of Flouting Over Flubbing Outside Hippias Minor

Consider Socrates' argument against Polemarchus' definition of justice in Republic I. Polemarchus says that the just man benefits his friends and harms his enemies.[10] Socrates points out that each craft allows one to benefit and harm in some area:

> SOCRATES : And who is most capable of treating friends well and enemies badly in matters of disease and health?
>
> POLEMARCHUS : A doctor.
>
> SOCRATES : And who can do so best in a storm at sea?
>
> POLEMARCHUS : A ship's captain. (332d10–e2)

Every craft can produce opposites, because the craftsman is the one who knows how to produce the distinctive kind of damage that is proper to the kind of benefit he also knows how to produce. A doctor can produce both health and sickness. After they identify the just man's particular province of benefit as the guarding of money, Socrates concludes: "If a just person is clever at guarding money, therefore, he must also be clever at stealing it ... A just person has turned out then, it seems, to be a kind of thief" (334a7–10). Here the conclusion is a kind of reductio – unlike in the Hippias Minor, Socrates seems to think that ascribing evil to the just person is absurd. Does this indicate that Plato is rejecting the argument of the Hippias Minor?

Many have thought that Plato uses Rep. II–X to expose the faulty reasoning characteristic of early Socratic dialogues. Reeve (1988: 22–4), for example, takes Rep. I to

[8] Jones and Sharma's rescue strategy makes this question especially difficult to answer. For the interest principle (2017: 130–3) on the basis of which they secure just action for the just man relies, as they acknowledge, on a disanalogy between morality and craft.

[9] Weiss 2006: 142–7.

[10] Note that Polemarchus' claim (332d) is that the just man actually harms, not that he merely has the ability to do so.

expose a "crippling defect in the craft analogy."[11] One might run this rejection of the craft analogy against the argument of the Hippias Minor as well: justice is not like archery, or running, or medicine, or navigation. Perhaps in those cases, intentional rule-breaking is a mark of mastery, but in the case of justice, intentional rule-breaking is a mark of lack of mastery.

Below, I will make the case that the argument of the Hippias Minor does not, in fact, work by presupposing the craft analogy. Even if it did, however, it would be important to distinguish Plato's perspective on Socratic argumentation from the line of thought contained in that argumentation itself. On the face of it, Rep. I has internal resources for explaining the error that has produced the conclusion that the just man is a thief. The problem is not that the craft analogy is invalid but that Polemarchus' definition of justice is wrong. Socrates thinks that justice cannot entail harming one's enemies because the just man never harms anyone (Rep. 335e1–5). Some have claimed, for this reason, that Hippias Minor and Rep. I line up perfectly: the just man has a power, the ability to harm, that he won't ever use.[12]

Even if the two dialogues can be reconciled in this way, I will argue that there is something to be gained from emphasizing the sharp rhetorical differences. In the Hippias Minor Socrates seems to embrace the possibility that the just man could be a thief, whereas in Rep. I he seems to view that as patently absurd. In the Hippias Minor, Plato doesn't have Socrates deny that just men harm, and this omission seems intentional – he seems to be flaunting the counterintuitiveness of saying that the just man does injustice.

Next, consider this exchange from the Crito:

> T4: CRITO : Your present situation makes clear that the majority can inflict not the least but pretty well the greatest evils if one is slandered among them.
>
> SOCRATES : Would that the majority could inflict the greatest evils (ta megista kaka ergazesthai), for they would then be capable of the greatest good, and that would be fine, but now they cannot do either. They cannot make a man either wise or foolish, but they inflict things haphazardly (hoti an tucho¯ si). (44d1–10)

As in the Hippias Minor, Socrates connects the power to act well in a masterful (as opposed to haphazard) way with the power to inflict the greatest evils. This passage is important, because Plato represents Socrates espousing the connection between these two powers casually, as an established belief, rather than as a tentative (and suspect) conclusion. It is true that the Crito, like the Republic, seems to assert something weaker

[11] See also Shorey 1903: fn. 38, Shorey 1933: 89–90, Gould 1955: 43, Hoerber 1962: 131, Reeve 1988: 22–4. Shorey, like Irwin (1995a: 71–2), reads Aristotle's critique of the H. Mi. as emblematic of the failure of the craft analogy.

[12] Jones and Sharma 2017: 133–5, Penner 1973a: 136–8.

than the Hippias Minor, since only the latter traffics in actual floutings of morality. Nonetheless, some commitment to flouting over flubbing underlies all three passages.

The dominant interpretative strategy with reference to the problematic "immoralism" of the Hippias Minor has been to try to use statements outside the dialogue to soften its counterintuitive conclusions. I believe we will learn more from the dialogue by doing just the opposite: using it to shed light on a fundamental Socratic commitment – flouting over flubbing – that appears outside of but is nowhere so precisely articulated as within the Hippias Minor.

VI. Socrates on Powers

Both the defenders and the skeptics of the argument in the Hippias Minor tend to see its conclusions as a product of the craft analogy. But notice, first, that the argument of the Crito passage (T4) does not rely on any claims about craft. Socrates seems to expect Crito to find it intuitively plausible that flouting entails expertise.[13] Furthermore, Socrates' methodology in the Hippias Minor suggests that he is not employing a craft analogy. For Socrates argues for flouting over flubbing by way of many activities or states that are not crafts: the practice of truth-telling (366aff.), having good eyesight (374d2–5), having good tools (374e3–6), possessing healthy horses or dogs (375a1–7), owning slaves with good souls (375c3–6). Even if some of these (e.g., the quality of one's tools) play a role in the practice of some craft, Socrates does not emphasize that fact. He doesn't seem to be employing a craft analogy so much as making a general observation about normativity, exploring the structure we find present whenever we speak of that in virtue of which someone is good or bad at something that she does. Crafts show up in this context, I suggest, because they are an arena where we can expect to find norms. It is evident to all, not merely to the practitioners of the craft, that in craft it is possible to do something well or badly. Socrates is, I believe, making a point about the larger genus, of which both morality and craft are parts. That arena is normatively assessable activity, i.e., what can go well or badly.

The distinction between flouting and flubbing describes two ways of violating a rule, but Socrates also takes it to illuminate two ways of conforming to a rule. The grounds of the distinction, both on the side of conformity and on the side of violation, is the question of whether the activity is based on desire or chance. Recall T1:

[13] Εἰ γὰρ ὄφελον, ὦ Κρίτων, οἷοί τ' εἶναι οἱ πολλοὶ τὰ μέγιστα κακὰ ἐργάζεσθαι, ἵνα οἷοί τ' ἦσαν καὶ ἀγαθὰ τὰ μέγιστα, καὶ καλῶς ἂν εἶχεν. νῦν δὲ οὐδέτερα οἷοί τε· οὔτε γὰρ φρόνιμον οὔτε ἄφρονα δυνατοὶ ποιῆσαι, ποιοῦσι δὲ τοῦτο ὅτι ἂν τύχωσι. I read Socrates as saying that the many can, accidentally, make someone wise; what they do not have is the power to make him wise or foolish. An alternative reading, on which Socrates is saying that the many cannot make anyone wise or foolish (even by accident) is rendered less plausible by the wording of the last clause: τοῦτο at 44d9 is most naturally read as referring back to ποιῆσαι φρόνιμον/ἄφρονα.

> Don't you think the ignorant person would often involuntarily tell the truth when he wished to say falsehoods, if it so happened (ei tuchoi), because he didn't know; whereas you, the wise person, if you should wish to lie, would always consistently lie? (367a2–5)

The expert, Hippias, tells the truth when he wants to tell the truth, and does not tell the truth when he does not want to tell the truth. A non-expert, by contrast, says what is true when chance favors his saying the truth, and fails to tell the truth when chance fails to favor that outcome. The fact that it is chance that is the alternative to mastery comes out also in our Crito passage (T4), where the majority's lack of expertise is described in terms of their acting in a chance fashion (hoti an tucho¯si, 44d10).[14]

Socrates contrasts the case in which one's actions are the products of chance with the case in which one's actions are determined by one's desires. The latter state is what he calls power: "each person who can do what he wishes when he wishes is powerful" (Grg. 466b7–c1).[15] This conception of power is prevalent in the Socratic dialogues,[16] but it is articulated with special care and precision in the Hippias Minor. For Socrates takes the time to spell out what it takes to be in a position to do what you want to do: physical strength and, more generally, bodily health (no lame feet), skill at various handicrafts, cognitive endowment (memory), bodies of knowledge (geometry, arithmetic, medicine), well-functioning sense organs (eyes, ears, nose), well-crafted tools (rudder, bow, lyre) and animate helpers (dogs, horses, slaves) who themselves must have souls in good conditions in order to be of use. Socrates' list of examples is not unified by any relation in which they stand to craft. Rather, what the quality of one's eyes, one's memory, one's bow, and one's dog's soul have in common is that they are all forms of empowerment,

[14] Similar language is applied to the chancy (as opposed to good-dependent) quality of a low kind of love in Pausanias' speech in the Symposium (181b1–8): "he strikes wherever he gets a chance (ὅτι ἂν τύχῃ). This, of course, is the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act. Whether they do it honorably or not is of no concern. That is why they do whatever comes their way, sometimes good, sometimes bad; and which one it is is incidental to their purpose (ὅθεν δὴ συμβαίνει αὐτοῖς ὅτι ἂν τύχωσι τοῦτο πράττειν, ὁμοίως μὲν ἀγαθόν, ὁμοίως δὲ τοὐναντίον)." Likewise Prt. 353a7–8, where Protagoras protests the need to investigate the opinion of hoi polloi, since they do not speak from expertise but rather from chance; they are people who say whatever strikes them (οἳ ὅτι ἂν τύχωσι τοῦτο λέγουσιν).

[15] Δυνατὸς δέ γ' ἐστὶν ἕκαστος ἄρα, ὃς ἂν ποιῇ τότε ὃἂν βούληται, ὅταν βούληται.

[16] Grg. 466d8–e2: If tyrants are shown not to do what they want, they are shown not to have power. This conception of power as doing what one wants also lies behind Glaucon's account of the state of nature in Rep. II 359b1–4: someone who has the power to do justice and avoid suffering it does not form laws and covenants with others but simply does what he wants. In Alc. I 134e8–135a2, a different word for power (ἐξουσία) is also glossed as amounting to "doing whatever one likes" (δρᾶν ὃ βούλεται). At Laws 687a7–b8, wealth and strength, and more generally powers, are seen as attractive because they will get us what we want. See also Rep. VI, where the two things that are given as possibly preventing someone from doing something are lack of willingness and lack of ability (497e3–4), and Tht. 177e5–6 where judgment and capacity stand in for willingness and ability.

which is to say, avenues of agency. Power consists in the tightness of the connection between what you do and what you want.

The argument of the Hippias Minor serves both to distinguish two forms of dependency, and to establish the one as superior to the other. Socrates, in effect, invites us to consider a fourfold normative classification (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1

	Conformity	**Violation**
Powerless	Mere conformity (chancy)	Flubbing (chancy nonconformity)
Powerful	Deliberate conformity (desire-based)	Flouting (desire-based failure to conform)

Hippias is initially inclined to use the columns of this chart to classify agents as better and worse: Achilles is better than Odysseus because he does not lie. Socrates wants to show him that the division between columns in Table 5.1 is not so fundamental as the division between rows. The important comparison is not between those who follow rules and those who violate them, but between those who have, and those who do not have, the mastery that would allow their performance to depend on their desire. Agents on the left are not (necessarily) superior to those on the right; whereas agents on the bottom are necessarily superior to those on top. Whether one conforms to a rule is less important than why one conforms to or violates it. Hence flouters are better than flubbers.

To say moral flouters are better than moral flubbers comes uncomfortably close to saying that unjust action can be good. Socrates doesn't quite say that, but he doesn't quite deny it, either. As many commentators have noticed, one could block the route to immoralism by adding premises from other dialogues. Taylor (1937) couples flouting over flubbing with the thesis that everyone desires the good, Jones and Sharma (2017: 130–3) with the thesis that injustice is never in a person's interest, Irwin (1995a: 69–70) with the conception of virtue as superordinate craft and a commitment to psychological eudaimonism. By all of these routes, one can show that Socrates' adherence to flouting over flubbing, even in the ethical domain, doesn't force him to embrace injustice. Taylor, Jones and Sharma, and Irwin all offer reasons for thinking that, when it comes to ethical cases, the lower righthand corner of the chart above will never be populated with examples; it is a mere conceptual possibility.

Socrates can be rescued. But why does Plato put him in the position where he has to be? What is the force of asserting that good people have a power (to do evil) that they will never use?

It would have been simpler and more intuitive to assert that in the moral case there is no flouting. What is puzzling about the Hippias Minor is the lengths to which Socrates goes to make room for the possibility of a power to be immoral, instead of simply denying that there could be any such thing.

VII. Socratic Virtue Ethics

The first step toward solving this puzzle begins with consideration of dialectical context. Consider the care Socrates takes in excavating Hippias' view in this early section of the dialogue:

> SOCRATES : Do you say that liars, like sick people, don't have the power to do anything, or that they do have the power to do something?
>
> HIPPIAS : I say they very much have the power to do many things, and especially to deceive people.
>
> SOCRATES : So according to your argument they are powerful, it would seem, and wily. Right?
>
> HIPPIAS : Yes.
>
> SOCRATES : Are they wily and deceivers from dimwittedness and foolishness, or by cunning and some kind of intelligence?
>
> HIPPIAS : From cunning, absolutely, and intelligence. SOCRATES : So they are intelligent, it seems.
>
> HIPPIAS : Yes, by Zeus. Too much so.
>
> SOCRATES : And being intelligent, do they not know what they are doing, or do they know?
>
> HIPPIAS : They know very well. That's how they do their mischief. SOCRATES : And knowing the things that they know, are they ignorant, or wise?
>
> HIPPIAS : Wise, surely, in just these things: in deception.
>
> SOCRATES : Stop. Let us recall what it is that you are saying. You claim that liars are powerful and intelligent and knowledgeable and wise in those matters in which they are liars?
>
> HIPPIAS : That's what I claim.
>
> SOCRATES : And that the truthful and the liars are different, complete opposites of one another?
>
> HIPPIAS : That's what I say.
>
> SOCRATES : Well, then. The liars are among the powerful and wise, according to your argument.
>
> HIPPIAS : Certainly.
>
> SOCRATES : And when you say that the liars are powerful and wise in these very matters, do you mean that they have the power to lie if they want, or that they are without power in the matters in which they are liars?

HIPPIAS : I mean they are powerful.

SOCRATES : To put it in a nutshell, then, liars are wise and have the power to lie. (365d–366b)

Hippias wants to maintain that Odysseus says false things intentionally, where that mastery amounts to being clever at deceiving people. Unlike the geometer who gives a false answer, Hippias wants us to understand Odysseus' failings as specifically ethical. He is a cunning trickster, who wreaks evil (kakourgousin 365e8– 9) on those around him, and the instrument of his destruction is his power of speech. Hippias understands Odysseus' ability to say false things as a power to be unjust. The commitment to the existence of a power to be unjust should thus be attributed to Hippias, rather than to Socrates.

Recall the conditional formulation of the ending of the dialogue –

> So the one who voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias – that is, if there is such a person – would be no other than the good man.

My suggestion is that the conditional aside refers to someone like Odysseus, as Hippias understands him. If Socrates grants to Hippias that it is possible to flout morality, then Hippias will have to concede that such flouting will both display mastery, and be the characteristic of the just person. In the Hippias Minor Plato is exploring what follows, if we hold fixed Hippias' commitment to the existence of voluntarily injustice.

If we let go of this commitment, a familiar argumentative alternative emerges. Instead of allocating to good people the power to act unjustly – to flout morality – Socrates could assert that all injustice is the result of flubbing. This would involve pointing to existent cases of injustice and noting that the people in question have no "power" or "ability" – they are incompetent. This is in fact what he seems to do elsewhere. Consider this passage from the Theaetetus (176d1–2):

> If, therefore, one meets a man who practices injustice and is blasphemous in his talk or in his life, the best thing for him by far is that one should never grant that there is any sort of ability about his unscrupulousness.

It is a persistent theme in Socratic dialogues that Socrates denies to wicked people even the trappings of goodness. He argues, against Meno, that wealth cannot be power (Meno 78c5–e5). He undermines Polus' veneration of tyrants and orators: The fact that they can put someone to death if they feel like it does not amount to power: "I think that orators have the least power of any in the city" (Grg. 466b9–10). In Rep. I, he argues that even a band of thieves requires justice, because injustice makes it impossible to achieve any kind of goal (351c7–352a8). The same is true in the Crito

passage cited above: Socrates is saying that the many lack the power to harm. In all of these places, he seems to assert that bad people don't have the power to do what they do – i.e., there is no such thing as a power to be bad.

Thus it seems likely that Socrates' idiosyncratic commitment to the power to do evil in the Hippias Minor should be explained in terms of Plato's desire to engage dialectically with the relevant view. Socrates' hesitation and "wavering" would, then, signal the fact (372d, 376c) that the conclusions he arrives at come from a view he has accepted for the sake of argument. But this pushes the question back a step: why does Plato have Socrates hold the relevant claim fixed? My conjecture is that this device allows Plato to explore some truths that would otherwise lie on the dark side of normativity.

The problem here is one of explanatory overdetermination. There are many ways of construing Socrates' distinctive constellation of views about desire, the good, and justice; without wading into those interpretative waters, I hope it will be reasonably uncontroversial to claim he believes that everyone desires the good.

The "unadulterated" Socrates we find in Theaetetus, Republic, Crito, Meno, etc. says that because everyone desires the good, anyone who is able to be good will be good. In addition, since the relevant power turns out to be knowledge, all bad action is a result of ignorance. Bad people are incompetent at doing or getting what they want, and you can read their inner badness off of their bad actions. This would set up an apparent disanalogy with, e.g., running. If an action constitutes a "failure" running-wise – by being slow – it might nonetheless be the action of someone who is excellent at running. Unjust action is a reliable sign of ignorance, whereas slow running is an unreliable sign of poor running ability. Plato wants to make sure we understand that Socrates takes this superficial disanalogy to cover over a deeper analogy, which is that both in the case of justice and the case of running, what matters is not the outer behavior but the inner principle from which it springs.

It is in the Hippias Minor that he spells out this point, clarifying the Socratic position as one on which even in the case of morality the question of success or failure is a question about the state of a person's soul and not the actions that spring from that state. The dialogue offers up a general theory of how normativity works: deliberate (as opposed to chance) conformity is a matter of desire-dependence (power) rather than chance-dependence. The reason why power should involve desire, in particular, is not spelled out in the Hippias Minor, but it is easy to see the answer in the light of the "everyone desires the good" principle that features centrally in so many other Socratic dialogues: when something is determined fully by desire, it is determined by the good.[17]

Since desire-dependence is the crux both for craft and for morality, the argument of the Hippias Minor cannot be accused of uncritical reliance on a dubious analogy between craft and justice. Rather, it offers an argument for the existence of a similarity

[17] For a discussion of whether this principle asserts that the object of desire is what really is good, or what the person takes to be good, see Callard 2017.

between craft and justice. What we praise or approve of is not the outer action – for that is something which could as well have come from chance – but the power to follow it. Power is the locus of value in both craft and morality.

Toward the end of the dialogue, Socrates moves to speaking of souls as the objects of value. He argues that one wants to possess animals (horses, dogs) and slaves with souls that are such as to conduce to flouting rather than flubbing; and similarly, one wants to possess one's own soul in such a condition that one flouts rather than flubs with respect to archery, flute playing, medicine (375a–d), and, likewise, justice. The most choiceworthy possession, the ultimate object of value, turns out not to be any of the visible things that Hippias can boast of having achieved with his many craft-abilities – the ring he engraved and sandals whose leather he cut, the tunic whose fabric he wove, the poems he wrote (368c–d) – but rather the invisible soul containing the powers that made it possible for all those accomplishments to depend on his desire to perform them. By directing our attention to the soul as the seat of power and value, the Hippias Minor effects the fundamental reorientation that is constitutive of Socratic virtue ethics.

VIII. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

It is crucial to the taxonomy in Table 5.1 above that one conceive of the very same normative violation – e.g., limping – as something that could have come about in two ways, and likewise for the case of conformity. But is that correct? One might push back against Socrates' assumption that the outer "action" constitutes a common denominator between the person with power and the one who lacks it. Is it really true that someone who deliberately limps counts as limping in the same sense in which the person with a lame foot limps? Is it really true that someone who does the just thing by chance does "the same thing" as someone who deliberately acts justly? This is precisely the line of questioning that Aristotle presses against the Hippias Minor.

In Metaphysics Delta 29, Aristotle objects that "a man who limps willingly is better than one who does so unwillingly" only insofar as "by 'limping' Plato means 'mimicking a limp'" (1025a11).[18] Aristotle's point is that we should draw a distinction between what the flubber is doing – actually limping – and what the flouter is doing – imitating a limp. In Nicomachean Ethics V.8 (1135b1) he argues that, although it is just to return a deposit, someone who returns a deposit from fear does not do the just thing, "except in an incidental way." In the Eudemian Ethics (VIII.1, 1246b1–7) he argues that one cannot do the same action from knowledge and from ignorance, or from justice and injustice, even if there is some sense in which the outward aspects of the two actions might resemble one another. Only the first of the three passages – Metaphysics Delta – mentions the Hippias Minor, but Aristotle's strategy is clear. He wants to deny flouting over flubbing, on the grounds that the one who flouts and the one who flubs

[18] All translations of Aristotle are from Barnes 1984.

are doing substantively different things. And he notes in Metaphysics Delta 29 that in the case where they are not different – if someone is "deliberately limping" because he has intentionally damaged his foot – flouting may well be worse than flubbing!

Aristotle denies flouting over flubbing because he denies that we can classify "what was done" without reference to the inner state of the doer. This is, of course, part and parcel of his embrace of virtue-activation over virtue. Aristotle thinks that happiness consists not in merely having virtue – for one could do so and be asleep – but in the use one makes of that virtue, in the form of virtuous activities. When Socrates claims that "returning the money" can't be of value since one can do it without justice in one's soul, Aristotle responds that "returning the money justly" is the correct description of the action in question. And that is both valuable and lacking any counterpart in the domain of "powerlessness."

Aristotle and Plato both place great importance on the powers present in the soul, but Aristotle sees the empirical world – in this case, the action – as hospitable to the inscription of this psychic order. Plato, by contrast, sees an action as merely this or that bodily movement caused by the justice (or lack thereof) in the agent's soul. This dispute reflects the deepest divide between the two thinkers, as to the degree to which we can find order, value, and reality in the world we apprehend with our senses.

It is worth noting that the Aristotelian response – inscribing the power in the action – is least plausible in the case of speech. When the geometer intentionally gives the false answer to a math problem, it is hard to maintain that he is "imitating" the false answer of the ignoramus. It seems clear that what is said – e.g., "a triangle has 200 degrees" – is a common denominator between the two cases. So, although Aristotle can with some plausibility assert that two cases of "returning the money" can amount to actions with substantively different contents, he is on shakier ground when he must insist that two false utterances of "a triangle has 200 degrees" have different contents. And lying, as a form of flouting, relies on the identity of its outer aspect to sincere speech: I succeed as a liar only insofar as my lying intention is in no way perceivably inscribed in my action.

It may seem that the "first wave" of the Hippias Minor, in which Socrates and Hippias have an extended discussion of lying and truthtelling, is superfluous. For it is only the "second wave" overview of various crafts that provides the account of power underwriting the explicit assimilation of moral and nonmoral cases. But there is another way to look at the structure of the dialogue: Plato opens his presentation of virtue ethics by calling our attention to the one case in which it is most difficult to deny that the flouter and flubber must be understood as "doing the same thing." This is a very good way to introduce a theory on which the difference between right and wrong must be made solely by reference to an inner, imperceptible state.

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Being Good at Being Bad
Plato's Hippias Minor
2022

The Cambridge Companion to Plato (Second Edition), Chapter 5.
<www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-companion-to-plato/being-good-at-being-bad-platos-hippias-minor/99175F15846C3A941E354BAD17BAE57C>