The Wandering Hero of the Hippias Minor: Socrates on Virtue and Craft

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The Wandering Hero of the *Hippias Minor*: Socrates on Virtue and Craft

Russell E. Jones and Ravi Sharma

Αἴνιγμά τινος αὐτῷ προτείναντος καὶ εἰπόντος, "λῦσον," "τί, ὦ μάταιε," ἔφη,
"λῦσαι θέλεις ὃ καὶ δεδεμένον ἡμῖν πράγματα παρέχει;

-Diogenes Laertius 2.70 [said of Aristippus]

The *Hippias Minor* has long been held in low regard. The dialogue’s ultimate conclusion, that the one who voluntarily acts unjustly is the good person, has been thought by many readers to be beyond the pale of Socratic philosophy. Moreover, the path to that conclusion has seemed riddled with equivocation. Scholars have thus tended to treat the dialogue either as an early, false start, inferior to Plato’s other works, or else as nothing but an attack on Hippias’ decidedly un-Socratic views.

Against such interpretations, we hold that the dialogue’s arguments are soundly Socratic, and that its conclusion is not merely acceptable but integral to Socrates’ thought as we encounter it in other parts of the Platonic corpus.¹ As we
shall argue, the *Hippias Minor* points the way to a successful elaboration and defense of the craft analogy and, thereby, to a secure foundation for the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge.

In order to rehabilitate the dialogue, we focus on the conclusion, which Socrates states at 376b5-6:

\[ \text{Ὅ ἀρα ἑκὼν ἁμαρτάνων καὶ αἴσχρα καὶ ἄδικα ποιῶν, ὦ Ἰππία, ἐὰν τίς ἐστιν ὁ ἄγαθός.} \]

Then the person who voluntarily goes wrong and does things shameful and unjust, Hippias – if in fact there’s anyone like that – would be none other than the good person.²

We shall argue that Socrates is committed to the conclusion. That is no simple task. We cannot attribute it to him simply because he says it, since interpreters claim to have uncovered compelling direct and indirect evidence that in fact he disavows it. So we must undertake a careful study of the surrounding context, showing that the great weight of the evidence favors his commitment to the conclusion. Along the way, we shall discuss some of the background convictions that lead him to it: his conception of virtue as craft-knowledge, his understanding of voluntary action, his radical views about the personal advantages of justice, and more. However, what will emerge is not merely a theoretical landscape. The *Hippias Minor* presents a powerfully attractive, unified portrait of Socrates’ character as a philosopher: sincere, confident, rational, and steady in his commitments; but at the same time
humble, probing, striving, even “wandering.” The tight integration of argument and character portrayal offers a rich resource for probing the complexities of Plato’s depiction of Socrates and warrants the dialogue a place at the center, not the periphery, of Socratic studies.

I

After Socrates draws the conclusion just quoted, he and Hippias have the following exchange:

[ΙΠ.] ὄντες ἐμοὶ, ὦ Σώκρατε, ταῦτα.

[ΣΩ.] ὄντες γὰρ ἐμοὶ, ὦ Ἱππία· ἀλλὰ ἀναγκαῖον οὗτω φαίνεσθαι νῦν γε ἡμῖν ἐκ τοῦ λόγου.

Virtually all translations represent Hippias as rejecting the conclusion, and they correspondingly represent Socrates as responding sympathetically and then as recommending his conclusion only with a significant qualification. The translation by Nicholas Smith offers a nice illustration:

[H.] I can’t agree with you in that, Socrates.

[S.] Nor I with myself, Hippias. But given the argument, we can’t help having it look that way to us, now, at any rate.

The final ‘now, at any rate’ is presumably meant to suggest that the argument just presented may in fact be unsound and that a reconsideration of it may support another conclusion.
We think this a misinterpretation of the lines, one that has bolstered the widespread judgment as to the untenability of Socrates’ conclusion. Since the issue is pivotal for the proper interpretation of the dialogue, we shall treat it in detail, first examining the lines on their own and then setting them in their dramatic and philosophical context.

On our reading, neither Hippias nor Socrates rejects the argument’s conclusion, though each acknowledges that it fits questionably with other views he finds attractive and, therefore, that he cannot yet see a way to embrace it without discomfort. An appropriate translation would be:

[H.] Socrates, I don’t know how I’m to agree with you on these matters.

[S.] Nor indeed do I know how I’ll agree with myself, Hippias. Yet it has to look that way under the circumstances, given our argument.

There are two significant respects in which that translation differs from those of the sort just discussed: (1) It interprets Hippias’ remark, and Socrates’ repetition of it, as statements of puzzlement rather than as refusals to accept the conclusion. (2) It treats Socrates’ further comment as expressing confidence in the soundness of his argument, rather than as hinting that the argument may be invalid or the premises untrue.

To begin with the first point, the standard version renders Hippias’ remark as if it were a straightforward refusal to accept the truth of the conclusion. However, the linguistic form of Hippias’ statement does not demand such a reading. The construction at issue is ‘οὐκ ἔχω’ followed by a relative clause with a
deliberative verb, here an aorist subjunctive or possibly a future indicative. On its own, such a construction expresses only bafflement, a failure to grasp how one might bring about the action expressed by the verb of the relative clause. In many contexts, a statement of that kind is functionally equivalent to a declaration of incapacity, as at *Euthydemus* 287c, where Socrates explains the expression ‘οὐκ ἔχω ὅτι χρήσωμαι τοῖς λόγοις’ by saying, οὐκ ἔχω ἔξελέγξαι αὐτὸν. Yet whether any given instance of the construction is appropriately glossed that way will depend on the context in which it is used. In the *Hippias Minor*, we shall argue, Hippias uses the construction to express puzzlement rather than disbelief. He effectively acknowledges that he has been defeated by Socrates’ argument, but he also declares that he does not know how to reconcile the conclusion with the way he otherwise thinks about voluntary action and moral responsibility.

Unambiguous parallels for such an interpretation are difficult to come by, since in many conversational exchanges there is nothing in context that would decide between an acknowledgement of puzzlement and something stronger, a statement that would be tantamount to a refusal to deliberate further. Yet consider a helpful Platonic parallel from the *Euthydemus*. In the closing exchange of the dialogue, Crito raises a problem concerning the education of his sons. Here is the passage in context (306d2-307a2):

> Καὶ μήν, ὦ Σώκρατες, καὶ αὐτὸς περὶ τῶν ύεων, ὡσπερ ἀεὶ πρὸς σε λέγω, ἐν ἀπορίᾳ εἰμὶ τί δεῖ αὔτοῖς χρησάσθαι. ὦ μὲν οὖν νεώτερος ἔτι καὶ σμικρός ἐστιν, Κριτόβουλος δ’ ἡδή ἠλικίαν ἔχει καὶ δεῖταί τινος ὀστίς αὐτὸν ὀνήσει ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν ὅταν σοὶ συγγένωμαι, οὕτω διατίθεμαι ὡστ’ ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ μανίαν εἶναι τὸ ἔνεκα
τῶν παιδῶν ἄλλων μὲν πολλῶν σπουδὴν τοιαύτην ἐσχηκέναι, καὶ περὶ τοῦ γάμου ὅπως ἐκ γενναιοτάτης ἔσονται μητρὸς, καὶ περὶ τῶν χρημάτων ὅπως ὡς πλουσιώτατοι, αὐτῶν δὲ περὶ παιδείας ἀμελήσαι· ὅταν δὲ ἐἰς τινα ἀποβλέψω τῶν φασκόντων ἄν παιδεύσαι ἀνθρώπους, ἐκπέπληγμαι καὶ μοι ἤκαστός ἐὰς ἐκαστὸς αὐτῶν σκοπούντι πάνυ ἀλλόκοτος εἶναι, ὡς γε πρὸς σὲ τάλιθη εἰρήσθαι· ὡστε οὐκ ἔχω ὅπως προτρέπω τὸ μειράκιον ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν.

You know, Socrates, in my own case I’m perplexed about how I should deal with my sons, as I’m constantly telling you. The younger one is still quite small, but Critobulus is already grown and needs someone who will help him. Whenever I spend time with you, I’m disposed to consider it madness to have taken such trouble about the boys in so many other ways – in my marriage, so that they would be born of the most distinguished mother possible, and in matters of money, so that they’d be as well as off as they can – and yet to neglect them when it comes to their education. But whenever I pay attention to one of those who profess to be educators, I am astounded. Each and every one of them looks utterly outlandish, to be honest with you. As a result, I’m at a loss as to how I should influence the young man to take up philosophy.

Crito is not here renouncing any further attempt to turn Critobulus toward philosophy. As is clear from his earlier reference to the aporia that he has long felt, he is confused about how to proceed and is soliciting Socrates’ advice on the matter. His final remark is simply a way of summing up the foregoing expression of
puzzlement. In the closing lines of the dialogue, Socrates accordingly helps him by supplying a way forward. He reminds Crito that while in every pursuit the worthy practitioners are few, this does not impugn the pursuit’s value. In the case of philosophy, Socrates recommends that Crito ignore the practitioners and take the measure of the activity for himself. Then, if he deems it worthwhile, he should engage in it and have his sons do likewise.

The *Hippias Minor* does not contain any explicit suggestions to relieve Hippias’ discomfort. Socrates is also puzzled, and indicates as much when he says, Ὅδε γὰρ ἐγώ [ἐχω ὅπως] ἐμοί [συγχωρήσω]. As we shall discuss, his puzzlement is of a subtly different character from that of Hippias. Socrates says what he does because he recognizes that the conclusion is but a beginning – a fragment of a larger theory of voluntary action and moral responsibility. Although he is much more comfortable than Hippias with the idea of embracing a bold result, he nevertheless does not know how to integrate that result fully with other thoughts he has on other occasions. Thus he can say without deception that he does not know how he will agree with himself. Still, as he recognizes, the argument demands that they accept the result.

That brings us to our second point, concerning the force of Socrates’ final remark at 376b8-c1: ἀλλ’ ἀναγκαίον οὔτω φαίνεσθαι νῦν γε ἡμῖν ἐκ τοῦ λόγου. As noted above, most translators take it to insinuate that closer consideration of the argument will lead to a different conclusion. They do so by leaning heavily on a restrictive or limitative reading of the ‘γε’ in ‘νῦν γε’: the conclusion is compelling “for the moment, at least,” though (it is strongly hinted) not beyond.
understand Socrates’ statement otherwise, taking the particle to be “determinative” rather than restrictive in character. Such a use is especially common after connecting particles, where ‘γε’ renders more precise the thought introduced by the earlier particle. It does so by underscoring a word or phrase that is crucial to the thought. In our passage, ‘γε’ underscores the ‘νῦν’ to which it attaches, and the composite phrase serves to define the qualification announced by ‘ἀλλὰ’, namely ‘ἀναγκαίον οὔτω φαίνεσθαι’. The point is then elaborated immediately with ‘ἐκ τοῦ λόγου’: still, the conclusion must seem correct here and now, on the basis of the argument just presented. There is no sign, then, that Socrates suspects his argument to be unsound. Quite the contrary: so far as the present passage is concerned, his confidence in it does not waver at all.

II

Having thus explained our reading of 376b7-c1, we want to argue for it by looking at the function of those lines in context. Our contention will be that our reading allows one better to understand various details of the dramatic and argumentative setting. Indeed, several passages of the dialogue virtually demand it.

We begin at 375d, where Socrates is on the point of finishing his long *epagōgē* to the effect that going wrong voluntarily is always better than doing so involuntarily. He applies his point to the human soul at lines d1-2:

Οὐκοῦν βελτίων ἔσται, ἔὰν ἐκοῦσα κακουργῇ τε καὶ ἔξαμαρτάνη, ἢ ἐὰν ἄκουσα;
Then won't [the soul] be better if it does evil and goes astray voluntarily rather than involuntarily?

There are several striking features of the subsequent exchange between Socrates and Hippias in lines d3-5:

[Π.] Δεινόν μεντᾶν εἶη, ὦ Σώκρατες, εἰ οἱ ἐκόντες ἁδικοῦντες βελτίους ἔσονται ἢ οἱ ἀκοντες.

[ΣΩ.] Ἀλλὰ μὴν φαύνονται γε ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων.

[H.] Come on, Socrates! It would be appalling if those who do wrong voluntarily are to be better than those who do so involuntarily.

[S.] Well, they certainly look to be better on the basis of what's been said.

Here, Hippias does doubt the conclusion that Socrates reaches. He does so in the strongest of terms. The conditional whereby he conveys his reaction is essentially an “emotional” (“most vivid”) future, in which the future indicative of the protasis conveys the vehemence of his distaste while the potential optative of the apodosis heightens that feeling by pushing off the whole idea under discussion and making it more remote.7

In responding, Socrates uses ‘φαίνεσθαι’ together with ‘γε’. One might be tempted to treat the particle as restrictive and to translate ‘They seem that way, at any rate . . .’.8 Yet such a translation would be misleading. When used in responses after conditional statements, ‘ἄλλα μὴν’ typically expresses strong assent to the
content of what has been asserted. Socrates is here *embracing* the substance of what Hippias says in the protasis of the conditional, though he is not of course endorsing Hippias’ reaction to it. One should thus avoid translating the verb ‘φαίνεσθαι’ so as to convey any connotation of mere appearance. Socrates indicates that this is *just how things look*, where the ‘γε’ makes clear that ‘φαίνεσθαι’ determines or further defines the assent expressed by ‘ἄλλα μήν’. The subsequent phrase ‘ἐκ τῶν εἴρημένων’ explains the basis of Socrates’ judgment: the preceding argument supports the inference that Hippias is inclined to reject.

Since Socrates’ response at 375d is linguistically so close to what he goes on to say shortly afterward at 376b8-c1 (ἄλλα ἀναγκαῖον οὕτω φαίνεσθαι νῦν γε ἡμῖν ἐκ τοῦ λόγου), we submit that he is making the same point in the latter passage as he is here. Indeed, in the intervening exchange – 375d7-376b6 – Socrates expresses no doubt at all regarding his judgment that the soul which does evil voluntarily is better than the one which does so involuntarily. He instead supports that judgment by way of another argument, this time a pointedly direct one about the just soul as capable of doing things both fine and shameful. By its end, Hippias is nonplussed. Despite his deep discomfort he has finally come to see the power of Socrates’ position, and that is what prompts his softer tone at 376b7.

If one were to suppose that Hippias remains intransigent at 376b, it would be difficult to explain why Socrates would echo Hippias’ comment sympathetically and then immediately return to his own earlier contention that the thesis they are considering is supported by their arguments. It fits much better to think of Hippias
as reluctantly granting the conclusion to Socrates. This is in fact crucial to understanding the final words of the dialogue, as we now explain.

Immediately after what he says at 376b7-c1, Socrates goes on to qualify his expression of confidence in the argument:

δοπερ μέντοι πάλαι ἐλεγον, ἐγὼ περὶ ταῦτα ἄνω καὶ κάτω πλανῶμαι καὶ οὐδέποτε ταὐτά μοι δοκεῖ.

Still, as I’ve said, I wander back and forth on these matters, and never do the same things seem right to me.

We shall address the point of the qualification momentarily. First, consider the way Socrates finishes the thought in the final words of the dialogue (376c3-6):

καὶ ἐμὲ μὲν οὐδὲν θαυμαστὸν πλανᾶσθαι οὐδὲ ἄλλον ἵδιωτην· εἰ δὲ καὶ υμεῖς πλανήσεσθε οἱ σοφοί, τούτο ἣδη καὶ ἥμιν δεινὸν εἰ μηδὲ παρ' ὑμᾶς ἀφικόμενοι παυσόμεθα τῆς πλάνης.

And it is not at all surprising that I wander, or that any other layman does. But if even you are going to wander, you wise men, that really is appalling, for us as well – if not even after coming to you are we to rest from our wandering.

Note here how Socrates turns the tables by sending Hippias’ earlier words right back to him with a repetition of ‘δεινόν’ and with a conditional whose protasis is again of the “emotional” future type (πλανήσεσθε, παυσόμεθα). In contrast to
what Hippias had earlier suggested, the thing that really (ἡδη) ends up being terrible is vacillation on the part of the wise. Such vacillation is precisely what Hippias has displayed by acceding uncertainly to the conclusion of the argument and by therefore failing to render consistent judgment on the topic at hand.¹¹ Socrates’ words would have little point as a rejoinder if one were to take Hippias’ statement at b7 in the typical fashion. In that case, Hippias would not be wandering at all. He would be steadfast in his refusal to accept what he deems an absurd view; and the final words of the dialogue would then fall flat as a response to his earlier expression of indignation.¹² In reality, Socrates’ response is both elegant and effective. Socrates has brought Hippias to his knees with the argument of 375d-376b, and he now turns Hippias indignation back upon him, highlighting the ignorance beneath his façade of competence to render judgment.

Yet what about Socrates’ acknowledgement that he “wanders” on the matter at issue? Does it indicate that in the end he cannot accept the conclusion of his own argument, and is our contextual case in favor of reinterpreting 376b7-c1 thereby undermined? We think not, as can be seen by considering the speech just a few pages earlier (372a-373a) in which Socrates first employs the image of wandering. Right before the speech, he states the position that he takes to have emerged from their argument so far – namely, that the person who voluntarily speaks falsely is in fact better than the one who does so involuntarily. Hippias in turn protests that from a moral and legal point of view it would be bizarre to suppose that the voluntary wrongdoer is better than the involuntary. Socrates then begins his speech, stressing his own ignorance and his eagerness to learn. As proof of the
former, he cites his failure to agree with those commonly deemed wise: “Virtually none of the same things seems right to me and to you.” (σοῦ δὲν γὰρ μοι δοκεῖ τῶν αὐτῶν καὶ ύμῖν, ὡς ἐπος εἶπεῖν [sc. οἱ Ελληνες πάντες μάρτυρες εἰσὶ τῆς σοφίας]. -372b7-c1) After underscoring his impulse to inquire and his readiness to give both credit and thanks, he returns to his disagreement with Hippias (372c8-373a2):

καὶ δή καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ λέγεις οὑχ ὀμολογῶ σοι, ἀλλὰ διαφέρομαι πάνυ σφόδρα· καὶ τοῦτ’ εὖ οἶδα ὦτι δὲ ἐμὲ γίγνεται, ὅτι τοιοῦτος εἰμί οἰόσπερ εἰμί, ἵνα μηδὲν ἐμαυτὸν μεῖζον εἴπω. ἐμοὶ γὰρ φαίνεται, ὦ Ἰππία, πᾶν τούναντίον ἡ ὑ σῦ λέγεις· οἱ βλάπτοντες τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ἀδικοῦντες καὶ ψευδόμενοι καὶ ἐξαπατώντες καὶ ἀμαρτάνοντες ἐκόντες ἀλλὰ μὴ ἄκοντες, βελτίους εἶναι ἢ οἱ ἄκοντες. ἐνίοτε μέντοι καὶ τούναντίον δοκεῖ μοι τούτων καὶ πλανῶμαι περὶ ταῦτα, δῆλον ὦτι διὰ τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι· νυνὶ δὲ ἐν τῷ παρόντι μοι ὡσπερ κατηβολὴ περιελήλυθεν, καὶ δοκοῦσί μοι οἱ ἐκόντες ἐξαμαρτάνοντες περὶ τι βελτίους εἶναι τῶν ἄκοντων. αἰτίωμα δὲ τοῦ νῦν παρόντος παθήματος τοὺς ἐμπροσθεν λόγους αἰτίους εἶναι, ὥστε φαίνεσθαι νῦν ἐν τῷ παρόντι τοὺς ἄκοντας τούτων ἐκαστά ποιοῦντας πονηροτέρους ἢ τοὺς ἐκόντας. σὺ οὖν χάρισαι καὶ μὴ φθονήσῃς ἰάσασθαι τὴν ψυχὴν μου· πολὺ γὰρ τοι μεῖζον μὲ ἀγαθὸν ἐργάσῃ ἄμαθίας παύσας τὴν ψυχὴν ἢ νόσου τὸ σῶμα.

And now, too, I disagree with you in what you’re saying. In fact, I dissent in the strongest of terms. I know well that this is my fault, because I’m the sort of person I am, to give no grand description of myself. You see, Hippias, it looks to
me precisely the opposite of what you’re saying: whoever injures other people and treats them unjustly and speaks falsely and deceives and goes wrong, doing it voluntarily and not involuntarily, any such person is *better* than one who does it involuntarily. Sometimes, to be sure, I think quite the opposite, and I wander on these matters, clearly because I lack knowledge. But here in the present circumstance I’ve been overtaken by a bout of fever, so to speak, and I think that people who voluntarily go astray on some matter are better than ones who do so involuntarily. I blame my current condition on the previous arguments, which are such as to make it look in the present circumstance as if those who do each of these things involuntarily are inferior to those who do them voluntarily. So oblige me and don’t begrudge my soul a cure. You’ll do me a much greater good by freeing my soul of ignorance than by freeing my body of disease.

Here it is plain that although Socrates describes himself as “wandering” in regard to the matters presently at issue, he does not reject the conclusion of the argument. As he emphasizes, he thinks it right. To be sure, he describes his commitment to it as resulting from an illness – a fever, or a spell of lightheadedness. If left unexplained, the image might be understood to suggest that the present argument is in fact unsound, a false creation proceeding from Socrates’ heat-oppressed brain. Yet Socrates is careful immediately to clarify what he has in mind, cueing the clarification with a repetition of the emphatic phrase that introduces the image (νῦν ἐν τῷ παρόντι). His “illness” has been brought on by the arguments that have just taken place (τοὺς ἔμπροσθεν λόγους); and although Socrates
describes their effect using the same language of appearance that figures at the end of the dialogue, his reliance here on a “natural result” clause (‘ὥστε φαίνεσθαι . . .’) makes it evident that what “appears” to be the case is something that he considers to flow naturally from what he has just said – i.e., to follow from the arguments just given.13

By his own clear account, Socrates thinks the conclusion to be true, and does so on the basis of the preceding arguments. Whatever he means when he says that he “wanders” on these matters, it must be consistent with the forceful affirmations surrounding that remark and dominating the substance of his response to Hippias.14

So what does Socrates have in mind with his reference to wandering? It would not do to dismiss the image as a simple piece of false modesty designed to keep Hippias involved in the discussion. In order to engage Hippias, all Socrates needs is his earlier plea of ignorance (372b) together with a confession that he is unable to refute a strange but compelling argument. Indeed, since the remark about wandering is not elaborated in context, it would do little to bring Hippias around were he otherwise unsympathetic.

We are instead inclined to see a serious point in what Socrates says. Socrates has an argument whose premises he is inclined to accept, and whose conclusion he takes to follow from the premises. However, he lacks a broader theory in which to set the conclusion. That is to say, he has as yet no general account of voluntary action or moral responsibility. Sometimes, when confronted with conventional practices of the sort to which Hippias calls attention at 372a-b, Socrates is tempted to think that the views underlying them may well be right and that his present
conclusion is misguided. Perhaps it is right to pardon those commonly considered to do wrong involuntarily while punishing people more severely in cases where the wrongdoing has been deemed voluntary. However, when Socrates attends to the argument that leads him to think as he presently does, he once again deems it unassailable. His remark about wandering is therefore a straightforward acknowledgement of further work to be done.\textsuperscript{15}

To elaborate, Socrates is giving some weight to Hippias’ objection regarding common practices of praise and blame. Yet the point is not that Socrates feels compelled to "save the phenomena" of ordinary usage by somehow accommodating them in his theory. Unlike Hippias, he gives no sign of considering ordinary usage to be conclusive. But lacking a broader theory of voluntary action, Socrates is not prepared to say without reservation that common practices are misguided. On occasion, his uncertainty about their value even leads him to entertain that he is wrong about the view he is now defending. That would occur when he is not attending to the pattern of argument supporting it, and when he is instead reflecting on more ordinary uses of ‘voluntary’ and 'involuntary'. Still, every time he returns to his own reflections on power, knowledge, and virtue, he is overtaken by a fever that leads him to speak as he does.\textsuperscript{16}

To say as much is effectively to hold that Socrates considers his argument valid but does not yet insist it is sound. The reason is that he does not presume he knows the truth of the underlying premises.\textsuperscript{17} Admitting a lack of knowledge here does not entail \emph{dubting} the truth of the premises. Doubting requires reasons – at the very least, a description of an alternative state of affairs that one can entertain
seriously as a possibility. When Socrates considers the premises of the argument, he cannot think of such an alternative. However, he understands that despite his inability to frame one, he does not have the integrated account of voluntary action that would move him closer to being able to make a knowledge claim.\(^{18}\)

Insofar as Socrates is not yet in a position to gather his views about voluntary action into a consistent and complete theory, he can honestly declare himself to be at a loss as to how he might square his present reasoning with the considerations that appeal to him on other occasions and in other contexts. What’s more, he can fairly blame his own ignorance as responsible for his “wandering,” as he clearly does at 372d8-e1 (δῆλον ὅτι διὰ τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι). The fact that he can say as much while nonetheless remaining committed to a particular thesis on this occasion is deeply characteristic of Socrates and one of his most appealing traits as a philosopher: He is a person of strong conviction, and yet also one of profound epistemic humility.

The conversation of the *Hippias Minor* contrasts Socrates and Hippias on precisely that score. Hippias is antecedently convinced of what the right view must be and cares little about supplying reasons. When confronted with Socrates’ arguments, he continually tries to sidestep their force by qualifying various inferences – suggesting in effect that what holds in one case or range of cases may not hold in others. He persists in doing so even though he is never able to offer either counter-example or clear justification for thinking as he does.\(^{19}\) Upon being refuted in decisive fashion at the dialogue’s mid-point, Hippias can think to complain only about Socrates’ style of minute questioning, not about anything substantive in the arguments on which Socrates relies.\(^{20}\) For Hippias, the whole
exchange has been nothing more than a competition to determine who is the better
speaker (369c7-8).

At the end of the dialogue, once he has finally been overcome by the
deductive argument of 375d-376b, Hippias makes as much of a concession as he is
capable of making, declaring that he has no idea what to do with the conclusion he
and Socrates have reached. As we have seen, Socrates responds sympathetically but
also stresses that the conclusion has to be taken seriously insofar as it follows from
the argument they have just considered. In the closing words of the dialogue, he
reminds Hippias of his earlier remark about wandering. There is a two-fold
significance in what he says. First, Socrates is careful to allow that in a fuller
elaboration of the theory he may be proven wrong, though he is not in a position to
say how that might happen. Second and more importantly, he points out that,
despite Hippias’ stubborn refusal to go along with the earlier *epagōgē*, he has now
ended up in the same position as the one in which Socrates finds himself—forced to
accept the conclusion of the argument and uncertain as to what that means for how
one should think about questions of voluntary action.

III

If the argument of the preceding sections is correct, it undermines most
interpretations according to which Socrates disbelieves the conclusion he reaches at
376b4-6. For instance, one can set aside the oft-repeated judgments that Socrates is
simply playing the sophist in the dialogue, or that he is philosophically immature
and “in a troubled state of mind.” Yet in order fully to secure our thesis that
Socrates embraces the conclusion of his arguments, we need to address a subtler version of the opposing interpretation – namely that Socrates’ final argument against Hippias is philosophically substantive but purely *ad hominem*. On such a reading, although Socrates stresses the way in which his conclusion follows from the preceding argument, he himself does not for a moment believe the conclusion to be true. For, he rejects at least one of the premises on which it depends.

Our interpretation of the imagery of wandering would suggest that such an approach is misguided, but responding directly to it will allow us say more about the confrontation between Socrates and Hippias and to confirm the Socratic credentials of the final argument. There is no way to engage the *ad hominem* reading other than by considering an example of it. In this section and the next, we shall therefore look critically at the fullest case that has yet been made for it, and we shall use our discussion as a way of highlighting some of the challenges that any such reading must face. In the process, we shall also defend two theses that may seem hard to reconcile. First, Socrates resolutely embraces the craft analogy. Second, he nevertheless doubts whether there can be a just person who does injustice. Interpreters have tended to endorse the second thesis at the expense of the first, and thus in the final sections of the paper we shall consider how Socrates might think the two can be reconciled.23

The most compelling case for reading the final argument as *ad hominem* has been made by Roslyn Weiss, who develops her position in the context of defending the validity of the dialogue’s arguments as a whole.24 Weiss dissents from a host of interpreters who have taken the arguments to rely on damaging equivocations in
their key terms, and she holds instead that they can adequately be understood only if one treats them as *ad hominem*. Indeed, whereas the dialogue’s earlier arguments at least endorse tolerably Socratic conclusions, those from 373c onward supposedly defend a position Socrates would firmly deny – namely, that a person who did injustice voluntarily would be better than one who did so involuntarily (375d1-2, 376a6-7), and in fact would be none other than the good person (376b5-6). As Weiss contends, the latter position raises profound difficulties for Hippias, and that is why Socrates drives him to embrace it, first by the *epagōgē* of 373c-375d and then by the deductive argument of 375d-376b. In the latter case, Socrates argues directly from the crucial premise he himself rejects, which is that justice is a *dunamis* or an *epistēmē* or both (375d7-8). He rejects it because he does not subscribe to the motivating idea that justice can be understood along the lines of a *technē*. Far from being a doctrine that Socrates ever embraces, the latter idea is purely a critical tool for exposing the incoherence of others – in this dialogue, of Hippias.

In developing that reading, Weiss maintains that it is Hippias, not Socrates, who introduces the notion of the voluntary wrongdoer into the discussion, thereby supplying the occasion for Socrates’ refutations from 373c to 376b. She relies on a passage to which we have previously referred – the challenge from Hippias that provokes the long speech in which Socrates invokes the image of wandering. When Hippias objects to Socrates’ earlier defense of the idea that the one who voluntarily speaks falsely on some matter is none other the knowledgeable person – the person who can likewise speak truly – Weiss takes him to be recasting Socrates’ position as being not just about the false speaker but also about the wrongdoer.25 Hippias thus
protests that no one could sensibly prefer a voluntary to an involuntary wrongdoer (371e9-372a3):

Καὶ πῶς ἂν, ὁ Σώκρατες, οἱ ἐκόντες ἀδικοῦντες καὶ ἐκόντες ἐπιβουλεύσαντες καὶ κακὰ ἐργασάμενοι βελτίους ἀν ἐξεν τῶν ἀκόντων, οἷς πολλὴ δοκεῖ συγγνώμη εἶναι, ἐὰν μὴ εἰδώς τις ἀδικήσῃ ἢ ψεύσηται ἢ ἄλλο τι κακὸν ποιήσῃ;

Socrates, how in the world could those who are voluntarily unjust and who voluntarily engage in treacherous plots and evil deeds be better than the involuntary, in whose case there seems to be much room for forgiveness if someone has unwittingly committed an injustice, or spoken falsely, or done any other evil thing?

Weiss argues that once Hippias has raised this objection, Socrates is at pains to point out that Hippias is in fact committed to embracing the view he deems reprehensible. As a sophist who professes to teach virtue, he cannot but acknowledge that he conceives of virtue as knowledge and that the knowledge he imparts may be used for ill as well as for good. In Weiss’ judgment, this argumentative strategy is the key to understanding the imagery of wandering, which is Socrates’ way of signaling that he is troubled by the conclusion but considers it forced upon anyone who operates as Hippias does.26

Unfortunately for that reading, Hippias does not introduce consideration of the voluntary wrongdoer into the discussion at 371e-372a. He and Socrates have
been thinking of such a person all along. Consider for instance 371e2-5, the exchange that almost immediately precedes the remark by Hippias on which Weiss relies:

\[
\text{ΙΠ.} \, \delta \varepsilon \, \text{Ὀδυσσεύς} \, \alpha \, \text{τε} \, \text{άληθή} \, \text{λέγει}, \, \text{ἐπιβουλεύσας} \, \alpha \varepsilon \iota \, \text{λέγει}, \, \kappaα \, \delta \sigmaα \, \text{ψεύδεται}, \, \\
\text{ὡσαύτως}.
\]

\[
\text{ΣΩ.} \, \text{Αμείνων} \, \αρ' \, \text{ἔστίν}, \, \\text{ὥς} \, \text{ἔοικεν}, \, \delta \, \text{Ὀδυσσεύς} \, \text{Ἀχιλλέως}.
\]

[H] When Odysseus speaks the truth, he always does so treacherously, and when he speaks falsehoods, it's the same.

[S] Then it would seem Odysseus is in fact better than Achilles.

Socrates here infers from Odysseus' *treachery* that he is the better one, since it suggests to him that Odysseus is knowledgeable. Such a position is precisely what Hippias vigorously denies in the passage previously quoted. To suggest that the talk of wrongdoing belongs entirely to Hippias and that Socrates is simply drawn into consideration of it is to ignore the fact that Socrates openly embraces the claim to which Hippias objects.

It is also to ignore the broader context of the preceding discussion and the tone of the dialogue's first argument. As Weiss points out, Hippias' early characterization of Odysseus as πολύτροπος τε καὶ ψευδής (365b5) already involves a negative judgment of his moral character. Socrates accepts the judgment, a fact Weiss explains by remarking, "if the discussion is to proceed, [Socrates] must adjust his conception of *polutropos* to match Hippias's" (2006, 124). Yet whether or
not Socrates ultimately agrees with Hippias on the resonance of the latter term, and thus on the proper attitude toward Odysseus, the crucial fact is that he readily attaches a negative moral weight to the term ‘ψευδής’ and conducts the discussion accordingly.²⁹ (See esp. 365e1-9.) Given that he does so, it is highly unlikely that he introduces the image of wandering at the dialogue’s midpoint to signal the argument’s turn to a conclusion he can no longer embrace. And if the image does not play that role, much of the textual warrant for Weiss’ interpretation disappears. It is in fact no longer clear what could justify any reading of Socrates’ arguments as *ad hominem*.

As noted above, Weiss believes that Socrates’ strategy as the dialogue proceeds is to force Hippias to recognize the conflict between his stated position on virtue and his practice as a sophist. On the one hand, Hippias thinks of virtue as a non-intellectual affair and praises Achilles accordingly. Achilles is for him ἀληθής τε καὶ ἀπλοῦς (365b4), as well as ἀμείνω Ὄδυσσεώς καὶ ἀψευδή (369c4). On the other hand, as a sophist who claims to teach virtue, Hippias is committed to thinking of justice as an *epistēmē*. Here he must allow that one who has mastered the *epistēmē* can voluntarily do right or wrong; and once the voluntary wrongdoer has been brought into the discussion, Socrates can force Hippias to a conclusion that is at odds both with his stated position and with conventional morality, of which he is effectively a mouthpiece.³⁰ In so doing, Socrates can expose the emptiness of Hippias’ whole professional stance.

A difficulty for this reading is that nowhere in the dialogue is any claim to teach virtue actually mentioned. The dialogue supplies a richly detailed
characterization of Hippias, including a long and amusing enumeration of his abundant areas of expertise (368b-e). Yet instruction in virtue is nowhere mentioned. As evidence that Hippias professes such an expertise, Weiss appeals to Socrates’ initial question whether or not Achilles is better than Odysseus. But surely Hippias’ claim to be a master of the Homeric poems is perfectly adequate to explain Socrates’ question.31 The question is no sign that Socrates considers Hippias someone who offers to teach virtue.

A more promising account of the drama would explain the choice of Hippias as interlocutor according to the resources supplied by the dialogue itself. On our interpretation, what is of central importance is that Hippias considers himself the τεχνικός par excellence – a fact brought home by Socrates’s persistent questioning about his technai, culminating in the above-mentioned comic episode in which Socrates enjoin him to survey all of the many technai he claims to know. Despite Hippias’ profession of comprehensive knowledge, he fails to understand the most important technē, the one dealing with justice or virtue. His failure is shown in two ways. First, there is his repeated inability to apply to justice the lesson of the other technai – namely, that the possessor also knows how to act in a fashion contrary to what would normally be expected of her. Second, there is his related inability to explain the reason the just person’s knowledge would nonetheless lead her to refrain from wrongdoing. His underlying error is that he thinks of human goodness as a matter of simplicity, treating the ψευδής as the only one who has a craft – a craft of manipulation, which can operate independently of any understanding of what’s right. In opposing those views, Socrates casts the good person as the possessor of a
technē and so readily allows that if there were any knowingly bad person she would likewise possess the same technē. Yet as we shall discuss in due course, Socrates gives sufficient indication that he is not inclined to think there can be such a person. The bad people one encounters are simply ignorant, and thus the dialogue indirectly supports the Socratic thesis that no one does wrong voluntarily.32

IV

We mentioned at the outset that an important motivation for Weiss’ reading is the desire to rescue Socrates from charges of equivocation. In discussing the dialogue’s final argument, Weiss is at pains to stress that his usage is consistent, especially as regards the crucial term ‘good’ (which a number of interpreters have considered a source of trouble).33 As we shall now explain, our rejection of Weiss’ *ad hominem* reading also necessitates giving up on her account of the final argument. Yet since we concur with her in denying the charge that Socrates equivocates, we need to defend another reading.

Weiss contends that Socrates consistently uses the word ‘good’ in the non-moral sense “good at, skilled.” In speaking of the good person, he here has in mind the person skilled in justice. His whole point is that conceiving of justice as a skill leads one inescapably to conclude that someone who does unjust things voluntarily must be deemed as good – skilled – as someone who voluntarily acts justly.

In order to defend that reading, Weiss must explain the qualification ‘if in fact there’s anyone like that’ (ἐὰν τίς ἔστιν οὗτος) in Socrates’ conclusion at 376b5-6. She cannot do so as many have done, by reading it to intimate that there is no
voluntary wrongdoer. That would undercut what she considers the point of Socrates’ attack on Hippias—namely, that Hippias is committed to allowing that the expert in justice may also act unjustly. If indeed Socrates consistently uses ‘good’ in the sense of ‘skilled’, he should have no reservation at all about the good person’s doing wrong voluntarily. As Weiss instead proposes, the qualification signals that the ideal of the perfectly skilled person is an impossible one. She puts Socrates’ point as follows: “if only there actually were a man so skilled at justice that he does wrong when and only when he means and never simply because he is unable to do right, that man would be the good man.” (139)

That interpretation has the merit of supplying Socrates with a valid argument. However, nothing in what Socrates says actually suggests that his conclusion is about a person’s doing wrong “when and only when” he so wills. The only statement of the argument even vaguely reminiscent of such a thesis is 376a6-7, the crucial preceding inference on which the conclusion builds. Yet on close consideration, it fails to provide any support. Socrates there asks Hippias: Οὐκόν ἢ δυνατωτέρα καὶ ἀμείωτων ψυχῆ, ὁτανπερ ἀδικῆ, ἐκοῦσα ἀδικήσει, ἢ δὲ πονηρὰ ἀκούσα; The construction at issue here – ‘ὁτανπερ’ plus the subjunctive, followed by a future indicative – is effectively equivalent to a "future more vivid" conditional (typically with ‘ἐάν’ plus subjunctive in the protasis). The conditional character of the ὁταν-clause is underscored by the emphatic ‘-περ’, much as in the ‘εἴπερ’ of 376b5-6.34 The basic idea is: “if the better soul in fact does wrong, it will do so voluntarily” or “in the event that it does wrong, it will do so voluntarily.” Nothing about the statement implies that the better soul will act unjustly,35 or even that on
any occasion when it should act that way, it would do so voluntarily. Had Socrates wanted to convey one of the latter ideas, he would likely have joined the ὅταν-clause to a present indicative, making it equivalent to a present general condition: “whenever [the soul] does wrong, it does so voluntarily.”36 As it is, this conditional just expresses a general account of the difference between better and worse souls when it comes to unjust action. This no more commits Socrates to thinking to that the better soul could never involuntarily do injustice than an analogous remark about archery or running would commit him to thinking that an expert marksman could never involuntarily miss the mark, or that an expert runner could never twist her ankle and so finish a race by running slowly.37

The source of trouble here is Weiss’ suggestion that Socrates’ use of the word ‘good’ is wholly skill-oriented in character. While it is of course true that the argument treats justice as a matter of power or knowledge, and therefore as a kind of skill, Socrates’ larger point is that the soul possessing this skill is more choice-worthy and thus better than the soul that does not. That is to say, it is a better example of a human soul. Hence at 375e9-11, Socrates asks: “Wasn’t this abler and wiser soul shown to be better and to be more able to do both kinds of thing, both fine and shameful ones, in every task it performs?” (Οὐκοῦν ἡ δυνατωτέρα καὶ σοφωτέρα αὕτη ἀμείωνον οὖσα ἐφάνη καὶ ἀμφότερα μᾶλλον δυναμένη ποιεῖν, καὶ τὰ καλὰ καὶ τὰ αἰσχρὰ, περὶ πᾶσαν ἔργασιάν;).38 When Socrates subsequently introduces the good person as the one having a good soul, he is continuing to speak in broad evaluative terms: the good person is the ideal example of a human being.39
In view of that, it is best to interpret the qualification “if in fact there’s anyone like that” at 376b5-6 in the more common way, as an indication that Socrates does not in fact think the good person would do injustice. To be clear, Socrates is acknowledging, indeed embracing, the conclusion that the person with the choice-worthy soul will be uniquely capable of doing injustice voluntarily, since acting voluntarily is tied to acting with knowledge. Yet he is careful not to affirm that the good person will act, and that is precisely the reason for what he says at 376b5-6. This creates an obvious problem as to how Socrates can avoid the immoralist consequences of the craft analogy. How can he allow that the physician, say, may well find occasion to harm rather than heal while making a legitimate exception in the case of the just person? We turn now to the resolution of that problem.

V

The key is to be found in a radical thesis to which Socrates is famously committed: One can never unjustly promote one’s own interests. The thesis is grounded in the idea that one’s interest in justice exceeds any other interests one may have. Socrates treats justice as a form of psychic health and supposes that the health of the soul is vastly more important than that of the body (as, e.g., at Crito 47d7-48a4). Since unjust action disorders the soul, trying to promote one’s interests unjustly is therefore tantamount to undermining one’s dominating interest, which consists in having a just soul. Put differently, one’s interest in justice
outweighs any set of interests that might be placed on the other side of the scale, whether singly or in combination.42

Justice, then, contrasts with the other crafts. A physician, say, might readily choose not to cure or even to bring about the death of her patient when she thinks she can achieve some more important goal than the patient’s health. For instance, she might thereby assist in a euthanasia case, or secure vital organs to save other lives, or (more ignobly) get rid of her competitors. One might initially be tempted to think that a person skilled at justice would act unjustly if she thought that by doing so she could promote more important aims than she could by acting justly. Yet what aims would the just person think she can thus promote? Socrates’ radical thesis obviously rules out cases analogous to the physician’s killing off her competitors, since there is no interest of the just person that can trump her interest in being just, and since her knowledge of justice will allow her to recognize that fact. There will likewise be no case analogous to the physician’s assisting in euthanasia in order to promote the ultimate interests of her patient. For Socrates, acting unjustly is unequivocally doing harm, or at least aiming to do it. Insofar as the just person is working to promote the interests of those toward whom she acts, she will seek to do them no injustice.

What, finally, about cases of unjust action analogous to the physician’s killing one person to save many, where the interests she seeks to promote are neither hers nor her patient’s, but those of some third party? Suppose for instance that the one who understands justice is considering sacrificing her own interest in a just soul (thereby also harming those against whom she acts) in order to promote the
interests of her children. We submit that Socrates’ would have a twofold response. He would insist that the only interest that could conceivably warrant such a sacrifice is the children’s interest in being themselves just, since any other interests would pale by comparison; and he would then deny the very possibility of promoting justice by unjust means.  

Because no interest of her own or another’s could trump her interest in justice, and because she is in a position to understand as much, the just person will not but pursue justice. Since voluntary action requires knowledge, only the just person – the one who understands justice – can voluntarily do injustice; but insofar as the content of her knowledge includes the radical thesis about interest, the just person will never in fact choose to act unjustly. This, then, neatly explains the reason Socrates might carefully qualify his final argument against Hippias as he does at 376a6-7 and again at b5-6.

A further attraction of the interpretation is that it can likewise explain several other Platonic texts in which similar issues arise. For example, at Gorgias 460a5-c6 Socrates infers that the person who knows what is just will be a just person, where that implies doing just things. One can readily understand why he might invoke such a thesis at this point in the dialogue. It has effectively been denied by Gorgias’ contention that the student who has learned what is just may nonetheless prefer to act unjustly, and Socrates can thus be understood as testing the strength of Gorgias’ commitments. Some readers have condemned Socrates’ easy inference from knowledge of justice to just action as a simple fallacy. But it is no fallacy so long as one supplies the background thesis that acting unjustly never
promotes one’s real interest. By contrast with the *Hippias Minor*, the *Gorgias* actually extracts that thesis from the conversational background and holds it up to direct scrutiny in what ensues. The primary point of the subsequent disagreement between Socrates and Polus is precisely the thesis about interest. Polus declares that tyrants are often right to think that it is better for them to act unjustly, whereas Socrates resists him and insists that they are never right in so thinking. Socrates explicitly declares his commitment to the thesis about interest at 469b8-9, repeats it with an eye especially to tyrannical acts at 470c1-3, and then relentlessly presses his case until Polus capitulates at 479e9. Given all of this, one can see why in his earlier exchange with Gorgias Socrates would feel wedded to the idea that the person who understands justice will be just, even though the idea has yet to be given a proper defense.45

Although we cannot canvass all of the related passages from other dialogues, it is worth noting here an additional benefit of our reading. In order to explain Socrates’ position, we do not need to think of him as committed to psychological egoism (henceforth ‘egoism’), the thesis that one always and only pursues what one takes to be in *one’s own* interest. It has been standard in the literature to presume that Socrates is committed to egoism – indeed, that he is committed to it at such a deep level that he never thinks to articulate the commitment explicitly. So Gregory Vlastos writes: “[For Socrates] desire for happiness is strictly self-referential: it is the agent’s desire for his own happiness and that of no one else. This is so deep-seated an assumption that it is simply taken for granted: no argument is ever given for it in the Platonic corpus.”46 Terence Irwin, sketching a view that is otherwise
compatible with ours, supposes that Socrates is committed to “psychological eudaemonism” – that is, to a form of egoism in which one’s interests are understood in terms of one’s happiness. Moreover, he thinks that the *Hippias Minor* highlights an inference from the craft analogy to egoism: He writes, “If this is Socrates’ view, then the point of the *Hippias Minor* is not to cast doubt on the identification of virtues with crafts, but to show that we must accept psychological eudaemonism if we are to identify virtues with crafts.”

Egoism is in our view an implausible thesis, and we would count it as a mark against Socrates’ position if it required egoism. Fortunately, it does not. We say ‘fortunately’ not only because we find egoism implausible, but also because a few scholars have now begun to question the orthodoxy that Socrates is an egoist.

In the case of the *Hippias Minor*, it is easy enough to dispense with egoism and still explain how Socrates’ can embrace the craft analogy without wavering as regards the morality of experts in justice. Suppose that Socrates has a pluralistic conception of motivation, thinking that people may be motivated by different considerations in different situations – whether it be considerations of their own benefit, considerations of the benefit of others, or even conceptions of rightness that operate independently of all calculations of benefit. What is crucial here is simply that Socrates subscribe to the thesis about interest and therefore hold that there are no situations in which one might knowingly choose to pursue one’s advantage through unjust action. Adopting egoism would not change that basic point: what does the essential work in motivating Socrates’ position is the thesis about interest,
and to it even the defender of egoism must appeal. In that sense, egoism is a gratuitous assumption.

That is a significant result, since those who find egoism philosophically or textually suspect can still take seriously the arguments of the *Hippias Minor*. Whether or not Socrates is an egoist, he can make all of the arguments one finds in the dialogue, and he can do so entirely on the basis of views he articulates and defends elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. The dialogue is neither a philosophical outlier nor a piece of decisive evidence in favor of any one conception of the psychology of motivation.

**VI**

At this point, though, one might have the nagging feeling that we have gone too far. How is the Socrates who champions such a substantive set of commitments compatible with the self-described “wanderer” of the *Hippias Minor*? Should we not at least refrain from attributing to Socrates the background thesis about interest? After all, we say that his self-description is sincere. Let us therefore close with some reflections on the overall portrait of Socrates in the dialogue, a portrait we find both unified and compelling.

To recapitulate, we take Socrates’ wandering to be rooted directly in his lack of knowledge. He is confident when considering the arguments at hand, so much so that he cannot offer viable alternatives. Yet he recognizes that his lack of knowledge leaves him in an unstable position. So far, he has been unable to develop the results of his arguments into one coherent and complete theory. For example (as we
discuss above), he has no general account of voluntary action into which he can set the conclusions of his discussion with Hippias. As a result, unresolved difficulties may – and on occasion have – tempted him to embrace positions at odds with those he so carefully develops here.

An analogous instability threatens Socrates’ background commitments, including the thesis about interest. This is so despite the fact that Socrates not only has arguments for the thesis but also has encountered many people who have tried to deny it, none of whom could sustain their positions. The point is especially clear in Republic I, where both Polemarchus and Thrasymachus fail to embrace the thesis about interest and come to grief as a result. Nevertheless, even at the end of his arguments with them, Socrates acknowledges that he has not yet fully secured it.

Consider first the position taken by Polemarchus, that justice is benefiting one’s friends and harming one’s enemies (332d4-6). In the course of arguing against it, Socrates questions Polemarchus on the assumption that justice is a craft. Eventually Polemarchus describes the craft as that of guarding money when it is not being used. But Socrates points out that the just person, so understood, will also be the best thief (334a10). Socrates can of course allow that justice could in principle be used for either of two opposed ends, since he thinks that the just person will never be tempted to use her skill for ill. But because Polemarchus does not understand what would prevent the person possessing the craft from actually stealing, he is troubled by what Socrates says.

Thrasymachus defines justice as the benefit of the ruler (339a2-4), whom he considers to be the person or group ultimately wielding power in any city. When
Socrates objects that rulers may enact legislation that is not really in their own interests, Thrasy
machus famously insists that rulers are to be understood strictly as experts, skillfully commanding their subjects in order to acquire goods for themselves. Insofar as actual rulers fail to command what is really in their own interests, they fail to act as rulers in the strict sense. Socrates undercuts this view: the expert ruler, considered as such, is concerned only with the benefit of the ruled (342e6-11). By contrast, Thrasy
machus insists both that rulers are to be considered strictly as skilled experts and that what they command – that is to say, what is just – serves their interests but not the interests of their subjects. He ultimately finds himself in an untenable position – attracted, like Socrates, to a conception of justice as craft, but unable to reconcile it with his idea that the real interests of different individuals are in fundamental conflict. Thrasy
machus accordingly collapses into what is effectively a celebration of injustice. That is precisely a denial of the thesis about interest, which has been his main target all along. He now conceives of the true ruler as unjust, skillfully manipulating all things to his own advantage at the expense of everyone else: injustice turns out to be the real craft. Socrates once again brings Thrasy
machus to grief, this time by showing that he is unable to reconcile his conception of rulers as expert craftsmen with his praise of them as outdoing absolutely everyone. Like Polemarchus, Thrasy
machus thus proves unable to maintain a version of the craft analogy while promoting non-Socratic conceptions of what is in one’s interest.49

Such encounters may strengthen Socrates’ commitment to the thesis about interest, but they do not solidify it into knowledge. Even after Socrates tacks on the
so-called function argument and concludes strongly that injustice is never more advantageous than justice (352d9-354a9), he still feels it necessary to emphasize the inconclusive nature of the discussion. He counts himself as knowing nothing about justice because he fails to know what justice is; and the result is that he cannot even speak with knowledge as to whether justice is a virtue or whether the just person will be happy (354b9-c3). Surely Socrates is not suggesting here that he has argued insincerely. His arguments do in fact lead him to think that justice is a virtue and that it is critical for human happiness. But the task of securely establishing this is far from complete. Socrates must still determine what justice is.50

In the Hippias Minor, likewise, Socrates argues sincerely for a conclusion he nevertheless cannot claim to know. Part of what he needs is precisely what he lacks at the end of the arguments of Republic I: to know the truth of the thesis about interest one must know what justice is. What’s more, Socrates needs a plausible account of voluntary action, and all of this must be integrated into a comprehensive theory. Until he has such a theory he will not achieve the kind of stability that puts an end to wandering.

Still, Socrates thinks that the thesis about interest will be crucial to any theory he might eventually construct. Rather than point that out explicitly to Hippias, Socrates forces him to confront the gap between understanding justice and acting justly, and does so without telling him how he might bridge it. Socrates operates thus because Hippias is in no position to endorse the thesis about interest so long as he holds on to his conception of virtue as simplicity and vice as artfulness. That conception leads him to think of the unjust person as one who consistently and
skillfully promotes his own interests at the expense of others and the just person as one who is often ineffective, adhering to the right course in relatively thoughtless fashion. Hippias must come to appreciate the way in which the conversation with Socrates has undermined his notion that there is a positive skill of deception – one that can be considered an expertise alongside all the others and that might qualify someone like Odysseus as clever but morally base. Until he does so, he is not in a position to embrace anything like the thesis about interest, and bringing it up would not help Socrates achieve his goal of forcing Hippias to reflect on the cogency of his position. By the dialogue’s end, Socrates has brought Hippias just so far as he could reasonably hope to bring him. He has done so not by employing *ad hominem* arguments, meant merely to confuse Hippias or to reveal his ignorance, though of course Hippias’ ignorance is on full display. Instead, Socrates has consistently argued in an open and straightforward fashion, revealing plainly the ways in which he takes Hippias to have gone wrong while also subtly indicating what he takes to be a more promising account.

Moreover, Socrates has done all this in a spirit of epistemic humility, with the result that he can at once argue with conviction and claim not to know. When he attends to his arguments, he is not in the least confused about the conclusions he draws; but he readily admits that he is uncertain how to develop those conclusions into a complete ethical theory. Hippias may be far from being able to “rest from wandering”, but so too is Socrates. However, all of this is a sign of Socrates’ philosophical energy and radicalism, and not in any way a mark of tortured self-doubt. The Socrates of the dialogue is thoroughly admirable as a philosopher,
displaying precisely the right blend of persistence and openness. Interpretations that hold otherwise effectively make Socrates out to be a much less modest character and, to our minds, succeed only in rendering him more tedious, self-indulgent, and in the end philosophically sterile.⁵¹

Harvard University

Clark University
Literature Cited


1 By ‘Socrates’, ‘Socrates’ thought’, and the like, we are referring to Plato’s Socrates. We make no assumptions and draw no conclusions about how that character relates to the historical Socrates. At one point we note a parallel between Plato’s Socrates and Xenophon’s, but again without assuming any influence from the historical Socrates.

2 Translations are ours throughout, except where we are explicitly discussing another scholar’s work. We follow Burnet’s text of the dialogues. Vancamp’s recent critical edition of Hpi. mi. accords with Burnet’s text in all of the passages we discuss.

3 Among the dozen or more translations that we have consulted, the only exceptions we have found are those by Robin (“Cela, Socrate, je ne vois pas le moyen de te le conceder!”) and Berger (“I don’t see how I’m to agree with you there, Socrates.”). Regrettably, neither translator defends his choice against the traditional alternative or takes it as spur to reworking the end of the dialogue so as to suggest a new account of Socrates’ position.

4 There is an amusing parallel at Symp. 216c1-3. Alcibiades explains how Socrates repeatedly makes him feel ashamed, and then caps his explanation with the following remark: καὶ πολλάκις μὲν ἡδέως ἄν ἵδοιμι αὐτὸν μὴ ὄντα ἐν ἀνθρώποις· εἴ δ’ αὖ τούτο γένοιτο, εὖ οἶδα ὅτι πολὺ μεῖζον ἄν ἄχθοιμην, ὥστε οὐκ ἔχω ὅτι χρήσωμαι τούτῳ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ. (‘Not infrequently would I gladly see him vanish from the face of the earth. But should that happen, I know well that I would be even more aggrieved, so that I’m at a loss as to how I should deal with the man.’)
Alcibiades is here expressing uncertainty how to integrate Socrates into his thought and conduct. He is not in fact renouncing any attempt to deal with him hereafter!

Some versions of such a translation go even further in suggesting that the argument is unreliable. Schleiermacher, Jowett, Fowler and, more recently, Leake all effectively represent ‘φαίνεσθαι’ as the sentence’s main verb instead of treating it as governed by ‘ἀναγκαῖον’ with an understood ‘ἐστί’. For example, Jowett: “and yet that seems to be the conclusion which, as far as we can see at present, must follow from our argument.” Loose renderings of that kind pave the way for Vlastos simply to omit the ‘ἀναγκαῖον’ altogether when he cites the passage as the centerpiece of his case that the dialogue is a record of “honest perplexity” on the part of Socrates (and Plato). See 1991, 278: “this is how it appears from the argument.”

See Denniston 1954, 119-20, and note his general explanation on 115 along with his complaint regarding scholars who deal with the emphatic (either determinative or intensive) use of the particle by “forc[ing] it down upon the Procrustean bed of limitation.”

Hippias’ indignation is further signaled by his emphatically placed ‘δεινόν’ as well as by his use of ‘μέντοι’ in connection with the potential optative, on which see Denniston 1954, 402: “[i]n potential statements . . . expressing lively surprise or indignation.” As the examples there show, emphatic words such as ‘δεινόν’, ‘γελοῖον’ or ‘ἄτοπον’ are not uncommon in connection with ‘μέντοι’. Note, for instance, the tone of mock indignation in Socrates’ comment to Polus at Grg. 461e1-
3: Δεινὰ μεντὰν πάθοι, ὦ βέλτιστε, εἰ Αθήναζε ἀφικόμενος, οὖ τῆς Ἑλλάδος πλείστη ἔστιν ἐξουσία τοῦ λέγειν, ἔπειτα σὺ ἐνταῦθα τούτου μόνος ἀτυχήσαις.

8 Translations of that sort are offered by Culverhouse, Fowler, Leake, Pinjuh and Smith.

9 For a neat parallel, compare an exchange shortly afterward, at 376b2-4: [ΣΩ.] Ἀγαθοῦ μὲν ἄρα ἀνδρός ἔστιν ἐκόντα ἀδικεῖν, κακοῦ δὲ ἀκοντα, εἰπερ ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἀγαθὴν ψυχὴν ἔχει. Προς αὐτὸν τὸν ἐξείλε γε. For further examples see Denniston 1954, 343-4.

10 Blondell characterizes the final words of the dialogue as a mockery of Hippias’ preference for statements using ‘δεινόν’ and equivalents (2002, 129-30). Yet the linguistic construction of Socrates’ remark ties it directly and solely to 375d3-4. All of Hippias’ other statements occur near the outset of the dialogue and none involve the emotional future condition. Indeed, the first two (at 363c7-d4 and 364d3-6, the latter of which has ‘αἰσχρόν’ instead of ‘δεινόν’) make use of an elaborate but not uncommon rhetorical figure, one of which even Socrates can avail himself. (See Ap. 28d10-29a1.) The third (at 365c7) is much more abbreviated, but it is essentially of a piece with the others, as is clear from the grammatical construction and the initial ‘καὶ γὰρ’ (on which see Denniston 1954, 109). What is being signaled in all these cases is Hippias’ deftness as a speaker and utter confidence in his own abilities. We therefore disagree with Blondell’s suggestion that Hippias’ use of ‘δεινόν’ and like expressions effectively marks him as “a complacent voice of conventional common sense” (2002, 130).
The unexpressed verb of the condition’s apodosis could be the future ‘ἔσται’, but it would be even better to understand the present ‘ἔστι’, which would emphasize the fact that the thought expressed by the protasis is already coming true.

Could one hold that Hippias “wanders” in the sense that his overt statements of his position are at odds with his assent to the steps of Socrates’ argument? Perhaps, although the more appropriate image for that idea would surely have been one of disharmony or dissonance. Moreover, an interpretation of that sort would produce uncomfortable results. First, it would force one to suppose that Hippias and Socrates are wandering in utterly distinct ways and would therefore be in tension with the straightforward implication of the dialogue’s final lines. Second, it would demand that one take Hippias to have been wandering throughout the dialogue – from the very first argument to the last. That would sit awkwardly with Socrates’ relatively late introduction of the image of wandering (at 372d) in order to describe his own situation, and it would empty Socrates’ final words of any special relevance to what has transpired toward the end of the dialogue.

The idea that Socrates is now in the grip of an argument he finds compelling would also make good sense of a suggestion that may be implicit in his use of the verb ‘περιέρχομαι’ – namely, that his κατηβολή is a recurring condition. (Compare here the scholiast’s explanation of the κατηβολή: ἡ τοῦ πυρετοῦ περίοδος καὶ ὁρμή... καὶ ἱερὰ νόσος (Greene 1938, 180).) Be that as it may, Socrates’ language in the passage indicates that the phrase ‘νῦν ἐν τῷ παρόντι’ should be translated without any suggestion that the conclusion would be revisable upon further examination of
the argument. That in turn makes it all the more likely that in the later echo of this passage at 376b8-c1 the phrase ‘νῦν γε’ does not mean ‘at least at this moment’.  

14 It is therefore important not to exaggerate the adversative force of ‘ἐνίοτε μέντοι’ at 372d7, as is sometimes done in translation and interpretation. (For an example see Vlastos 1991, 278.) Compare here Denniston, 405: “Like μήν, μέντοι is normally a balancing adversative, and seldom goes so far as to eliminate, or seriously invalidate, the opposed idea like ἀλλά, or μὲν οὖν.” Socrates’ reassertion of the contrasting idea in what immediately follows (νῦν δὲ ἐν τῷ παρόντι . . .) effectively renders his statement at d7-e1 an aside.

15 The theme of wandering also plays an important role in a passage from Alc. (117a-118b). There, the cause of wandering is said to be not just a lack of knowledge but, in addition, a tendency to think one knows when one does not. Such a characterization might seem to conflict with Hp. mi., where Socrates is well aware that he lacks knowledge. Yet the two dialogues are not really at odds. The discussion in Alc. is about the goals of one’s practical activity. According to Socrates, the reason one does not wander when one is aware of one’s ignorance is either that one recognizes the end in question to be unattainable (as with the example of ascending to the stars, 117b5-6) or else that one can simply defer to an expert who will serve as a guide. Neither consideration is relevant in the more theoretical context of Hp. mi. There is no good reason to suppose that the problem under discussion will not admit of a resolution; and as Socrates makes clear at the end of the dialogue, deferring to the supposed experts would be of no use in the present case.
16 Is Socrates’ wandering in tension with his statement at *Grg.* 490e9-11 that he continually says the same things about the same things? It is not. That avowal of constancy is made in response to Callicles’ impatience with the homely examples Socrates typically uses. In answering Callicles’ reproach, Socrates emphasizes that (unlike Callicles) he uses evaluative terms in a clear and consistent way, one that neatly fits his favored examples (491b5-c5). Such consistency is rooted in Socrates’ commitment to philosophical argument (482a4-b2), and nothing about the exchanges of *Hp. mi.* would suggest that Socrates here thinks differently. Note also Socrates’ careful remark in *Grg.* that his tendency to say the same thing does not amount to knowledge (509a4-7) – a remark that would permit him elsewhere to wander in just the manner we have described.

17 The premises at issue here are the theses that the false speaker is powerful or capable (δυνατός), that capacity is to be understood in terms of knowledge, and that the knowledge in question involves a mastery of the subject about which one speaks. (See 365d-366a.) Hippias enthusiastically endorses each premise.

18 This is not to say that for Socrates truth or knowledge consists in theoretical coherence. It is simply to acknowledge that in this case a coherent and comprehensive theory is a crucial mark, a necessary condition, of being able to say that one knows the truth of one’s premises. Lacking the necessary condition, Socrates understands that he falls short of knowledge.

19 For illustrations of this tendency see 367d3, 369a3, 374a1, 374b3-4, 374d7, and 375b4. Socrates’ struggle against it explains the laborious way in which the arguments sometimes proceed and accounts for one of the dialogue’s most striking
comic moments—the long passage at 368a-369a in which Socrates casts Hippias as
the representative of a vast range of technai and demands that he review them all in
order to find a counter-example.

20 See 369b8-c2, and cf. 373b4-5. (Hp. mai. 301b2-7 is a close cousin of the former
passage. Compare likewise 304a5-6 of the latter dialogue.)

21 Our defense of the idea that Socrates endorses the argument’s conclusion finds a
parallel in Xenophon, who incorporates a roughly similar thesis into his account of
Socratic protreptic in Mem. 4.2. (See 4.2.19-23.) For our purposes, it does not
matter whether one author derives his discussion from the other or whether instead
both depend on a common source (perhaps the historical Socrates). The crucial
point is that a second Socratic writer could find a version of the conclusion plausible
enough to attribute it to his Socrates in a context in which that character’s interests
are not strictly refutational. In view of what we shall eventually go on to say, note
also that Xenophon does not represent Socrates’ endorsement of the conclusion as
implying that he thinks of the just person as someone who will on occasion act
unjustly. (See esp. Mem. 3.9.5.) How Xenophon’s treatment of the background
philosophical issues may compare with Plato’s is beyond our scope here, but for
valuable discussion of Mem. 4.2 see Johnson 2005, and for further reflections see
Bandini and Dorion 2011, 80-3.

22 The phrase is Vlastos’ (1991, 280). For a colorful statement of the former reading,
see Guthrie 1975, 195-6.
We are not the first interpreters to endorse both theses. Penner (1973) and Irwin (1995, 69-70) do so as well. As will emerge later, we differ from them in the way we join the two.

See Weiss 2006, an updating of her 1981. (We shall be concerned throughout with the more recent discussion.) For another influential treatment of at least some of the dialogue’s arguments as ad hominem, see Blondell 2002, esp. 138-9, 142-3, and 146-7. We favor Weiss’ version of the approach partly because of its central concern with demonstrating the validity Socrates’ arguments — a concern with which we sympathize despite our other differences.

Earlier in the dialogue, Socrates had argued that Hippias is committed to thinking that the same person has the capacity to tell the truth and to lie, and that the voluntary liar is to be esteemed over the involuntary one. According to Weiss, “Socrates does not shrink from the idea that the voluntary liar is better than the involuntary; he might well believe that lying and deceit are necessary – even beneficial – on occasion. Yet, once the liar is conceived of as a wrongdoer, the voluntariness with which he lies seems to threaten his goodness” (2006, 143).

For the details of Weiss’ interpretation, see esp. 2006, 132-3 and 142-3.

At 2006, 130-1, Weiss translates ‘ἐξ ἐπιβουλής’ and equivalents as ‘by design’, and she gives that expression a weak (non-pejorative) reading, as if it were interchangeable with ‘ἐκών’. The relevant terminology is introduced into the dialogue at 370e5-9, where Hippias declares: ἄ μὲν γὰρ ὁ Ἀχιλλεύς ψεύδεται, οὐκ ἐξ ἐπιβουλής φαίνεται ψευδόμενος ἁλλ’ ἀκών, διὰ τὴν συμφορὰν τὴν τοῦ στρατοπέδου ἀναγκασθεὶς καταμεῖναι καὶ βοηθῆσαι· ἄ δὲ ὁ Ὄδυσσεύς, ἐκών τε καί
ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς. The contrast here is not simply between Achilles’ saying false things voluntarily and his doing so involuntarily (Weiss 2006, 131) but, rather, between his saying false things out of treachery and his doing so because he is compelled to change his plans by the plight of the army. When Hippias then characterizes Odysseus as acting ἐκών τε καὶ ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς he likewise means that Odysseus acts not just intentionally but treacherously. Socrates thus goes on to counter Hippias in the case of Achilles by describing the latter as a malefactor, γόης καὶ ἐπίβουλος πρὸς τῇ ἀλαζονείᾳ (371a3). See further 371d5-7, where Socrates asks Hippias whether he really believes that in speaking to Odysseus Achilles is οὐκ ἐπιβουλεύοντά τε καὶ ἡγούμενον ἀρχαῖν εἶναι τὸν Ὀδυσσέα καὶ αὐτὸν αὐτῷ τούτῳ τῷ τεχνάζειν τε καὶ ψεύδεσθαι περιέσεσθαι.

The strength of Hippias’ reaction is marked by the rhetorical fullness with which he develops the idea, as well as by his opening adverbial καὶ, which pointedly expresses his distaste. In between the two passages we have quoted, there occurs an exchange (371e6-8) in which Hippias rejects Socrates’ contention that he is committed to thinking Odysseus better than Achilles. Socrates responds by pointing out that this would seem warranted by their earlier discussion: Τί δέ; οὐκ ἄρτι ἐφάνησαν οἱ ἐκόντες ψευδόμενοι βελτίους ἢ οἱ ἀκόντες; Here, Socrates returns to discussing οἱ ψευδόμενοι not because he is narrowly focused on that class of person but because it was the center of attention in his earlier argument with Hippias, an argument that he takes clearly to support the preference for Odysseus. (The ‘τί δέ’ accordingly registers his incredulity. Cf. Denniston 1954, 175.)
Vlastos maintains that the word ‘ψευδής’ need not designate a liar, a person who knowingly speaks false things with the intent to deceive (1991, 276, with n. 130). But his reasoning is unconvincing: he simply generalizes from what the word often means when applied to statements, and he offers no evidence for the relevant use in connection with persons. In fact, the sense of the word when applied to persons is standardly what Vlastos suggests is not at issue here. The point is made clearly by Aristotle, who puts it thus: ἄνθρωπος δὲ ψευδής ὁ εὐχερής καὶ προαιρετικός τῶν τοιούτων [sc. ψευδῶν] λόγων, μὴ δὲ ἐτερόν τι ἄλλα δι’ αὐτό, καὶ ὁ ἄλλος ἐμποιητικός τῶν τοιούτων λόγων . . . (Metaph. Δ.29, 1025a2-4). When Socrates argues that the ἀληθής and the ψευδής are in fact the same person, and does so by focusing squarely on the idea of a capacity to speak falsely rather than on the intention or disposition to do so, he of course understands that his conclusion will seem bizarre from an ordinary standpoint. That is why he so elaborately develops his way of thinking at 365d-366c. He speaks as he does in order to show that the ἀληθής and the ψευδής cannot be distinguished as Hippias has proposed to do, by characterizing the former as naively simple and the latter as skilled. Indeed, Socrates holds that the tendency to deceive should not be considered a distinct art of any sort. (Compare here Weiss 2006, 127-9.) His usage would be “sophistry” (Vlastos’ term) only if he moved illicitly between capacity and intention in his arguments, but as Weiss has shown he does not. In the matter of translation, however, we avoid Weiss’ ‘liar’ because we think it encourages too narrow a focus on the dispositional quality and thereby obscures the argument Socrates is making. We prefer ‘false speaker’ or ‘false person’, insofar as they preserve the root notion of
falsehood and better capture the force of the argument while still being adequately pejorative in character.


31 Indeed, Socrates introduces his question by tying it to a judgment of the relative merits of the Iliad and Odyssey as poems. He then justifies asking Hippias by stressing the extent of his competence in the evaluation of poetry: “he has displayed for us a host of things of all kinds, and about other poets as well as Homer” (ἐπειδή καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ καὶ παντοδαπὰ ἡμῖν ἐπιδέδεικται καὶ περὶ ποιητῶν τε ἄλλων καὶ περὶ Ὀμήρου – 363c1-3).

If one looks elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, the claim to teach virtue is not in fact regularly connected with Hippias. At Prt. 315c, Hippias is said to lecture on natural philosophy, and at 318d-319a Protagoras contrasts himself with Hippias on the grounds that while the latter teaches arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music and poetry, Protagoras teaches sound deliberation, which he equates with political success. Despite several further episodes involving Hippias in the dialogue, no reference is made to any expertise in human goodness. Nor is there such a reference in the mentions of Hippias in Phdr. (267b) or Ap. (19e). In the latter work, strikingly, the practice of offering to teach virtue is discussed (20a-b), but it is associated only with Evenus and not with the figures mentioned just before – Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias. It is only in the Hp. mai. that one finds any such claim being ascribed to Hippias (see 283cff.). While that constitutes some evidence, its value is significantly mitigated by the ill fit with the other dialogues and by continuing uncertainty concerning the authenticity of the Hp. mai. For a more
sanguine discussion of Hippias as a "moral teacher," see Blondell 2002, 128-9, and compare the earlier and even fuller remarks in the original version, Blundell 1992, 135-6.

32 For a classic statement of this common approach, see Taylor 1937, 37-38.

33 See 2006, 137-8 for discussion and references.

34 Although the point typically goes unnoticed, 376a6-7 thus contains exactly the same sort of qualification as 376b5-6, albeit in less emphatic form. (For a rare observation to that effect, see Blondell 2002, 152 n.185.) Weiss misconstrues the point of the statement when she cites it (2006, 139 n.38) as a case in which Socrates announces a version of his conclusion without any qualification whatsoever.

35 Weiss’ paraphrase in her reconstruction of the argument is thus misleading: “The abler and better soul acts unjustly intentionally,” “The bad soul acts unjustly unintentionally.” (See 2006, 135, premises 9 and 10 of the argument Weiss presents.)

36 The ὅταν-construction a few lines earlier, at 376a2-3, is in effect a present general condition. (Ὅταν ἁρὰ τὰ ἁλόχρα ἐργάζηται, ἐκοῦσα ἐργάζεται διὰ δύναμιν καὶ τέχνην . . . ) That it is because it simply explores the logical implications of the immediately preceding mention of the soul’s ability to do both fine and shameful things (375e9-11). Indeed, that preceding remark in turn just reiterates the conceptual connections established in the course of Socrates’ earlier epagōgē. It is only at 376a6-7 that Socrates draws his conclusion concerning the soul’s ability to do injustice, and there the appropriate reservation is carefully marked.
Compare 366c1, where Socrates effectively acknowledges the possibility of such cases. In discussing the dialogue’s final argument, Pinjuh accuses Socrates of equivocating between the thesis that the soul of the good person does injustice only voluntarily (and never involuntarily) and the thesis that only the soul of the good person (and never that of the bad person) voluntarily does injustice. He thinks that Socrates has reason to endorse the first thesis but not the second. (See his 2006, 224, 236.) In supposing that the first thesis figures in the argument, he has in mind what is said at 376a6-7. We take the interpretation we have just offered to counter that reading, and we consider Pinjuh’s second thesis as the one with which Socrates is solely – and appropriately – concerned. Against that thesis, Pinjuh objects that at 367a2 it is said that the ignorant person wishing to speak falsely often, but not always, speaks the truth – thereby implying that he sometimes acts voluntarily. We do not take the latter inference to follow. When the ignorant person succeeds in speaking falsely, it is not because he is δυνατός or σοφός, and therefore not because his action may be characterized as ἐκών.

Note that on Weiss’ reading, the phrase ‘ἀμείνων οὐσα ἑφάνη’ would implausibly have to be understood to express the tautology that the abler and wiser soul is more skilled. However, the backward reference of ‘ἑφάνη’ clearly links the point to the immediately preceding epagōgē, where ‘ἄγαθός’, ‘ἀμείνων’ and like terms are evaluative in character. (See especially the way these terms are used at 374d8-375a6.)

Compare here Penner 1973, 141.
Nowhere in the dialogue does Socrates maintain that there are people who voluntarily do wrong. As we have explained, he is careful to avoid any such implication at 376a6-7. He is similarly careful at 375d1-2, which is likewise future more vivid in form. A like caution can be seen even in Socrates’ emphatic statement of the idea at 372d4-7: οἱ βλάπτοντες τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ἁδικοῦντες καὶ ψευδόμενοι καὶ ἐξαπατῶντες καὶ ἁμαρτάνοντες ἐκόντες ἀλλὰ μὴ ἄκοντες, βελτίους εἶναι ἢ οἱ ἄκοντες. Here, the use of ‘μή’ in the crucial participial expression ἐκόντες ἀλλὰ μὴ ἄκοντες’ effectively gives the participles a conditional force. Unlike ‘οὐ’, ‘μή’ leaves it an open question whether there are in fact any such people.

41 ‘Interest’ here must be read objectively: It is not that my subjective concern with justice must exceed all my other concerns, but rather that in fact justice has more to do with my well-being than do all other things.

42 This line of reasoning secures only the idea that it is impossible to promote one’s overall interest through unjust action. That is all we need to attribute to Socrates to explain how he bridges the gap. Yet he may well have an even stronger view: not only will one fail to promote one’s overall interest by unjust action, but one will also fail to promote any aspect of one’s interests. To secure that claim, Socrates could appeal to his theory of conditional goods, arguing that justice is the condition of any aspect of one’s life being good for one. See, e.g., the treatment of conditional goods at Euthyd. 278e-282d (esp. 280d7-281e5).

43 The first point could once again be sharpened by appeal to Socrates’ theory of conditional goods. If all other things depend on justice for their goodness, then no other “good” would really be good if it were exchanged for justice or acquired in the
absence of justice. Assessing the plausibility of the overall (twofold) position would prove a complicated matter insofar as it would require canvassing a range of cases in which one might think that justice could be promoted by unjust means.

44 E.g., Dodds 1959, *ad loc.*

45 It is an interesting question why Gorgias does not dissent at 460a-c, especially since the full case for the background thesis is not complete for another twenty pages. One possibility the dialogue leaves open is that he may well agree with Socrates. Notice that Gorgias made his earlier comment concerning the student only in order to reconcile the fact that rhetoricians often act unjustly with his admission that the teacher of rhetoric must be able to teach justice. Yet there is good reason to suppose that the latter admission is utterly ad hoc on his part (see *Meno* 95c1-4). So perhaps Gorgias does not really hold the position he has just been forced to take and instead finds Socrates’ view much more attractive.


47 Irwin 1995, 70. Irwin’s discussion of the dialogue is brief. Penner 1973 offers a fuller treatment along similar lines, and we are sympathetic to many details of his approach. However, he too identifies Socrates as an egoist.

48 Notably, the view that he is not an egoist is defended in different ways by Morrison 2003, Weiss 2006, and Ahbel-Rappe 2010 and 2012. One piece of evidence that we find especially compelling is Socrates’ description of his own other-directed motivations at *Ap.* 30d6-e2.

49 One could of course respond to such an inability by giving up the craft analogy rather than assenting to Socrates’ conception of interest. Socrates himself never
encourages such a resolution, instead relentlessly arguing that justice is so decisively in one’s interest that it would never benefit one to be unjust. Not only does he take that to be the result of his arguments in Book I (354a8-9), but he also undertakes to prove it in response to the challenge of Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book II.

50 The fact that Glaucon and Adeimantus subsequently take up Thrasymachus’ position, and that their challenge to Socrates in elaborating this position essentially sets the agenda for the whole of the Resp., helps show that Socrates’ victory over Thrasymachus is provisional and that his conviction that justice is better than injustice requires further theoretical grounding.

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