

HIPPIAS MINOR

—or—

THE ART OF CUNNING

*A new translation of Plato's
most controversial dialogue*



Introduction and artwork

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been realized in these pages. This book would not exist without "The Owl's Legacy," Chris Marker's thirteen-part video series on the historical and philosophical foundations of ancient Greece. Marker was and will remain—in our hearts and minds—the most cunning one of all: the cat *and* the owl. This book is dedicated to his memory.

—The Editors

INTRODUCTION

by Paul Chan

Hippias Minor is one of Plato's early dialogues and arguably the most controversial. In it, he portrays Socrates debating Hippias, a prominent sophist. As the dialogue unfolds, Socrates argues that there is no difference between a person who tells the truth and one who lies, that an intentional liar is better than an unintentional one, and that the good man is the one who willingly makes mistakes and does wrong and unjust things.

It is difficult to reconcile this dialogue with Plato's reputation as a philosopher renowned for his pursuit of such ideals as justice and truth. This is the reason *Hippias Minor* is so confounding. It makes claims that plainly contradict what is generally understood to be Plato's philosophical and moral outlook. But what if those claims are puzzling because they have been misunderstood? What if *Hippias Minor* becomes more comprehensible if we broaden the terms of the dialogue, which in turn renders the claims in their full and original complexity? And what if it was revealed that,

rather than being a series of paradoxical moral arguments, *Hippias Minor* is actually a provocative theory about the indispensability of aesthetics to an ethical life? What if Socrates wasn't merely championing the act of lying—as the dialogue has traditionally been interpreted—but, rather, advocating for a novel way of thinking about the political potential of the creative act?

Plato was by his own account uninterested in art. He considered it distracting and perhaps even dangerous if left unfettered. The pleasures and insights to be gained from experiencing art are like so many lures that lead away from what he considered the higher good: philosophy. This is why the kind of aesthetics Plato advocated for (on the rare occasions when he did) mirrored how his philosophy acted and felt—pure, changeless, and unwavering.¹ And the art Plato championed was startlingly austere and minimal, but not like the minimalism one would associate with, say, a Donald Judd sculpture. The very appearance of art as something that one could sensuously consider and appreciate was objectionable to Plato. Beauty, for him, was a painting that didn't use paint.

This way of thinking about art is most emphatically reflected in the *Republic*, Plato's later and most expansive work. Poets such as Homer were banned from Callipolis, his utopian city. Songs with

1. James I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87.

multiple harmonies were also prohibited, along with any music played by multistringed instruments.² All forms of art must be as "unmixed" as possible, which meant that they must be uncontaminated by plurality or change. Plato wanted art to be as pure as he thought his philosophy was.

In early Platonic works such as *Hippias Minor*, this longing for art and philosophy to be as objective and unadorned as the laws of nature was expressed in a negative way. Rather than define what they ought to be, Plato denigrated those who he believed represented what they were not. Here, the target was Hippias of Elis (c. 470–c. 395 BCE), who was a well-known member of the sophistic movement in the fifth century. During this time in Athens, itinerant teachers of the arts and sciences, known as sophists, catered to the growing demand of the Athenian upper class to learn different bodies of knowledge. For large sums of money, sophists taught methods of rhetoric and a variety of philosophical discourses that, among other things, helped those who could afford it reach even higher stations in Greek society. In other words, philosophy was being sold by sophists in ways not unlike the marketing of higher education today: as a tool for social and political advancement.

Hippias was perhaps the first to combine musical and literary analysis, and was attempting to realize a discursive model for understanding language through musical qualities such as pitch and

2. Plato, *Republic* 399d.

rhythm.³ But very little of this, or any of Hippias's real thinking, is spelled out in the dialogue that bears his name. It was never Plato's intention to give him a fair hearing. Instead, he used Hippias as a stand-in for sophistry in general, so that he could show how Socrates was superior to the entire sophistic movement in his methods of philosophical thinking. This is how Plato wants us to remember him—as the one who, through informal conversation, gave away his philosophy to anyone willing to listen, and emphasized the interdependency between what one knows and who one is. In other words, philosophy was not about knowing this or that, but *being* this way or that way.⁴ Socrates's famous proposition that virtue is knowledge reflects his insistence that what is most worth knowing is a particular know-how or practice concerning what it means to carry oneself in the world.

Plato believed Socrates was sentenced to death in 399 BCE by the city of Athens because he was mistakenly viewed as a sophist. This is perhaps why Plato took such pains to distinguish his teacher from the philosophical circle that—in his eyes—contributed to his death. I think it is also reasonable to suggest that this antagonism toward sophists plays a sizable role in how Plato viewed art and aesthetics, since one of the defining characteristics of sophistry is its intimate relationship with the arts.

3. Porter, *Aesthetic Thought*, 214.

4. Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 29.

Among the sophists, Protagoras (c. 490–c. 420 BCE) is considered the oldest and to be broadly representative of sophist thought. He is perhaps best known for his famous dictum that “man is the measure,” which succinctly captures the core of Protagoraeian philosophy: that the sum of our experiences lies in how things appear to us. For Protagoras, the world is understood solely through our senses, and philosophy consists of what insights can be gained by how it all looks and feels. He believed in a sort of radical empiricism where the essence of a thing is *nothing but* its appearance. Diogenes Laertius reported that Protagoras even held “that the soul is nothing apart from its sensations.”⁵ Sensorial experience is key to Protagoras's thinking and to sophistry in general.

This accounts for the sophists' fascination with the arts. By engaging with the work of painters, musicians, and poets, they speculated on how artistic compositions came to embody qualities such as beauty, harmony, or pleasure, so that they could harness (and exploit) those same qualities in their philosophical work. They were also materialists, insofar as they accepted that the arts exist in a material reality. A piece of music needs singers and instruments to conjure the sounds that are to be felt and heard; a sculpture comes into being because it is carved from a piece of marble. For the sophists, exemplary sensory experiences such as those afforded by art must be embodied in some kind of material substance if they are

5. Porter, *Aesthetic Thought*, 214.

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to be grasped at all. So they sought to understand the phenomena that made forms of expression possible.

Plato disdained the sophists for these reasons. He believed material as such was debased and fundamentally deficient as a medium for expressing what was most exemplary about existence, which he called The Good. This undeniably mystical aspect at the core of Platonic thought is coupled with an insistence that only through the rigorous application of a certain way of thinking could The Good be comprehended. And virtues such as beauty were only realized in what he called the Ideas or Forms, which are not embodied in any kind of material substance and so do not exist in actual reality—they literally do not appear and are not apprehended by the senses at all. For Plato, the fact that sophists engaged with the material presence of art and sensuous experience at all made them suspect. He never tired of accusing the sophists of being inferior philosophers, and this is certainly the case in such later works as the *Republic*. But Plato's own philosophy was still developing when he wrote *Hippias Minor*. He could not rely on a robust and mature set of concepts to defeat Hippias; instead, he had to resort to other—more inventive—means.

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French historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot has noted how the relationship between Socrates and Plato bears a striking

1. The most excellent thing is that which can be both itself and its opposite. $(X \leftrightarrow \sim X)$

PAUL CHAN $(X \leftrightarrow \sim X)$

2. That which can be both itself and its opposite is a riddled object.

resemblance to that of another teacher and his disciple some five hundred years later—Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul.⁶ This connection is especially pertinent in *Hippias Minor* because, like Paul, Plato sought to undermine the notion of law and the order that it decrees. In the later section of the dialogue, Socrates makes the case that the excellent man is one who is knowledgeable at what he excels in. But the more he masters a certain field of endeavor, the more he is capable of manipulating that field to suit his interest and will. This, Socrates claims, creates the possibility that the excellent man is the one most able to deceive others, making an explicit connection between understanding something and exploiting it. He goes on to argue that the one who knows law best is also the one capable of being the most criminal, and the one who uses the law most ably, even when it is being *misused*, is the one most worthy of being praised as excellent:

SOCRATES So, now, to commit a crime is to do something poorly, and not to commit one is a fine thing.

HIPPIAS Yes.

SOCRATES So won't the more able and excellent character, whenever it commits a crime, willfully commit that crime, while the worthless character does so against its will?

6. Hadot, *Ancient Philosophy*, 237.

3. OOO requires acknowledgment of excellence in nonhumans.

\therefore ooo requires riddle

\therefore The riddled object¹⁹ is the most excellent thing.

HIPPIAS It appears so.

SOCRATES So isn't the excellent man the one who has an excellent character, while his opposite has a poor character?

HIPPIAS Yes.

SOCRATES Then it's the mark of an excellent man to commit crimes willfully, while his opposite does so against his will, if indeed the excellent man has an excellent character.

HIPPIAS Well, he does have an excellent character, at any rate.

SOCRATES Then the person who goes wrong and does disgraceful and criminal things, if he does exist, can't be anyone other than the excellent person.⁷

Paul takes a similarly ironic and perverse view of law. In *Letters to the Romans*, Paul links law to sin, and suggests that death is felt first by following the law.

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not

7. Plato, *Hippias Minor* 376a-b (82-83).

have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.⁸

I don't interpret this as Paul describing a literal death, but, rather, a psychosomatic dynamic of law, where, in trying to influence our behavior through regulations and prohibitions, it also agitates and excites us physically and emotionally. And it is this excitation that produces a "deadening" within oneself. Law, for Paul, "deadens" life by making it manic, and disrupts the potential for inner development because the living is too traumatized by its own repetition compulsion to follow and fulfill the law that lords over it.

Nomos is the Greek word that corresponds to "law," but it also translates as "custom" or "convention." The constellation of meanings that *nomos* represents reflects how the power to establish and maintain order is understood in the ancient world. And this is what the writings of Plato and Paul were working to subvert, using whatever literary and philosophical means were at their disposal. They were both working against the law of some order. But this

8. Romans 7:7 (English Standard Version).

is not to say that what was being subverted was merely philosophical or literary. In the case of Paul, he had a very particular and historical kind of law in mind that he sought to upend. That law was Roman rule.

Likewise, Plato's target was the sophists, who represented a kind of intellectual and aesthetic influence that he believed led to the wrong kind of rule in Athens. So he ridiculed the authority the sophists claimed and the *nomos* they represented:

SOCRATES Come on now, Hippias, go right at it and scrutinize how this applies to all the fields of knowledge one by one: Is there anywhere this works differently? At any rate, in the greatest number of the arts you're the most intelligent among all humankind, as I once heard you boasting, relating in detail the plentiful and enviable intelligence you possess, in the public square, next to the bankers' tables. You said that one time you arrived at Olympia with nothing on you but things you had made yourself. First the ring—you started there—that you were wearing you said was your own work, since you know how to carve rings; and another, a signet ring, was your work too, plus an oil scraper and an oil bottle—which you yourself had wrought! And then there were the sandals you had on, which you said you had cobbled on your own, and the cloak and short tunic you said you'd woven on a loom!

And what everybody thought was the most outlandish, and the exhibit of the greatest intelligence, was when you said that the belt you wore around that short tunic was like the Persian ones that extravagant people wear, but that you'd twined it together with your own hands.⁹

Throughout the dialogue Socrates questions the veracity of Hippias's claims as if he was exposing the lies of a con artist, and conflates Hippias's inferior intellect with his talent as an artisan, as though they went hand in hand. But what is less remarked upon is how cunning Socrates is in outwitting Hippias, and the degree to which he is willing to use crafty, even outlandish arguments to make his points. Socrates here is no paragon of virtue but, rather, the shrewd and seasoned philosopher who demonstrates how cunning he must be in order to unmask the hollow authority of an inferior form of thinking.

The dialogue in fact begins with the notion of cunning. Hippias had just given a presentation where he claimed Homer made Achilles the most excellent man among those who had arrived at Troy, with Nestor the most intelligent, and Odysseus the most cunning. Hippias then declares that Achilles is better than Odysseus. Eudicus, who had heard Hippias speak, goads Socrates to praise Hippias for his performance. But instead, Socrates begins

9. *Hippias Minor* 368b–c (61).

to question Hippias about why he believes Achilles is superior to Odysseus, and what he means in using the word *cunning*.

Hippias explains that Achilles is the better man because he tells the truth and speaks plainly, whereas Odysseus is deceitful and therefore not excellent. Socrates hones in on this and questions him further, leading him to conclude that the excellent man cannot also be cunning, and vice versa. Hippias goes on to boast how confident he is about what he knows as true. If law is the language of authority, then certainty is its style.

Socrates chaffs at what Hippias presents and proceeds to attack him like a lawyer conducting a cross-examination, dismantling the notion that someone who is cunning cannot also be excellent. At the end of this first series of arguments Socrates corners Hippias with his reasoning and forces him to admit that the excellent man is the one who is *most* capable of cunning—exactly the opposite of what Hippias initially claimed.

SOCRATES Who then turns out to be deceitful concerning calculation, Hippias? The excellent person, or someone else? The same person in fact is able; and this person is also truthful.

HIPPIAS It looks that way.

SOCRATES Do you see, then, that the same person is deceitful and truthful about these things, and that in no way is

the truthful person superior to the deceitful one? There's no doubt that it's the same person, and we're not talking about opposites, as you thought just now.¹⁰

The Greek word Homer uses to describe Odysseus is *polutropos*, which is how Hippias describes Odysseus as well. And like *nomos*, *polutropos* holds a range of meanings; it can describe deceitfulness but it also means "versatile," "adaptable," "ingenious," "crafty," and "never at a loss." In a recent translation of the *Odyssey*, poet and writer Stephen Mitchell expresses these qualities by translating *polutropos* as "cunning."¹¹

How is Odysseus cunning? Homer portrays him as a master storyteller and legendary cheat; he is renowned for devising stratagems and ways of cheating gods and men; he tells grand lies and tall tales; his cunning is, in short, his creative instinct. But it is also bound up with his use of reason, or how he is able to understand and reflect on himself and the situation at hand. He uses reason in order to see what he is able (or not able) to get away with by finding or even inventing choices where none are evident or given.¹² This mindfulness is what distinguishes him from other Homeric heroes, what makes him so prudent and, at the same time, so dangerous.

10. Ibid., 367c–d (58–59).

11. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Atria Books, 2013).

In other words, the cunning that Odysseus embodies is twofold or dialectical. It is creative, inventive, and resourceful precisely because it is grounded in reason, insofar as reason is actually a creative process in its own right. For what Odysseus characterizes is how understanding what is most real and true about reality enables one to more ably reshape it for one's benefit or pleasure. He survives and endures by the grace of what he knows and what he is capable of imagining and creating. Like an artist. Of course, what he wants most is to make his way back home to Ithaca, not make art. But these notions are not so far apart. Consider that, for the Greeks, the idea of homecoming is intimately tied to the notion of identity.¹³ Being *someone* in the ancient world meant *one* had to take the trouble to get into *some* in the first place. This is what has been called "the fruitfulness of trouble" in Odysseus.¹⁴ The sufferings he endures and the calamities that befall him act like different artistic materials, which he uses to forge his identity and win recognition that confirms the value of his own existence. In the *Odyssey*, the way home is itself a grand and singular form of expression.

12. This perspective on Odysseus was developed as part of a series of lectures I delivered at the University of Basel, Switzerland, in February and April 2014. The lectures were entitled, "Odysseus as Artist, Parts I and II."

13. G. E. Dimock, Jr., "The Name of Odysseus," *The Hudson Review* 9 (Spring 1956), 67.

14. *Ibid.*, 69.

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A work is not merely a simple reflection of the person who made it. What an artist, poet, or philosopher creates gains import precisely when it stands on its own, without the one who made it standing in the way—or so it has been said. But on the other hand, I think that when a work holds any interest at all for us, it is in part because we discern in what is being expressed traces of the *kind* of person who made it. These traces embedded in the work illuminate how a way of living has enlivened (or deadened) what was made or written. This is similar to the way in which the "grain" of a person's voice embodies the one speaking or singing. The grain is the quality of the sound that expresses the particular shape and path air takes as it travels from the lungs, to the larynx, and out of the mouth. It is, in essence, the "body" in the sound.

Likewise, I am always curious about the body in the work. Marcel Duchamp expressed something similar once when he quipped that what interested him most about Andy Warhol's soup can paintings wasn't the paintings themselves but the mind that thought it would be worth the time and energy to paint them in the first place. That is how I think about the Plato who wrote *Hippias Minor*. What *Hippias Minor* claims sounds so contrary to the way Plato is remembered that it is hard to imagine the same person wrote the *Republic*. Is this Plato?

I think it is *yes* insofar as it is also *no*. The provenance of the work is not in dispute. But clearly it appeared before his understanding of art evolved (or devolved, depending on which side of the fence one is on) to the point where he believed that the most exemplary artistic forms are ones that are not expressed at all; before he viewed aesthetics as merely the study of all the vain and dishonest ways in which artists and poets dress up their ideas in order to reach bigger audiences and achieve greater ambitions; before he found that expressions considered creative could be potentially harmful, even dangerous.

It was Plato before Plato, so to speak. After Socrates martyred himself and became a symbol of moral courage, Plato sought to remember his beloved teacher through what is generally considered his early dialogues. And if *Hippias Minor* is any indication, it was during this period in Plato's life when his philosophy was less stark and more accommodating to how art could contribute to a meaningful existence. And perhaps this is the case because art informed Plato's world. He was an aspiring young philosopher who wrote like a poet, trying to come to terms with the life and death of his teacher, who happened to be the son of a sculptor and who, in his own early life, earned a living as a stone carver and who philosophized like no other—in the spirit of irony, playfulness, inventiveness, and, above all, cunning. In other words, he philosophized like an artist.

It is not hard to imagine that Hippias's arrogant and short-sighted view of Odysseus is what prompted Socrates to launch his

provocative defense. For Socrates, excellence does not come from simply being frank and noble but by practicing the very Socratic virtue of understanding oneself and, by implication, one's place in the world. And Odysseus manifests in exemplary fashion how powerful this understanding can be. But what is remarkable is that, in *Hippias*, Socrates uses this power to such cunning ends. He was willing to say whatever it took to discredit his interlocutor, even to lie outright.¹⁵ He was in it to win it.

Hippias Minor resembles an *agon*, which, in Greek, means a contest or debate between two characters. The term is typically used to describe a kind of scene in ancient Greek theater in the fifth century BCE, not only in Tragedy but also in so-called Old Comedy. It is a bit of a stretch to align the dialogue with this kind of work, but not too much of one. *Hippias* is funny in its own perverse way. It is certainly ridiculous, like the plays of Aristophanes, who was one of the Old Comedians. It unfolds like a comedy of errors—or better yet, a comedy of reason.

It is also, it seems to me, about an artistic rivalry. As an artist, I can't help but see the debate between Hippias and Socrates as a contest between two different schools of thinking about art. In one corner there is Hippias, who represents the School of Excellence.

15. For a fascinating analysis of how Socrates intentionally misquotes Homer, see Laurence Lampert, "Socrates' Defense of Polytreptic Odysseus: Lying and Wrong-doing in Plato's *Lesser Hippias*," in *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 2 (2002), 231–59.

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He believes art is best when it serves authority and the kind of law and order it brings (*nomos*). In the other corner there is Socrates, who is head of the School of Cunning. He believes art holds an altogether different purpose, one that serves nobody (*outis*) and reaches its full creative potential only when it is empowered by wild reason (*polutropos*).

There is no real contest, of course. Plato made sure of that. But in the process of intellectually dismantling what he believed Hippias stood for, Plato ends up doing something very unlike him, or who he became, at least. He champions an artistic idea that is as politically subversive as it is surprising, which Socrates performed to full effect: that what is most excellent about the creative act is its power to make a mockery out of any authority, even the authority within oneself.