Book Reviews

Hippias Minor—or—The Art of Cunning: A New Translation of Plato's Most Controversial Dialogue. Introduction and Artwork by Paul Chan. Translation by Sarah Ruden. Essay by Richard Fletcher. Brooklyn: Badlands. 2015. 137 pp.

This new translation of Plato's *Hippias Minor* contains four distinct elements: an introduction by the artist Paul Chan; Chan's artwork, loosely related to the dialogue; the translation itself (along with a brief note by the translator, Sarah Ruden); and an essay by Richard Fletcher. What follows are comments on all but the artwork.

The introduction by Paul Chan offers an interesting perspective on Plato's quirky dialogue, the *Hippias Minor*. Chan sees in Plato's work a defense of artistic freedom, along with a recognition of the necessity that art be "cunning." Rather than react with alarm and horror at the presumed immorality of the dialogue's conclusion, namely, that the intentional wrongdoer is the good man, Chan finds the dialogue liberating, a celebration of the unfettered nature of art. It teaches that "what is most excellent about the creative act is the power to make a mockery out of any authority, even the authority within oneself" (30).

On the way to his interpretation, Chan takes what appear to be a few wrong turns. Two in particular stand out. First, Chan says that "Plato was by his own account uninterested in art," by which he seems to mean that Plato, at least in the *Republic*, is opposed to art and wishes to suppress it, or that, more generally, Plato approves "on the rare occasions when he did" only of such art as is "pure, changeless, and unwavering... startlingly austere and minimal" (14)... "objective and unadorned" (15). Concern about the danger inherent in art, however, is hardly the same as lack of interest. Plato is, if anything, deeply interested in—if leery of—art, particularly poetry. In the *Republic* Socrates is less than clear and consistent in his view of art and in his recommendations with respect to art in Callipolis. And the unassailable testimony of the exquisite artistry of the *Republic* itself tells against any purported uninterest in art on Plato's part.

Second, Chan trots out a developmentalist view of Plato's corpus to suggest that Plato is a different writer at the time he composes the *Hippias Minor*

than he is when he composes the *Republic*. In Chan's words, he is "Plato before Plato" (28). Yet, there can be no more frivolous and morally shocking argument than the argument in *Rep.* 1 that concludes that the just man is a kind of thief (334a-b). The author who is willing to pen that argument and the author of the *Hippias Minor* are one and the same.

In his essay, Richard Fletcher succeeds admirably in amplifying Chan's unique approach and weaving it into his own understanding of Plato's *Hippias Minor*. Unfortunately, however, what he sees as the key to the dialogue, what should save it from its undeservedly poor reputation, is the matter of gracefulness (*euschēmosunē*). Yet, gracefulness and gracelessness (*aschēmosunē*) appear in but one example in the series of examples Socrates provides in order to derive and support his conclusion that the intentional wrongdoer is the good man: "But what about gracefulness, Hippias? Is it not characteristic of the fitter body to willingly assume disgraceful and poor positions, while the poorer body does this unwillingly? . . . "Then gracelessness that's willing is meritorious where physical condition is concerned, while gracelessness that's unwilling is a sign of poor physical condition" (374b-c) (76). According to Fletcher—and this is not convincing—Socrates' overarching concern is "with the aesthetic quality of gracefulness in the path *not* taken in Socrates's argument" (123, my emphasis), and for this reason Socrates, Fletcher thinks, is free "from the argument, from Hippias, from sophists, from Athens" (126).

Fletcher further commits the error that many interpreters of the dialogue do: he thinks Socrates regards intentional wrongdoing as a good thing and a better thing than unintentional, and that he approves of and admires abusing one's skill so long as the abuse is intentional. It is critical to see, however, that Socrates unequivocally regards all the bad things—running slowly, seeing dimly, limping, singing off-key—as bad; *they* do not become better when one does them intentionally. The runner who runs slowly intentionally is not doing something good, but rather something bad and shameful (*kakon kai aischron*) in the race. One assumes postures that are shameful and bad. Seeing dimly is a defect (*ponēria*) of the eyes. Senses act badly. A man steers badly. One rides horses badly. One produces bad actions with horses. The soul "does bad things and shameful things and errs" (375c). Socrates' point is that it is only good runners, good eyes, good feet that can walk straight, and good voices that are good—because only the good versions of all of these enable the *bad* things to be done at will rather than against one's will, that is, despite one's wanting to do well. Persons who have at their disposal good things and persons who are themselves capable are the ones who are able to do bad things on purpose. Such persons are better or good in the sense that if they do badly it is because they so choose rather than because they are unable to do well.

A runner who runs slowly only intentionally is one who could run fast because he is skilled and has good feet. All Socrates maintains is that a person who does badly on purpose—that is, only when he wishes to and not because he cannot help it—is more skilled (better) than the person who does badly regardless of what he wishes. If justice is a skill (a *technē* or *epistēmē* or both), then the man who does injustice (an indubitably bad thing) intentionally—that is, only when he wants to—is better (more skilled) than the man who does injustice unintentionally, against his wishes. If “good” means “good at,” and if justice is something one can be “good at,” then the intentional wrongdoer is the good man. Socrates registers his own dissatisfaction with this conclusion. It is driven, as he says, by the argument, specifically by the assumption that justice is, like crafts and the various forms of knowledge, something at which one can be good or bad. What Socrates truly believes is that a just man is one who does wrong only unintentionally, a man like himself who, as he boasts, has never done wrong intentionally (*Ap.* 37a; see, too, *Gorg.* 488a).

In the introductory note to her translation, Sarah Ruden inauspiciously admits she is not “a fan of Plato” but “quite the opposite.” Might the translation reflect her lack of sympathy and regard for the work’s author? Terms that Plato uses in a way that is characteristically his own are rendered by Ruden in what she takes to be more standardly Greek. These choices on her part tend to distort Plato’s intent. Ruden lists several key terms with respect to which her translation departs from that of others. Some are acceptable; others ill-advised. Two that she does not call attention to in her introductory remarks are problematic and will be mentioned in what follows.

Of the translations that Ruden highlights in her introductory note, the following are acceptable, though not in every case the best: “fine” for *kalos*, “cunning” for *polutropos*, “excellent” for *agathos*, “superior” for *ameinōn*, “most excellent” for *aristos*, and “perform” for *ergazomai*. Unacceptable, however, are “more fitting” and “most fitting” for *beltiōn* and *beltistos* (which lead to such infelicitous results as: “Wasn’t it made clear just now that those who deceive willingly are more fitting persons than those who do so unwillingly?” [372a] [68] and “Which do you say is more fitting, the voice that sings willingly or unwillingly off-key?” [374c] [75]); “intelligent” for *sophos* (which causes the translator to use “shrewd” for *phronimos*, a term that Socrates applies to the *alēthēs* no less than to the *pseudēs*, a term that is hardly “neutral”; it also sacrifices the irony involved in Socrates’ telling Hippias that Hippias is *sophōteron* than he [370a]: as a professional sophist, how could Hippias fail to be wise?; how could he fail to have all the answers?). More objectionable are “character” for *psuchē*, which not only leads to talk of horses’ and dogs’ character, but also destroys the contrast between the distinct entities body and soul that is critical

both here and throughout Plato's works; and "lawfulness" and "criminality" for *dikē* and *adikia*, respectively, when it is justice—as a virtue, and sometimes as *the* virtue, of the human soul—that is of paramount importance for Socrates from the *Apology* on.

Two further choices on Ruden's part merit a brief comment: "frank" for *haplous*, when "simple" or perhaps "artless" better captures the contrast with *polutropos* and makes it possible for Achilles to qualify as an unintentional speaker of falsehood; "willingly" and "unwillingly" for *hekōn* and *akōn*, though these fail to capture the distinctive flavor of the final argument of the dialogue: it is those who do bad things only intentionally and never unintentionally who are more skilled and hence better than those who do bad things unintentionally—because they cannot help themselves.

Despite the above-noted reservations, the book is charming. It is refreshing to see an artist's original take on this dialogue; the translation is lively and agile; and the concluding essay is rich in insights about art and life. I have not commented on Paul Chan's artwork. I have no doubt, however, that this added attraction will broaden the book's appeal.

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