At the outset of the Timaeus Socrates is quite agitated. After having given a summary of an ideal state, he has a ‘desire’ to see his state in action, a point Plato strongly emphasizes: peponthôn tugechanô—to pathos—eis epithumian aphikoito—pepontha (19B). And, even more baffling, Socrates lumps himself together with the poets and sophists, as being inferior to men of experience such as Timaeus, Critias and Hermocrates, all of whom harmonize their deeds to their words and principles (19D–E).

What exactly is unusual in this situation? First, Socrates’ desire merits a closer look, even though it could be an instantiation of the right kind of erôs, as a striving towards knowledge and truth. Second, the summary at the opening of the Timaeus does not easily map onto the Republic. The setting of both texts is different, but more to the point here is that the recapitulation covers only part of the Republic (up to Book Five), without making any mention of the philosopher-kings.

The third issue is Socrates’ motivation for downplaying his abilities, and whether any so-called Socratic irony could be at play here. Such a disavowal of expertise sounds familiar enough based on other instances in Plato’s textual universe. In his intellectual autobiography in the Phaedo, for instance, Socrates recounts how his hopes of finding answers in the works of Anaxagoras (Phaedo 97B–99C) were disappointed. In the Apology too Socrates is portrayed as looking for answers in others, including the poets (22A–C). The Apology, however, also clearly spells out the crucial advantage Socrates has over the poets, sophists, and other self-declared experts, namely that he is aware at least of his limitations and his ignorance. The Timaeus too hints at this advantage (19D1: emautou men autos kategnôka; D2–3: kai to men emonouden thaumaston). Yet, the irony thickens in this context. For when it comes to war situations (which are the topic of discussion in the opening of the Timaeus) even Plato presents Socrates as in fact having some experience and being able
to claim successes (Symp. 219E6 ff.; 221A1 ff.). And an astute reader like Proclus does not fail to point out this feature of Plato’s representation of Socrates (in Tim. 1.62.15–21).

The awareness of his limited, yet significant experience is not the only feature that separates Socrates from the poets and sophists: unlike them, he does have his own way of aligning his words and deeds. The Phaedo and the Apology, for instance, show that Socrates in fact practices what he preaches, but that his understanding of such ethical self-consistency differs radically from the common one, and hence requires considerable acumen on the part of his interlocutors. Yet rather than pursuing the inquiry into this model of self-consistency, in the Timaeus, Socrates claims actually to have found the expertise which he lacks in Critias, Timaeus, and Hermocrates. Socrates’ request, then, has features that make it look like the kind of test to which he would also submit a Euthyphro; it cannot be taken at face value. When we hear Socrates praising his companions’ experience in state matters, in addition to philosophy, we can imagine Timaeus seeing through the irony, smiling and shaking his head, whereas Critias takes the bait. But Socratic irony is elusive, so we need more evidence.

What kind of discourse does Socrates request from his companions? What is the object of his desire, and how is it related to truth? Here is how the Timaeus formulates the request:

[My feelings are] like those of a man who gazes upon magnificent-looking animals, whether they are animals in a painting or even alive but standing still, and who then finds himself eager to look at them in motion or engaged in some struggle or conflict that seems to show off their distinctive physical qualities.2 (transl. D. Zeyl)

This passage reveals two oppositions: one between painting, or depiction, and living reality, which is subsumed under a second opposition, between rest and motion. The structure of the passage implies that the motion also contrasts with the implied static nature of a depiction. Let’s examine the role of painting and living things, each in turn, in the context of the opposition between rest and motion.

If Socrates considers the possibility here (eite . . . eite kai) of ranging his own previous account with depictions, we are left with the question as to how this would relate to the notorious Republic condemnation of paint-

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2 ... ὅποιον εἰ τις ζῷα καλὰ που θεασάμενος, εἰτε ὑπὸ γραφῆς ἐισγασμένα εἰτε καὶ ἄλλωντα ἄλλωντα ἠδυνάμως ἱκνίζων δὲ ἄγαντα, εἰς ἐπιθυμίαν ἀφίκοιτο θεασάσθαι χινούμενα τῇ αὐτᾷ καί τῷ τοῖς σώμασιν δοκούντων προσφέρειν κατὰ τὴν ἄγαντα ἀθλοῦντα . . .