Plato's Lesser Hippias

ROBERT G. HOERBER

ALTHOUGH THE two propositions of the Lesser Hippias — that the truthful individual is one and the same as the liar; and that a person who commits injustice voluntarily is superior to one who does so unwillingly — might prove puzzling to readers unversed in Socratic dialectic, there should be no doubt concerning the genuineness of the treatise. Even the generally sceptical scholars of the nineteenth century, such as Stallbaum, Steinhart, and Socher, agreed to its authenticity. Ast and Schleiermacher are the only Platonists of that era who rejected the composition as spurious especially because of its sophistry.1 Scholars of the current century agree with the majority of previous Platonists in accepting the Lesser Hippias as a genuine work of Plato, no doubt because Aristotle cites the dialogue in no uncertain terms.2

Both the dramatic date and time of composition, however, are questions which cannot be resolved with any degree of certainty. The consensus of opinion is that the Lesser Hippias is an early work of Plato; possibly the brevity of the treatise and the absence of metaphysical concepts have pointed Platonists in that direction.3 Since absolute proof, or even concrete evidence, to the contrary are lacking, we may assume that the consensus of scholars is probably correct. Only two Platonists have risked an opinion on the dramatic date of the dialogue — and that

1 Cf. George Grote, Plato and the other Companions of Sokrates (London 1875) I 387-8, for references to the scholars of the previous century. Even W. Lutoslawski seems to accept the Lesser Hippias, omitting it from his study merely because it is so brief and because he feels it is of no importance in the area of logic; cf. The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic (London 1905) 75, 194.

2 Metaphysica 1025a6-9: "Hence, the argument in the Hippias that the same man is false and true is misleading. For it takes him to be false who is able to speak falsely, though he is discerning and intelligent, and takes him to be better who is consciously false" (Richard Hope's translation).

merely by implication; for their statements concern the dramatic date of the Greater Hippias, which may or may not implicate the Lesser Hippias. According to Wilamowitz, "Hippias spricht von seinen Besuchen in Sparta; von denen konnte nach dem Kriege von 402/1 nicht mehr die Rede sein. Aber das geht nur die in Wahrheit ganz gleichgültige Zeit des fingierten Gespräches an."¹ A. E. Taylor states: "The presence of Hippias at Athens implies that the time is one of peace, and, as the first visit of Gorgias to the city is referred to as a past event (282b), the supposed date must be after 427 B.C., and therefore during the years of the peace of Nicias."² Granted that the scenes of both compositions called after Hippias took place on his same visit to Athens,³ the evidence adduced by both Taylor and Wilamowitz is so slight that the question of dramatic date is better left open, with the assumption that it possibly is sometime during the last twenty years of Socrates' life. The appearance of Hippias in the Protagoras adds little light, since the dramatic date of the Protagoras cannot be established with certainty;⁴ and, furthermore, there is no necessity to assume that the scenes of these two treatises (Hippias Minor and Protagoras) occurred during the same visit of Hippias.

The general tenets and accomplishments of the fifth-century sophist Hippias are well-known to students of Greek history: his stress on arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy; his support of nature over against human legislation; the discovery of a new curve, the "quadratrix," to assist in the trisection of an angle and the squaring of a circle; the interest in the elements of speech, letters, syllables, rhythm, and harmony; a self-sufficiency in the crafts, by which he once brought to Olympia only the things he himself had made - a ring, a seal, an oil-can and scraper, shoes, tunic, cloak, and an elaborate Persian girdle; a compilation of a chronological list of victors in the Olympic games; an intimate acquaintance with Homer and other poets; a proficiency in the composition of epic, tragedy, dithyramb, and oratory - which has accredited Hippias with a number of treatises, almost completely extinct:

³ Such a situation seems likely in view of the parallel references to Eudicus, son of Apemantus, and to Nestor; cf. Greater Hippias 286b and Lesser Hippias 363a-c, 364c-e, 373a-c.
⁴ Cf. Kathleen Freeman, The Pre-Socratic Philosophers (Oxford 1949) 343-4. R. Hackforth is entirely too dogmatic in his statement: "... and the date of this [i.e. the Protagoras] must be 433-432 at latest" (Plato’s Phaedrus [Cambridge 1952] 8).