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## A Thracian Charm and Socratic Teaching: The Politics of Education

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**A Thracian Charm and Socratic Teaching:  
The Politics of Education**

**Arlene Saxonhouse**

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Center for the Study of Ethics in Society  
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**A Thracian Charm and Socratic Teaching:  
The Politics of Education**

**Arlene W. Saxonhouse**

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Studies  
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**Presented to the WMU Center  
for the Study of Ethics in Society  
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## **A Thracian Charm and Socratic Teaching: The Politics of Education**

In 1993 the publisher Simon and Schuster published former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett's book entitled *The Book of Virtues*. It was an instant best seller and was followed last Christmas by *A Children's Book of Virtues* which now sits proudly on the best seller list as well. I purchased the original book last December and it was already in its 34th printing. Such success for a book seems like a fantasy dream for those of us with Ph.D.'s, matched perhaps only by Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. Bennett introduces the *Book of Virtues* by telling his readers that he has compiled the following series of poems, stories, myths, and excerpts on such virtues as self-discipline, compassion, honesty, courage and loyalty "to aid in the time honored task of moral education of the young," and he goes on to define moral education as "training of heart and mind toward the good." He offers as an aid in this training what he calls "moral literacy" stories and examples.

With this book Bennett is tapping into a long



tradition of educating the young by example, by stories of heroics and of venality. We find this model of education, for example, as a major motivation for the writing of history among the historians of Rome. Sallust, for instance, writing in the first century BC, explains that he writes his history because "the memory of what others have accomplished kindles in the breasts of noble men a flame that is not quenched until their own prowess has won similar glory and renown." It was with Machiavelli, though, that it became clear that history was not always the guide for virtue and heroism; sometimes history told stories of the bad who succeeded and the good who failed. Bennett thus uses poems, stories, fables -- not history -- as his texts for moral literacy.

Bennett recognizes well the legacy of this mode of moral education through stories and myths when he quotes a section from Plato's *Republic* as a foreword to his entire collection. It is the section where Socrates talks of the importance of educating the warriors who are to populate the just city he is founding in speech. The quote goes like this: "The beginning is the most important

part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing for that is the time at which character is being formed." Bennett we should note adds the modern word "character." Plato does not use such a loaded term; he merely talks about the young being "formed." Bennett continues to quote, without comment, what many today would find the more troubling part of this education, though benign enough in its first exposition -- namely, the warning: "Shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up?" "We cannot," replies his interlocutor -- and off Socrates and his companions go to censor the poems of Homer and Hesiod, deleting for instance all stories of gods laughing uncontrollably and of heroes mourning the deaths of their loved ones.

In Bennett, in Sallust, in the Socrates of the *Republic*, the assumption is that stories told with examples of virtue and vice will lead the listener -- especially the child -- to virtue. But will they?

Are such stories a means to virtue -- or conformity? In the more basic framing of the question, as Socrates himself phrases it on a number of occasions in the Platonic dialogues, can virtue be taught at all? What does it mean to act as if virtue can, in some almost mechanical way, be transferred from a story about heroism to acts of heroism, or stories about loyalty turn one into loyal citizens?

One of the several places that Socrates asks this question about whether virtue can be taught is in a dialogue named the *Protagoras* and it leads the sophist Protagoras, after whom the dialogue is named, to recount a myth in which he tries to explain how we can know that virtue -- or at least the virtues of citizens -- can be taught. Protagoras tells this story when he is confronted by Socrates who is himself accompanied by a young man, Hippocrates by name. Hippocrates is eager to study with the famous teacher Protagoras who has just arrived in Athens -- so eager, in fact, that he had rushed into Socrates' bedroom well before dawn to ask Socrates to introduce him to the great teacher. It would disturb our sleep, but I suspect



many of us might all wish for young friends who show such enthusiasm for learning. Socrates resists a bit, slows down the pace and demands that Protagoras explain to him and Hippocrates what Hippocrates will learn if the young man becomes Protagoras' student. Protagoras promises that he will make him a good/virtuous citizen. Socrates admires this response because he has always noted that "not only in public with regard to the city, but also in private life, the wisest and the best citizens are not able to hand over the virtue they have to others." He looks at the great Pericles' sons (who happen to be in the room); they have not been educated by their famous father in the virtues in which the father himself excels; they instead, Socrates notes, "go about grazing at will like sacred oxen coming upon, or chancing upon virtue all by themselves -- *automatoi*" -- a curious image this, Pericles' sons grazing as if sacred oxen. Do we simply chance on virtue? Can the fathers, can the city, can the Sophists teach the young to be virtuous? Protagoras responds to Socrates' challenge about whether virtue is teachable with a myth; it is really

a creation myth in which all the animals have been formed, but not given any particular excellences. Epimetheus, the backward looking brother of Prometheus, distributes assorted virtues or excellences to the animals, swiftness, coats of hair, claws and so forth, but he runs out of such excellences by the time he reaches the human being. Left on their own, humans begin to war with one another as if in a Hobbesian state of nature until Zeus, fearing lest they kill off one another, sends them two qualities -- shame and a sense of justice. These are the two qualities that enable them to live with one another; shame provides a restraint and justice gives the sense of what is due and what ought to be. Once humans share these virtues, they can live together in cities, but they must all share in these fundamental virtues if there is to be peace among them. This is unlike excellence in the arts, where the city can survive if only a few know shipbuilding and others know shoemaking or military strategy. Not everyone can be excellent in those skills, but justice and shame belong to all and if some one does not have them by nature (*automatoi*), they will be forced,

Protagoras says, to have them. How? By punishment. As Protagoras points out, if one is ugly, we do not punish that person with floggings to make him beautiful; but if one does not have a sense of shame or justice, he is punished. Protagoras claims punishment will straighten out the "twisted piece of wood," as he calls the unjust and shameless child. This shows, according to Protagoras, that virtue is teachable. The portrait that Protagoras paints of human nature is a cruel one; for some virtue comes only from floggings, again according to Protagoras as portrayed by Plato, this demonstrates that virtue can be taught. Now, as is obvious from this extended Preface to my talk, I am turning away from contemporary writers, from our modern political pundits and social critics to a dead white European male and to a problem he addressed two and a half millennia ago, a problem, as Bennett's books and the rhetoric of our times makes all too clear to us, which continues to confront us as we live the lives of public and private individuals. The dead white European male to whom I turn in this and many questions is, of course, Plato -- and the problem is



that of whether we can educate the young to virtue, whether such an education is possible, whether we can plan, organize and provide for such an education, whether the city and citizens are educators, or whether we must leave the young to graze like sacred oxen, like Pericles' sons "by themselves" automatoi. And, since I come from a political science background, I turn to the political implications of the efforts to educate in virtue. Ultimately, I believe Plato is profoundly pessimistic on this point, suggesting that we are indeed at the mercy of chance like the sons of Pericles -- and to approach education in virtue more systematically has tyrannical rather than liberating consequences. This is not necessarily a conclusion we -- Bill Bennett or we -- would want to hear, but Plato does, I believe, make us aware of some of the dangers of education in "virtue" and its tyrannical implications. I am, I admit, making a fundamental assumption here that is not accepted by everyone: namely, that a dead white European male like Plato may indeed have something important to say to us worthy of our time, that he may force us to rethink our givens

and reveal to us the limits -- and tyrannies -- of our own ambitions.

Plato certainly has not been much of a hero for the modern age. Ever since Karl Popper accused him of being one of the founders of the closed society and therewith a forerunner of totalitarianism, Plato's philosophy has lost much of its attractiveness. An advocate of hierarchy, a critic of democracy as the rule of the passions, a believer in epistemological absolutism and, apart from a brief lapse in Book V of the *Republic* where he seems to suggest an equality for women in political life, a denigrator of the female as fascinated by the tawdry and multicolored and weak in the face of hardships -- all these are reasons offered for a critical dismissal of Plato as an educator for our age.

I obviously take a very different view and want to suggest how looking at Platonic dialogues can help us address perennial questions that continue to confront us about the meaning, nature, purpose, limits of the education and to suggest that only mis-readings of his dialogues lead to Plato the totalitarian rather than Plato the defender against

tyranny. Plato's dialogues do not give us clear answers to the questions that he raises and which we must confront, they provide no blueprints, offer no precise curricula advice, but they do point to assumptions that underlie the efforts at education in virtue, and in particular, the issues that we must consider when we begin to think about the education of the young in virtue, and the place that the polity can or cannot play in their education. Bill Bennett's dream that reading the right tales to the young will build a nation of virtuous citizens seems hopelessly naive when faced with the Socratic presentation of the complexity of human nature and its potential for aiming towards the good.

The title of my talk makes reference to a Thracian charm. The allusion is to Plato's dialogue the *Charmides*, a dialogue that is usually subtitled "on moderation" or in the more dated translation of the Greek word *sophrosune*, temperance. This is the dialogue around which I intend to build the rest of my discussion. Since the *Charmides* is not one of Plato's most frequently read dialogues, let me spend a little time giving you a sense of the



dialogue, its vitality, its arguments, and again, I fear, some of its pessimism at least about the possibility of teaching virtue.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates has just returned to Athens from battle at Potidea, one of the early battles between Athens and Sparta during the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans had been victorious at Potidea and many Athenian lives were lost. Socrates, now a survivor of that battle, heads directly to the wrestling schools or gymnasia where his friends spend their time and the young men of Athens congregate. His acquaintance Chaerephon rushes to greet him -- delighted that he has returned safely from the costly battle. We begin the dialogue with a reminder of the war between democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta -- and the contrast between the two cities, I will argue, serves as a backdrop to the discussion that follows. Socrates, after telling the news from the battlefield, turns away from talk of war and politics to ask Chaerephon about the youths of the city, if any of them had distinguished himself in beauty or in wisdom or in both. A certain Critias -- forgetting about the philosophy part of the

question -- immediately tells Socrates of one who surpasses all in beauty -- Charmides, by name -- the son of Glaucon and the cousin and ward of Critias. All the young men are in love with Charmides, gazing at him, Socrates reports, "as if he were a statue" and Critias suggestively asserts that were they to strip Charmides of his clothes, the beauty of his form would overwhelm any attention to his face. Socrates asks, though, whether Charmides has a soul that is good by nature and proposes that they strip him -- not of his cloak so that they may see his body, but so that they can see his soul; Critias, basking in the reflected glory of his cousin, responds that Charmides is also a philosopher and a poet --not bad for someone probably around thirteen years old.

The challenge that Socrates poses here of seeing the soul captures the tension that characterizes all of Plato's work, the tension between the seen and the unseen -- the body and the qualities of the individual that we cannot observe through the senses. From the Homeric poems on we hear about the beauty of the human body, about the

beauty of the Homeric heroes Achilles, Hector, Diomedes in action and about the meanness of those who are ugly like Thersites, a hunchback worthy of the whipping he receives from Odysseus. The great accomplishment of Socratic and Platonic philosophy was to transform virtue or human excellence from the external qualities of the body and heroic actions to the internal, invisible beauty of the soul. To do this, though, creates new problems: how do we observe the beauty of the soul? and if Socrates is correct to associate virtue with internal qualities of the individual, how can we know whether any one is virtuous; or to put it another way, how do we know whether education has transformed the wicked into the good, made the child virtuous where before he or she was not, -- whether we have made straight, in Protagoras' words, the "twisted piece of wood."

In such dialogues as the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, Socrates faces the challenge of arguing that it is better to be just than to seem or appear to be just. For example, Adeimantus challenges Socrates in the *Republic*: "For the things said [i.e., the comments of the poets, the stories he has been



told] indicate that there is no advantage in my being just, if I don't also seem to be, while the labors and penalties involved are evident. But if I am unjust, but have provided myself with a reputation for justice, a divine life is promised." In the *Gorgias* a young man remarks with disbelief that Socrates could think that it would be better to be punished if one is found unjustly seeking tyranny, than to live as happily ever after as a tyrant with a reputation for justice. In each of these dialogues, the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* Socrates must ultimately resort to myth to deal with that which is beyond sight. When Socrates says that he wants to see the soul of Charmides, he wants to go beyond the beautiful and alluring body that puts even Socrates, he admits, into a condition of erotic excitement. Socrates wants, however, to gain knowledge of what cannot be seen. The dialogue, the use of words will help us to do this, but where Plato still leaves us uncertain is whether, once we have transcended the limits of sight through words to see the soul, whether we can influence and change that invisible soul with words?

I have been using the term "soul" as the translation of the Greek *psyche* without apology, though for sure the term sits uneasily in modern academic discourse. From Hobbes's materialism in the seventeenth century to the twentieth century's positivistic insistence on the observability of all phenomena to contemporary psychology's reduction of the individual to a set of responses, the soul largely remains in exile in modern political discourse and yet when we talk about education in virtue, its possibilities, its limits, its goals, we are sufficient heirs of Socrates to want to address the qualities of an individual that go beyond what we see, beyond responses, beyond the beauty of the body. Whether we want to use the heavily laden, theologized word that is traditionally used to translate the word *psyche* may be questionable, but for simplicity's sake I accept the standard translation of *psyche* with the request that we strip it of the baggage it has acquired over the years. Back to the *Charmides*: When Critias sends his slave to bring Charmides to meet Socrates, he tells the slave to tell Charmides that he has a doctor for him to see about a weakness he had spoken of --

in particular, a weakness in his head when he gets up in the morning. In a dialogue that will focus on the virtue of moderation, we may ask ourselves whether this morning weakness in the head is the sign of a certain immoderation with regard to wine from the evening before. Critias asks Socrates *to pretend* that he has such a medicine -- a *pharmakon* -- for Charmides's head and when Charmides himself asks whether Socrates has some cure, Socrates says that he "somehow managed to answer" that he did. This cure, this *pharmakon*, we must remember is a pretense, an illusion, that enables Socrates to speak with Charmides. Socrates claims to have knowledge that he tells the person to whom he is relating the story and to us the readers as well that he does not in fact have so that Charmides will speak with him.

Socrates thus tells Charmides that he might just happen to have a certain leaf that can cure headaches, but the leaf only works when it is applied along with the singing of a certain charm. Socrates elaborates on the powers of this supposed charm: The charm along with the leaf

makes one completely well, but the leaf without the charm is useless and the charm cannot heal the head alone; it must attend to the whole person, just as a good doctor does not heal a part of the body but must heal the whole. Socrates learned about this charm from a Thracian doctor of whom it was claimed that he could make you immortal. This doctor said that one should not attempt to cure the eyes without the head or the head without the body -- or the body without the soul. "At present," the Thracian continued in his supposed speech to Socrates, "this is the great mistake of men that they try to cure without using both -- the medicine for the particular part and the charm for the whole." The whole here means the soul -- and to treat the soul we need to use the Thracian charm -- namely words, for they will, as Socrates says, engender "moderation." The doctor specifically enjoined Socrates not to let anyone, however wealthy or well born or handsome, i.e., a Charmides, convince him to try to heal a part rather than the whole. So following this supposed -- remember Socrates is making this story up -- this supposed injunction from the Thracian doctor,



Socrates indicates that he can only provide a pharmakon for the weakness of the head if he can heal the soul first.

Critias is delighted that because of the efforts to cure Charmides' weakness in the head, Charmides will gain a better "understanding" when he submits himself to the charm of Socrates' words; but Critias, as we have seen before, is proud of his cousin and ward who stirs up so much erotic longing among others in Athens, and he comments that Charmides is not only beautiful in form, but also has what this supposed Thracian charm is supposed to produce: moderation; given the headaches in the morning, we may want to question Critias' knowledge of the soul of his ward.

Socrates begins by bluntly asking Charmides whether he is sufficiently moderate, whether we need to apply the charm to induce moderation first or whether we can get right to the application of the leaf. How would we react if someone were to pose that question to us? We'd hem and haw and apologize, I suspect. Charmides blushes; he recognizes, he says, that if he claims not to be

moderate he will be contradicting his guardian Critias who has just praised his moderation and thus appear to accuse his guardian of lying. If he claims moderation for himself, he will seem immodest, praising himself which is not particularly pleasing to others.

We learn a great deal about Charmides from this blush; this is a young man who knows what is expected of him -- what is the appropriate behavior in the society in which he lives. But note how he expresses himself. He cares about what others think of him. How will he be perceived? Either affirmation or denial of his own moderation means for him offending some. We are reminded here of Protagoras' speech. Charmides has the gift that Zeus sent, shame; shame induced blushing, but is shame enough? Isn't it just a mechanism for conformity? Doesn't Charmides still have the headache that comes in the mornings? Charmides' blush reveals not only his own sense of shame, but the confusion, or what is called in Socratic terms *aporia*, the being without a way or a road, that goes along with a dependence on the opinions of others. The blush is an admission of the

inadequacy of Protagoras' shame as a guide to virtue.

Socrates offers the blushing Charmides an alternative, one that might help him escape the awkwardness of needing to please all his observers. Socrates suggests that if Charmides has moderation within him, as Critias claimed he did, he will be able to express in words what it is: "Since you know the Greek language," Socrates says, "put into words what ever it appears to be to you." Thus begins the central part of the dialogue as Charmides struggles to express what he supposedly has within him -- and thus begins the effort to see whether Charmides needs the counterfeit doctor Socrates to apply his phony Thracian charm or whether Charmides already is moderate and thus needs only the leaf.

Socrates begins by asking: "In order that we may know whether it is in you or not, say what moderation is according to your opinion." At first Charmides hesitates, but then finally suggests, not entirely unreasonably that moderation is a sort of orderliness (*kosmios*) and quietness; yes, that is it, he says, a quietness; in Greek *hesuchia*. This

word happens to have particular connotations and happens to connect our beautiful young Athenian to Sparta, the city with which Athens is at war. The Athenian Thucydides wrote a history of that war and includes in his history a wonderful speech by the Corinthians. In that speech, he has the Corinthians present what we today might call the national character of Athens and Sparta. In contrast to the active involved Athenians, the Spartans are a people dominated by *hesuchia*, quietness, resistance to change: "You alone of the Hellenes," the Corinthians say, "are quiet." (1.69). The Athenians, in contrast, are portrayed as a people "of whom one might truly say that they were born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others." Charmides, the Athenian youth, associates moderation with the quality of the enemies of Athens. When we get to the end of the dialogue, we shall understand better Charmides' natural inclination for the Spartans and his immediate association of virtue, his proclaimed virtue of moderation, with the national character of Sparta.



Socrates easily, perhaps too easily, dismisses this equation of moderation with quietness or *hesuchia* by turning quietness into slowness; once this is done it becomes child's play to point to activities that benefit from swiftness rather than slowness. Socrates mentions writing, reading, playing the lyre, learning, and so forth as he gently leads Charmides to reject this Spartan trait as the basis of moderation. After the next brief effort by Charmides to suggest `a la Protagoras that moderation is a sense of shame -- the social restraints that we saw him wilting under when he blushed -- Charmides stops giving us his own ideas and turns to something he thinks he remembers having once heard from someone close. He now takes his thoughts from elsewhere, no longer trying to find moderation within himself. Does this tell us whether he needs the Thracian charm, that he is not moderate, despite Critias' claims that he does not? If we are virtuous, does that mean that we can articulate what virtue is? Charmides now asks what Socrates thinks of a definition he has heard from someone else, namely that moderation is "doing one's own thing."

For those of you who have read Plato's *Republic* recently or even not so recently you may remember the phrase "doing one's own thing." In the *Republic* the phrase "doing one's own thing" is the definition of justice, not moderation. There "doing one's own thing" does not have the contemporary liberal connotations of you leaving me alone to do what I want and I'll leave you alone to do what you want; rather, in the very process of doing one's thing -- that for which one is suited -- one helps the whole community, one exercises one's skills for the welfare of the entire community. This is where justice enters -- it is the welfare of the whole, not the individual. In any case, Charmides has recalled this phrase, spoken by someone close, "doing one's own thing," but he has gotten the story all wrong; our beautiful young man is not very astute. Socrates immediately suspects that it is Critias who tried to teach Charmides the lessons of the *Republic*; Critias denies it --perhaps, not wanting to be caught in the role of being a bad teacher. Socrates quiets Critias by saying that it does not matter who said it; the question is, Socrates claims, whether

what was spoken was spoken truthfully or not. This seems a simple statement meant to defuse a tense situation and one we would expect from a Socrates who has been lionized as the seeker after Truth with a capital "T", but if we take seriously the effort to think about moderation as doing one's own thing, not intruding into the lives (or words) of others the question must arise as to whether speech or words do or do not belong to a person.

Discourse today, especially in feminist circles, often centers around the loss of voice and the loss of authenticity when one does not speak one's own words, but the words of another -- when women speak the language of men rather than their own language. Socrates, not as worried as modern writers about the relationship between oppression and the speech of others has a somewhat different take on the issue. Rather than worrying about the oppression implied in speaking the speech of others, reading the words of others, he asks more moderately whether when we speak the words of another -- or read the books of another -- we are not meddling in their affairs rather than tending to

our own, whether we are transgressing some boundaries of "ownership" and thus being both immoderate and unjust. If moderation (or justice) is indeed doing our own thing can we speak, repeat or read the words of others without being immoderate or unjust? Whereas modern feminist writers see this as oppression, Socrates sees it as meddlesomeness.

Now, even though the question of whose speech we speak has permeated some contemporary writers' work, the questions that Socrates poses about whether it is our own speech or words or the speech of others that we speak or write do I admit seem somewhat weird or absurd. Listen to one of the passages on this topic from the *Charmides*:

And does the scribe, in your opinion, write and read his name only, and teach you the same with yours? Or did you write your enemies' names just as much as your own and your friends'?

Just as much, responds Charmides

Were you meddlesome or immoderate in doing this?

Not at all



And you know you were not doing your own thing, if writing and reading are doing something.

This is often where frustration with the Platonic dialogue sets in and the book and Socrates along with it get tossed. But let's persevere.

In the *Republic*, adhering to the notion of justice as doing one's own thing leads to the elimination of theater, both tragedy and comedy, since actors are speaking the words of another, not their own. In the model that Socrates is developing the words we speak are ours -- the words of others which we repeat show our meddlesomeness -- our distance from the quiet of moderation where we do our own thing. Are we beginning to get a hint here that perhaps moderation defined as doing one's own thing may be no virtue at all and that being quiet, like the Spartans tending to their own affairs, is indeed showing a certain slowness and becomes the barrier to learning rather than its basis, that the common ways of thinking about moderation that have surfaced in this dialogue prevent rather than enhance the learning of virtues?

Can we function NOT using the language of others? To so restrain ourselves means to lose the capacity for communication -- whether it be meddling in the speech of others or speaking the language of the oppressor. To deny ourselves such speech is to remove ourselves from human interaction. Let me elaborate a bit. As Socrates goes on, by learning to write the names of others, by speaking the speech of others, we become in Socrates' language "busy bodies" - in Greek this a *polypragmosune* -- *polu* -- many, *pragme* affairs -- ones who get involved in the affairs of others -- indeed, very much like the Athenians who, as the Corinthians of Thucydides' history noted, were born to give no rest to others, and like the Athenian citizens who in their democratic assemblies, in their collective decision making, become involved in the affairs of others. To write and speak that which is not one's own makes one an interferer -- in quoting Plato and Socrates here, I am, according to Socrates, meddling in what is not my own. Plato writing down the words of Socrates is a contradiction of the same principles. But is this not the very activity of education and --

I should add as well -- of democratic political life in ancient Athens? Does it not say something about the concept of what is one's own and the necessary openness to others that is central to this process of education and democracy? Is there some connection with Socratic education and democracy in the meddlesomeness in the affairs of others? If to be moderate is to restrain ourselves from such involvement, is not immoderation necessary for education and for democracy? In this little interchange, Socrates is pointing to the ambiguity and uncertainty about the language of moderation and justice and virtue in general and suggesting I believe how precise definitions can become constraining and limiting.

Charmides tries to resist the curious implications of Socrates' questioning; they seem as weird to him as they do to us upon first hearing or reading. But Socrates continues to push him and further on in the dialogue not only is reading and writing meddling in what is not one's own, but also medicine, and building and weaving, and producing anything that comes into being through some skill for another. Socrates asks Charmides

whether a city seems to him well organized where each person weaves his own cloak or makes his own shoes. Clearly not; the one skilled in weaving should weave for others and the one skilled in cooking should cook for others. We do not attend to our own things only; insofar as we live among others and engage in activities with others we are -- like the Athenians in their national character -- busy bodies -- intervening in the lives of others. We do not do our own thing -- and if this is the definition of justice or of moderation then we are neither moderate or just -- and ought not to be. Even to read the Platonic dialogue is to appropriate for ourselves the speech of another. For there to be political life, for us to live as human beings together -- we must go beyond doing our own thing and do the things of others. Only the isolated individual living in a cave without human contact can fulfill the moderation or justice demanded by the definition that Charmides here and Socrates in the Republic has proposed.

The Greek word that I have been translating as busy body or meddler, as I mentioned before, is



*polypragmosune*; it is a peculiar word. The Corinthians in their speech in Thucydides' history described the Athenians as "least inactive," as ones who do indeed meddle in the affairs of others. Socrates in the *Apology*, his defense before the Athenians, also describes himself as a busy-body, one who meddles in the affairs of others. By so describing himself, Socrates portrays himself as similar to the democratic Athenian citizens who participate in making decisions that control the lives of their fellow citizens and indeed like the city of Athens itself that has become the leader of an empire. Today, too often, we think of democracy as rights, rights of protection from others and rights to services and rights to participate in the legislative process that will pass laws that will affect our private interests. Socrates as a busy body in Athens and in his process of education, and as an Athenian citizen, reminds us that democracy more fundamentally entails involvement in the lives of others, entails being a busy body, intervening in the lives of others -- not only speaking their speech, but also making laws and regulations that define what they can and

cannot do.

Socrates' virtue and the virtue of the Athenian citizen do not rest on doing their own things, on their not meddling in the affairs of others -- they are never being moderate with regard to such meddlesomeness. Socrates is emphatically a meddler and like the Athenians gives no rest to himself nor to others. To be a meddler, as is Socrates and as are the Athenians, is to disrupt the conventional and traditional -- and in particular to introduce complexity -- not let us do just our own things -- and not to blush. While Socrates is like the democratic Athens, Charmides, the beautiful youth who inspires the erotic gazes of those around him is more like the Spartans; he stands as an object of admiration adored by the young and old who watch and follow him in the gymnasium. He is an object, not an actor. He does not transform others as does Socrates and as do the Athenians to the world around them.

I fear I would try everyone's patience if I were to follow through for you the rest of the argument in *Charmides* (which at times becomes even more arcane than the section about writing your own

and your enemies' names). But let me just note that Critias, that inadequate teacher of Charmides, dominates the second half of the dialogue and Socrates, as with he did with Charmides, leads him to question what benefit is moderation, even at one point wondering if moderation is anything at all. "For our suggestion just now that moderation as a guide to ordering house or state must be a great boon was not to my thinking, Critias, a proper agreement." (172d) At the same time, he keeps remarking how curious it is that they may be concluding that moderation does not accomplish anything positive for us.

Why this uncertainty about whether moderation is good? The definitions that have surfaced, quietness, shame, doing one's own thing, and in the Critias section knowing what one knows all support the Spartan values or Spartan national character, the character of the enemies of democratic Athens. The Athenians are the opposite -- they are not quiet, they are defiant, meddlers, and always seeking new adventures. A quick history lesson is in now order here: The Spartans ultimately win the Peloponnesian War

and as a result of their victory a group, the so-called Thirty Tyrants, become rulers in Athens. Among the Thirty, as they come to be called, are the two men with whom we have just spent the evening: Critias and Charmides. After all this discussion of moderation, after all the attempts to define it, after all Socrates' efforts to apply a Thracian charm to heal the whole person, Charmides and Critias become tyrannical rulers in Athens.

The dialogue concludes with Charmides and Critias agreeing that Charmides shall submit himself to the charms of Socrates. They decide this without including Socrates in the discussion. When Socrates inquires about this arrangement, Charmides says, "You will be forced since Critias commands it. So take counsel as to what you shall do." Socrates replies: "There is no room for counsel since no one would be able to oppose you if you use force." Thus ends this dialogue about moderation. Of course, in the context of this dialogue the discussion of force is presented in a playful and ironic fashion, but the dark undertones are there. Though the Thirty Tyrants rule briefly,



they rule harshly and while they do they cause much suffering to the Athenians as they prosecute, execute and expropriate. The playful ending and tone of the entire dialogue are prelude to the harsh political consequences of the concern with moderation as it comes out in the Charmides' and Critias' vision. The tyranny they impose politically has its parallels in the tyranny of their attempt to heal themselves through the forced application of the charm. They search for a static point. Socrates in contrast is in motion, engagement and most significantly, incompleteness.

Whom does the dialogue educate then? Certainly not Charmides nor Critias. Neither is made virtuous by the words and charms of this dialogue. If anything, they become more obdurate, determined to "force" Socrates to apply his Thracian charm. They are driven by their own desire for power and the concern for how they appear before the evaluative gazes of others. The readers of the dialogue, however, who in the process of reading it, meddle in the lives of others and appropriate Plato's and Socrates' speech, are the obvious beneficiaries; they (we) are

intemperate or unjust as we engage in the affairs of others. Our education comes from this immoderation; we do not learn specific answers to questions posed; we do not learn how to heal the whole person; we may be no more successful at finding the sources of virtue than are Pericles' sons grazing like sacred oxen, but we recognize how Charmides' and Critias, demanding cures, insisting that Socrates continue his charm, fail to recognize the complexity of the pursuit of understanding.

William Bennett begins his volume on Virtues with the virtue of self-discipline. I would suggest that self-discipline is in many ways the modern analogue of moderation. To instill this self-discipline Bennett urges us to recite assorted rhymes and poems to the young. He begins with one from Robert Louis Stevenson which includes a stanza that goes like this:

But the unkind and the unruly  
And the sort who eat unduly  
They must never hope for glory---  
Theirs is quite a different story!

And in another anonymous ditty "John, Tom, and James," with the note from Bennett "We meet three ill-behaved children (who nobody likes)," we hear of:

John was a bad boy, and beat a poor cat;  
Tom put a stone in a blind man's hat;  
James was the boy who neglected his prayers;  
They've all grown up ugly, and nobody cares.

Socrates had begun the dialogue with the Thracian charm, but by the end he expresses distress about "the charm I learned from the Thracian that I should have spent so much pains on a lesson which has had such a worthless effect." And he wonders whether Charmides even needs the charm but the future tyrants still long for it. "I quite believe," says Charmides, "that I do need the charm" and that is why he and Critias plot to "force Socrates" to continue the charm. The Thracian charm, I would like to suggest, is like the stories and poems Bill Bennett tells, stories that make the virtues seem simple, charms that magically transform the

individual to conformity with others' expectations, that lull us into a quietness of self-satisfaction.

Plato/Socrates teaches human excellence which is complex, uncertain, searching and unsure, engaged and even intrusive. It is emphatically not pursuing the formulaic definitions of virtue which constrain and threaten, which set up the judgment of others, the mechanisms of shame as the tool to create youths of virtue. Plato/Socrates are not, I can add now, the forerunners of twentieth century totalitarianism. Rather, in the denial of precise definitions, in the rejection of simplistic charms, they warn about the dangers of a love of simplicity in our concern for the education of the young. There is no Thracian charm that can heal and make us whole and the search for it can only lead to the tyranny of the Thirty.

Allow me a moment of self-reflection to end my talk: Am I any different from Bill Bennett who tells stories to instill virtue. I've told stories: Protagoras' myth, the story of Socrates' return from battle, the encounter between Socrates and Charmides, the story of the Thracian charm, but I have learned from these stories a skepticism about



whether they can teach virtue, a quality that remains vague and ill-defined. The stories do teach a critical thinking -- an openness to the complexity of problems, a suspicion about whether future tyrants can force Socrates to teach moderation to a young man who has demonstrated immoderation in drinking, a worry about easy answers and thus a protection against tyranny.

Bill Bennett wants his stories to teach simple lessons. Except for the most simplistic of them, like the poem about "John, Tom and James," good literature is complex. Among the pieces included in Bennett's section on self-discipline are some lines from *Macbeth* about the self-discipline needed by Macbeth and urged on him by Lady Macbeth to murder Duncan the king of Scotland, but Bennett notes "it's the wrong kind of self-discipline, driven only by runaway ambitions." So how do we know, Socrates would ask, which self-discipline we want. We need to go beyond the praise of virtues. Good literature points to the complexity of virtues, not their simplicity. It opens up possibilities and varieties. Perhaps in response to Socrates' persistent question about

whether we can teach virtue, the answer must be that we cannot, but we can provide the settings in which easy answers of a tyrannical simplicity are replaced with the complexity that moves us to a more thoughtful assessment of educational goals and political limits. Through our very reading of Platonic dialogues, we become meddlers in the lives of others; the dialogues, like democratic regimes, provide such a setting. I fear Bill Bennett's stories and fables, assuming models of virtues, do not.

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Dr. Arlene W. Saxonhouse is Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan. She is currently also a Fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. Dr. Saxonhouse writes mainly in the area of ancient Greek political theory. Her major publications include: *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (1986); *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (1992); *Hobbes' Three Discourses: A Critical Modern Edition of Newly Identified Work of the Young Hobbes* (1995); and *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Historians* (forthcoming 1995).

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