

*Charmides Abandons the ‘Best Method’*  
*The Third Definition – Temperance Is ‘Doing One’s Own’*  
*(161b4–162b11)*

Charmides’ final attempt to determine the nature of temperance differs from the other two and marks a turning point in the dialogue. Dramatically, it represents both an end and a beginning. For after Charmides is refuted, he withdraws from the front stage of the action and is replaced by Critias, who claims on his own account that temperance is ‘doing one’s own’, undertakes to defend that definition anew (162b12–164d3), and remains Socrates’ dialectical partner almost to the end of the dialogue. Philosophically, the two-fold discussion of the third definition of *sôphrosynê* (the round with Charmides, 161b4–161b11, and the round with Critias, 162b12–164d3) links the joint search of Socrates and Charmides aimed at discovering whether there is temperance in Charmides’ soul to the investigation jointly conducted by Socrates and Critias and focused on the relation between temperance and self-knowledge. Notably, on the one hand, the conception of temperance as ‘doing one’s own’ provides a platform for integrating the values of acting *hêsychôs*, quietly and unobtrusively, and of acting with *aidôs*, a sense of shame, into a broader socio-political context, while, on the other hand, the debate between Socrates and Critias eventually leads to the realisation that temperance or acting temperately has intrinsic worth and presupposes self-knowledge of some sort.

But consider the following view about temperance to judge whether you like it. For I just remembered something that I once heard someone say, that temperance might be doing one’s own. So I should like you to examine whether you think that the person who said this is right. – You scoundrel, I said, you have heard this from Critias here or some other wise man! – Apparently, said Critias, he heard it from someone else. For he certainly hasn’t heard it from me. – But Socrates, said Charmides, what difference does it make whom I heard it from? – None, I replied. For, in any case, we ought to consider not who said it, but whether or not the claim is true. – Now you are speaking correctly, he said. – Yes, by god, I retorted. But

I would be amazed if we are also going to discover the truth of the matter.  
For it seems to be a sort of riddle. (161b4–c9)

The phrase 'doing one's own' (*ta heautou prattein*: 161b6)<sup>1</sup> sounds odd to the modern ear. Nonetheless, it was widely used in the Periclean age, was part of the vocabulary related to the Athenian ideological debate between the oligarchic faction and the democrats, and had specific political, social, and ethical connotations for Plato's near-contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Generally, 'doing one's own' was taken to be conceptually related to *apragmosynê*, the reluctance to meddle in things, and *hêsychia*, the unintrusive quietness of citizens who are contented to deal with their own affairs. All three terms indicate a similar attitude and all three are frequently contrasted in the sources with '*polypragmosynê*', which refers to one's tendency to have many different concerns and activities that are not only 'one's own', but also may involve other people or the city as a whole.<sup>3</sup> While the aforementioned phrases could be (and, in the fourth century, had been) used in an increasingly neutral way,<sup>4</sup> in the late fifth century they usually pointed to specific political associations and had an evaluative aspect. It was typical of aristocratic oligarchs to praise *hêsychia* or concentration on one's private affairs as a positive feature of one's character and one's attitude as a citizen. Peaceful inactivity (*hêsychia apragmôn*) was taken to indicate loyalty to the state, obedience to the laws, willingness to live and let live in the *polis*, love of peace, and justice. Also typical of those who had an anti-democratic bent was the tendency to deprecate *polypragmosynê* for causing trouble and chaos, and for leading to aggression and war. From their perspective, *polypragmosynê* or involvement with the affairs of others and not just with one's own often indicated civic restlessness, primitive and destructive instincts, the lust for power, and insatiable greed.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the democrats and, in particular, Athenian democrats stigmatised *apragmosynê* as a kind of quietism that was useless or even dangerous to the *polis* and unbefitting free men. From the democratic point of view, engagement with the *polis* was considered the hallmark of a distinctly Athenian vitality and optimism that enabled the city to thrive despite various setbacks.<sup>5</sup> As Athenian supremacy approaches its end, however, the ancient sources highlight

<sup>1</sup> The phrase τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν is also rendered by, for example, 'doing one's own things', 'minding one's own business', or 'minding one's own affairs'.

<sup>2</sup> Also, as readers of the *Republic* well know, this phrase takes a special meaning as part of the definition of justice in that work. More on this later.

<sup>3</sup> See the classic study by Erhenberg 1947. <sup>4</sup> Erhenberg 1947, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrenberg 1947, especially 47–53.

a particular aspect of *apragmosynê* especially relevant to the historical subtext of the *Charmides* and the conception of temperance under consideration. That is, in the last few decades of the fifth century, the attitude of quietism related to 'doing one's own' was frequently interpreted as deliberate defiance of the mob by a person of knowledge and education, intellectually superior to the many, and frequently devoted to theoretical as well as practical pursuits.<sup>6</sup>

As indicated, Charmides' first definition of temperance has been widely interpreted along these lines. For instance, according to Noburu Notomi, 'doing one's own' represents a step in the development by Plato of Critias' elitist ideology;<sup>7</sup> and although Plato takes pains to distinguish Critias' elaboration of that concept from Socrates' ideal of self-sufficiency,<sup>8</sup> nonetheless he retains some sympathy for Critias and implicitly acknowledges that 'evil results are not incompatible with a good will'.<sup>9</sup> Or, according to Thomas Tuozzo,

Plato's portrayal of Critias in the *Charmides* should be seen as, in part, Plato's move in a literary struggle over the meaning of Critias and his activity, a struggle analogous to that waged over the meaning of Socrates and his activity. It goes without saying that Plato does not put Critias on the same level as Socrates, either morally or intellectually. But he does think that Critias represents a positive strand of Greek political and cultural thought, a strand that Plato considers himself as in some measure continuing and deepening.<sup>10</sup>

On such approaches, 'doing one's own' is an expression of the political ideal also expressed in negative terms by *apragmosynê*. Citizens who 'do their own' are not doing nothing but, on the contrary, engage only with things properly concerning themselves. Both the surviving writings<sup>11</sup> and the political trajectory of the historical Critias make it seem likely that he was the originator of the formula '*ta heautou prattein*',<sup>12</sup> or one of the prominent users of that phrase.

One important difference between this definition and the previous ones has to do with its provenance. This time Charmides does not look inside himself but outside. He advances the claim that temperance is 'doing one's own' not as a belief that he has formed on the basis of self-awareness, but as a view that he recollects (*anemnésthên*: 161b5) someone else having stated.

<sup>6</sup> Erhenberg 1947, 53–9, explains how ἀπραγμοσύνη, concentration on one's own affairs, gets to be closer connected with ἡσυχία, quietness, and the private cultivation of one's mind and soul.

<sup>7</sup> Notomi 2000, 246. <sup>8</sup> Notomi 2003, 250–2. <sup>9</sup> Notomi 2000, 249. See also Chapter 1, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Tuozzo 2011, 57.

<sup>11</sup> The fragments of Critias' works are found in DK II: 375–99.

<sup>12</sup> See Bultrighini 1999.

Thus, he violates a basic requirement of the 'best method' and makes it impossible for him and Socrates to find out whether temperance is present in his own soul. For the belief under discussion does not derive from Charmides' own sense of himself, but from an external source. Even though Charmides will undertake to defend it, he cannot really claim ownership of it: it is not *his* in the sense in which the first two definitions of temperance undoubtedly are. Why does Charmides proceed in that manner? Perhaps he has become so engrossed in the previous search that he has forgotten the initial purpose of the search. Or perhaps he wants to remove himself from the conversation and, therefore, is trying to provoke Critias to take over.<sup>13</sup>

Another possibility is that he is shocked by the abrupt refutation of his previous definition and feels unable to continue. 'He is shaken by this experience, as well he should be: Socrates has called into question his deepest self-understanding, not only of the pride he takes in himself (a pride reinforced by his many admirers), but also of the values and even the society supporting that pride of self-evaluation.'<sup>14</sup> Also, it is conceivable that the youth understood the point that Socrates made earlier, namely that *sôphrosynê* involves concern with one's own good and not just concern with other people's expectations, and the definition that he now offers gives Socrates the opportunity to clarify the notion of concern for one's own good by focusing first 'on the outward looking, social nature' of the virtue.<sup>15</sup> If so, we may assume that Charmides sincerely endorses on his own account the claim that temperance is 'doing one's own'.<sup>16</sup> The narrator gives us no help in deciding between these competing options. However, it may be helpful to compare Charmides' move of advancing a view derived from someone else to a similar move in the *Euthyphro*. Like *Euthyphro*, Charmides has run out of suggestions regarding the definition of the virtue under consideration. And as *Euthyphro* accepts and tries to defend Socrates' suggestion (cf. 11e) that piety is part of justice, so Charmides accepts and undertakes to defend a view that comes from an external source rather than from within himself. In both cases it is clear that Socrates' interlocutor won't be able to contribute to the argument much longer. But in neither case does Plato give decisive indications as to what the feelings of the interlocutor might be.

In any case, Charmides is represented as advancing this third definition in an even and self-controlled manner: he invites Socrates to consider a new response to the 'what is X?' question in case it might be correct. Again,

<sup>13</sup> So Bruell 1977, 156–7. <sup>14</sup> Schmid 1998, 29. <sup>15</sup> Tuozzo 2011, 166. <sup>16</sup> See Blyth 2001, 43.

there is no telling what his motives are. He may be entirely sincere or somewhat sly: if the definition holds good, he will get credit for it, but if it is not, someone else will get the blame. Likewise, his attitude to Critias seems ambiguous. Assuming that he wishes Critias to step in, does he try to provoke him to do so because he knows Critias to be a far more experienced debater, or does he merely want to annoy him? It is possible that Charmides' move is motivated by playfulness, mischief, reaction to authority,<sup>17</sup> suppressed anger, or the desire to see his vain guardian refuted by Socrates. But the narrator says nothing explicitly on that score. Philosophically too, the passage under discussion is open to different readings. Charmides' reference to the process of *anamimniskesthai*, remember or recollect,<sup>18</sup> makes complete sense if we take the verb in the ordinary sense of bringing back to mind an experience that one has had in the past, and of making available to oneself in the present the contents of that experience. But it cannot be excluded that '*anamimniskesthai*' is intended to point towards the theory of recollection and the arduous process of recovery of the Forms latent in one's soul.<sup>19</sup>

Other issues debated in the literature need to be addressed as well. It has been contended that when Socrates exclaims 'ὄ miare!' (161b8), he characterises Charmides by a 'very derisive term';<sup>20</sup> for the latter conveys the idea of *miasma*, pollution, and especially pollution resulting from bloodshed. In fact, Plato's Socrates frequently employs that adjective in a coaxing or playful sense. For instance, when Phaedrus swears an oath that he will never read to Socrates another speech unless Socrates produces his own counter-speech, Socrates retorts: 'Oh! Oh! You wretch (*ὄ miare*)! How well you discovered how to force a lover of speeches bid your will!' (236e). I think that his exclamation to Charmides should be understood in a similar way. He reacts playfully rather than seriously, for he wishes to encourage Charmides to go on with the conversation as long as he can sustain it. If he feels disappointed in the youth, he does not show it at present.<sup>21</sup> Nor, on the other hand, does he appear pleased at Charmides' move.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See the remarks of Blyth 2001, 42. <sup>18</sup> ἄρτι γὰρ ἀνεμνήσθη: 161b5.

<sup>19</sup> See *Men.* 81a–85d, *Phd.* 72e–77a, *Phdr.* 246a–257b. <sup>20</sup> Schmid 1998, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Contra Schmid 1998, 30–1, who takes Socrates' use of *μισαρός* to indicate that he feels disappointment at the fact that Charmides does not 'do his own': he does not give his own definition and retain his role in the search, but acknowledges the authority of his guardian and is ready to yield his place to him.

<sup>22</sup> Tuozzo 2011, 166, suggests that Socrates feels pleased at the thought that Charmides finally came to realise that temperance involves some sort of concern with one's own good. However, I do not think that the text supports that suggestion.

A more puzzling issue is why Critias so emphatically<sup>23</sup> denies that he is the author of the proposed definition. Does he merely wish to deceive those present?<sup>24</sup> Does he want to give Charmides another chance to show off? Does he take offence at the fact that Socrates lumped him together with 'other wise men' (161b8–c1)? Or is he acting out of fear that he might be refuted by Socrates and thus might be shamed in front of his ward? It is impossible to tell with any degree of certainty, and we must leave our options open. But the thing to register is that, for whatever reason, Critias is lying. It is the second time in the dialogue that he has preferred deception to truth.

For his own part, Socrates too says something perplexing, namely that 'doing one's own' is like a riddle (161c9) and that he would be amazed if they were able to solve it and discover the truth (161c8–9). Thus he implies that the argument to follow will have as a primary aim to try to resolve the enigma. Nonetheless, in the first place, it would seem that the expression 'doing one's own' is far from mysterious: as indicated, fifth-century Athenians knew what it meant. In the second place, many have judged that the cross-examination purporting to clarify the matter defeats this purpose. The elenchus that follows has been considered a joke in bad taste at Charmides' expense,<sup>25</sup> a parody of the proposed definition,<sup>26</sup> an interpretation both literal and pedestrian entailing ridiculous consequences,<sup>27</sup> one that is 'least plausible'<sup>28</sup> or deliberately apolitical,<sup>29</sup> or, alternatively, one that indicates the social and political dimensions of *sôphrosynê* in a bizarre manner.<sup>30</sup> I believe these contentions to be mistaken. Even though the elenchus to follow is one where Socrates probably has a bit of fun, it also offers preliminary clarifications of the meaning of 'doing one's own' by eliminating certain possibilities but allowing for others. Thus, it paves the way to Critias' more sophisticated attempt to defend the claim that temperance is 'to do one's own'.

We should look at the argument aiming to refute Charmides (161d1–162a9). Socrates pretends to be far more literal-minded than he really is, and takes 'doing one's own' to mean, literally, engaging in all sorts of activities, all of which are directed solely towards oneself.<sup>31</sup> To undermine

<sup>23</sup> οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἐμοῦ γε: 161c. <sup>24</sup> Hyland 1981, 76. <sup>25</sup> Notomi 2000, 251.

<sup>26</sup> Beversluis 2000, 142. <sup>27</sup> Solère-Queval 1993, 16–17. <sup>28</sup> Blyth 2001, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Hyland 1981, 73, interprets 'doing one's own' as being 'neither in need of nor a dependable contributor to a healthy *polis*'.

<sup>30</sup> Schmid 1998, 32.

<sup>31</sup> In this sense, therefore, 'doing one's own' can be considered reflexive. If it is read in that way, Socrates' point that, in fact, the experts' activities are not self-directed but other-directed can be taken to foreshadow the Argument from Relatives.

the view that temperance is 'doing one's own' in this latter, very narrow sense, he asks Charmides to entertain several examples of experts in various *technai*, arts and sciences, and consider whether the experts in these *technai* are concerned in truth with 'their own' rather than 'other people's own'. In response, Charmides has to concede that, in fact, experts primarily or exclusively direct their activities towards goals concerning others, not themselves. They do or make 'other people's own' rather than 'their own'. For example, assuming that the teacher of grammar *does* (*prattein*: 161d3) something when he writes or reads or teaches, he does not perform these activities by reproducing, for instance, only his own name, nor does he instruct his pupils to write only their own name but other names too, including the names of people that are not 'their own' but alien or hostile to them (161d8). But even though both the teacher and the pupils (including Charmides himself) do not only 'do their own' but also 'other people's own', they cannot reasonably be considered busybodies (*polypragmones*) or intemperate (161d11–e1). The same observation holds for expert work in medicine, building, weaving, and generally any work (cf. *apergazesthai*: 161e8) done in an artful manner in the domain of first-order arts (161e6–9). Note that Socrates does not draw distinctions between different kinds of arts (productive, performative, etc.) and the works that they do. He intends his point to apply to deeds and productions of all sorts and, therefore, he uses indiscriminately the verbs '*prattein*', to do, and '*ergazesthai*' or '*apergazesthai*' (161e8, 162a2) – a verb designating both actions and productions. His practice will be challenged later on. At present, however, we begin to understand why the definition proposed by Charmides might be riddling. It is not all that clear what 'doing one's own' may mean. But one thing it cannot mean is that the experts must focus their activities solely on themselves on pain of being proclaimed intemperate.

Next, Socrates extends this reasoning to the *polis*, city or state. On the assumption that legislation is an art whose work (*ergon*) consists in making laws able to ensure the well-being of the city, he leads Charmides to concede that, if a city were governed according to a law prescribing that everyone should produce or do (*ergazesthai kai prattein*: 162a2) only 'one's own', e.g. weaving only one's own cloak or making only one's own shoes, the city would not be governed well (*eu oikeisthai*: 161e10). But running a city temperately would be running it well (162a4–5). 'Therefore', Socrates infers, 'temperance would not be "doing one's own" in those kinds of cases or in that way' (162a7–8). The conclusion, then, leaves open the possibility that temperance *might* involve 'doing one's own' in different cases or in a different way. Nonetheless, it is strongly suggested, I think, that even if



that were the case, i.e. even if temperance did imply 'doing one's own' in some *other* way, the latter would have to accommodate the intuition that the work of every art and every expert is primarily to benefit other people rather than the experts themselves.

As we shall see, this intuition lies at the core of the debate between Socrates and Critias. But it also governs certain aspects of the argument in the *Republic*. As many have noted,<sup>32</sup> 'doing one's own' has a special meaning as part of the definition of justice in the context of the analogy between the city and the soul. While the meaning and implications of 'doing one's own' differ in these two works,<sup>33</sup> we may now begin to discern some sort of thread linking them. The virtue of justice holding together the tripartite structure of the Callipolis consists in the proper function of each citizen class. Each of the three classes 'does its own' in the sense of doing what its members are naturally best fitted to do. And each of the three classes 'does other people's own' not, of course, in the sense that its members are busybodies, but in the sense that they function with a view to the common good rather than their own.

Towards the end of the Myth of Er concluding the *Republic*, we are told that when the soul of Odysseus came to make its choice of its next life, remembering the former evils that Odysseus had suffered because of his *philotimia*, love of honour, it searched for a long time to find the life of 'a private citizen' minding his own affairs and, upon finding it, declared that this life would have been its first choice in any case (620c–d). The 'quiet solemnity'<sup>34</sup> of the last words of the *Republic* may move us to look back to the *Charmides* and consider how the *Republic* provides an answer to Socrates' query about the meaning of 'doing one's own'. Properly understood, 'doing one's own' entails that every class and every citizen will concentrate on the kind of work that is naturally appropriate for them and will do that work for the good of the whole. The Myth of Er drives home the idea that, by acting in that manner, always pursuing the good and avoiding evil, 'we shall fare well' (*eu Prattōmen: Rep.* 621d). The *Republic*, then, can be taken to provide a fully argued response to the concern highlighted by Socrates in the third elenchus of the *Charmides*: whether a city run according to the principle of 'doing one's own' could be

<sup>32</sup> See also note 2 in this chapter.

<sup>33</sup> Solère-Queval 1993, 18, appears to assume that 'doing one's own' has the same meaning in these two dialogues, even though the argumentation differs. 'L'auteur présumé de cette définition, tout aussi bien que Critias, pourrait donc être Socrate!'

<sup>34</sup> The phrase belongs to Paul Shorey: in his last footnote to the Loeb translation of the *Republic*, he notes the 'quiet solemnity' of the work's last words, 'εὐ πράττωμεν', and compares it to the solemn first word of the *Laws*, 'θεός'.



managed well or, more literally, lived in well<sup>35</sup> by its own citizens, each of them individually and all of them as a whole.

In sum, I hope to have shown that there is more to this elenchus than commentators have allowed for. Once the refutation is completed, however, Socrates and Charmides indulge in what might appear as mere banter.

So, it seems that the person who claimed that temperance is doing one's own was riddling, as I was saying a moment ago. For he couldn't have been as simple-minded as that. Or was it some idiot that you heard claiming this, Charmides? – Not at all, he said, for he seemed very wise indeed. – Then, in view of the difficulty to understand what doing one's own can mean, it seems to me virtually certain that he was challenging you with a riddle. – Perhaps, he said. – Well, what could it mean 'to do one's own'? Can you say? – By Zeus, he exclaimed, I really have no idea. But it may well be that not even the man who said it had the least idea of what he meant. And as he was saying this, he laughed a little and looked away towards Critias. (162a10–b11)

To be sure, these remarks are presented as a joke at Critias' expense. But the language is unusually strong and even offensive. On the one hand, Socrates concludes that, if 'doing one's own' means what they took it to mean, only a fool (*euêthês*: 162b1) or an idiot (*êlithios*: 162b1) could have believed that it conveys the nature of temperance. On the other hand, even though Charmides has earlier witnessed his guardian's negative reaction to the suggestion that he is a *sophos*, wise man or sophist (161b8–c2), he retorts that the author of the definition did not seem an idiot but *pany sophos*, very wise (162b3). Adding insult to injury, he indicates that, in fact, the man in question was anything but wise, since he probably did not know what he really meant by 'doing one's own' (162b9–10). As if this were not enough, Charmides reveals to everybody present that Critias was, in truth, the source of the claim that had just been refuted: he looks sideways at him and laughs (162b10–11). Clearly, the main purpose of both interlocutors is to prick Critias' *philotimia*, love of honour, and jolt him into action. But the language that they use makes one wonder about Charmides' character and perhaps about Socrates' own feelings as well. The youth appears to have no scruples about ridiculing his guardian and exposing him as a fraud. His smooth manners and deference are momentarily torn asunder by a flash of nasty wit. As for Socrates, one may question whether he really had to call Critias a fool or an idiot in order to draw him into the conversation. In any case, their device succeeds and Critias enters the ring, causing quite a commotion.

<sup>35</sup> εὖ οἰκεῖσθαι: ἰδίδιο.