CHAPTER 7

# *Critias' Speech*
## *Temperance Is Knowing Oneself (164d4–165c4)*

> As a matter of fact, I am almost ready to assert that this very thing, to know oneself, is temperance, and I am of the same mind as the person who put up an inscription to that effect at Delphi. For it seems to me that this inscription has been put up for the following purpose, to serve as a greeting from the god to those who enter the temple instead of the usual 'Be Joyful', since this greeting, 'Be Joyful', is not right nor should people use it to exhort one another, but rather should use the greeting 'Be Temperate'. Thus, the god addresses those entering the temple in a manner different in some respects from that in which men address each other, and it is with that thought in mind, I believe, that the person who put up the inscription did so. And it is alleged that he [sc. the god] says to every man who enters the temple nothing other than 'Be Temperate'. However, he says it in a more enigmatic manner, as a prophet would. For while 'Know Thyself' and 'Be Temperate' are one and the same, as the inscription and I assert, perhaps one might think that they are different – an error that, I believe, has been committed by the dedicators of the later inscriptions, i.e. 'Nothing too much' and 'A rash pledge and, immediately, perdition'. For they supposed that 'Know Thyself' was a piece of advice, not the god's greeting to those who were entering.[1] And so, in order that their own dedications too would no less contain pieces of useful advice, they inscribed these words and put them up in the temple. The purpose for which I say all this, Socrates, is the following: I concede to you everything that was debated beforehand. For concerning them perhaps you said something more correct perhaps than I did, but, in any case, nothing we said was really clear. However, I am now ready to give you an argument for this, if you don't agree that temperance is to know oneself. (164d4–165c4)

Critias' speech is not just a rhetorical display. Structurally, it provides continuity between the intellectualist assumption on account of which Critias has abandoned the definition of temperance as 'the doing or making of good things' and the view that *sôphrosynê* is knowledge of

[1] I delete ἕνεκεν, following Cobet.

oneself. Thus, the speech links what is commonly considered the first part of the investigation with the second part.[2] Conceptually, Critias' interpretation of the Delphic inscription 'Know Thyself' focuses on the notion of self-knowledge in a new way. His central claim is not merely that knowing oneself is a necessary condition for having temperance, but that knowing oneself is what temperance is in its nature. Dialectically, Critias' move is astute and effective. For, in his speech, he indicates *why* he found unpalatable the implication that the craftsmen may be temperate and yet ignorant of their temperance and, moreover, supports his intuition by appealing to the authority of the god. His opening statement, i.e. that he is *almost* ready to assert that temperance is this very thing, to know oneself, underscores the dialectical context of the discussion. The qualification 'almost' (*schedon*: 164d3) points to the fact that the new definition is not the result of deductive reasoning or of careful consideration of all relevant factors. Rather, Critias has been brought to the point of suggesting that temperance is self-knowledge as a result of the previous argument and, in particular, the stance that he took vis-à-vis the hypothesis that people can be temperate without having knowledge of themselves in that regard. While Critias will appear firmly committed to the view that temperance is knowing oneself, it is worth bearing in mind that he initially proposes that view in a dialectical mode.[3]

A. E. Taylor and others claim that the view that temperance is knowing oneself is 'generally accepted',[4] but this is probably not true. While the contemporaries of Socrates and Plato commonly assume that self-knowledge is an aspect of *sôphrosynê*[5] and acknowledge the value of the precept 'Know Thyself', they would probably deny that *sôphrosynê* is just this, knowing oneself.[6] The former view represents a conventional value, whereas the latter is a philosophical position held by Critias and, at first glance, likely to be attractive to Socrates as well. In fact, Critias appears to

[2] According to Schmid 1998, 40, Critias' speech constitutes the high point of the dialogue. As he suggests, the investigation ascends to the definition of temperance as self-knowledge through three prior stages, then descends in three stages in which it is criticised on metaphysical, epistemological, and moral grounds. In fact, however, the target of the elenchus is not the claim that temperance is knowing oneself, but Critias' articulation of self-knowledge in terms of the only science that is of the other sciences and of itself (166c2–3).

[3] In my view, the text does not support the claim by Gotshalk 2001, 82, that the word 'almost' points to an aspect of temperance that Charmides has not yet made his own, i.e. 'the need to assume individual responsibility for his own life and to find that way of taking part in things which is his very own as a human being'.

[4] So Taylor 1926. [5] See Annas 1985.

[6] While *sôphrosynê* was commonly believed to entail self-control (see North 1966, *passim*), this does not hold for self-knowledge.

hope that Socrates will admit on the spot that temperance is self-knowledge and the argument will end there. He tells Socrates: 'I am now ready to give you an argument for this, if you don't agree that temperance is to know oneself' (165b3–4).

As Tuckey remarks, Critias appears to be thinking: 'Oh, of course! Why didn't I think of that before? Socrates used always to talk about the Delphic precept "Know thyself" and he used to tell us that we must know ourselves if we were to reach true spiritual health.'[7] In the *Laches*, Nicias appears to have a similar reaction. After Laches' definition of courage as wise endurance has been refuted, Nicias is summoned to rescue the argument (*Lach.* 194c). And he wonders why Socrates does not put forward a view that Nicias has heard him express in the past, namely that people are good in respect of that in which they are wise and bad in respect of that in which they are ignorant; from this latter it can be inferred that, if people are courageous, they are wise (194c–d). Socrates takes Nicias to suggest that courage is a sort of wisdom (194d). As in the *Charmides*, so in the *Laches* the definition under consideration equates a virtue with a kind of knowledge. As in the former dialogue, so in the latter Socrates' interlocutor fully expects Socrates to agree with the proposed view. Moreover, in both cases Socrates carefully distances himself from the view expressed by his interlocutor. He refuses to answer Laches' question concerning what sort of wisdom is courage, but invites Nicias to respond: the view is Nicias' own and Nicias should take responsibility for it (194e–195a). Likewise, he refuses to accept outright Critias' claim that temperance is knowing oneself (cf. 165b–c). Rather, he appeals to his own ignorance and expresses his wish to consider the matter further.

> Critias, I said, you treat me as though I claimed to know the things that I ask about, and as though I shall agree with you only if I want to. But this is not so. Rather, you see, I always enquire together with you into whatever claim is put forward, because I myself do not know. Thus, it will be after considering the matter that I am willing to state whether or not I agree. So, please hold back until I have done so. – Do consider then, he said. – I am doing so, I replied. (165b5–c4)

Critias as well as Nicias had hoped that Socrates might accept their respective definitions for a similar reason. Both characters are represented by Plato as being familiar with Socrates' ways of thinking and, therefore, both expect him to be favourable to their intellectualist accounts of,

[7] Tuckey 1951, 24.

respectively, courage and temperance. They appear to forget, however, that while Socrates conceives of the virtues as a sort of knowledge or understanding, his disclaimer of expertise in 'the most important things' precludes him from accepting the definition of an ethical concept without argument, and also the rules of his method make it impossible for him to undertake on his own account the defence of a definition put forward by someone else. Neither the *Laches* nor the *Charmides* gives us reason to worry that the elenchus demolishes a conception of courage or of temperance known to lie close to Socrates' own heart. For as in the former case, so in the latter the definition under investigation gets refuted on the basis of premises representing the beliefs of Socrates' interlocutor, not necessarily of Socrates himself.

Nonetheless, I contend, the situation in the *Charmides* is far more complicated than in the *Laches*, insofar as Socrates' known view about self-knowledge has an important dialectical and philosophical function from the beginning of the dialogue to its very end. Critias' speech makes this function prominent by prompting us to compare and contrast the speaker's peculiar interpretation of the Delphic dictum with Socrates' own understanding of the oracle and his lifelong devotion to the task set for him by the god. This suggestion is crucial to my reading of the dialogue and, therefore, it may be useful to summarise some things that I have said earlier as well.

Namely, Critias' appeal to the Delphic inscription 'Know Thyself' cannot fail to evoke the god's verdict about Socrates in the *Apology*, namely that no man was wiser than he was (*Ap*. 21a). After cross-examining various experts about things that they claim to know, Socrates comes to the conclusion that he is wiser than they are because he does not believe that he knows when he doesn't, whereas they believe themselves to be experts in certain 'most important matters' that they are in truth ignorant about (21d). Socrates does not explicitly identify these 'most important matters'. However, it is clear that they do not belong to the domain of any first-order expertise (22d–e), but essentially have to do with truth, virtue, and the health of the soul (30a–31c). Socrates provisionally concludes that the mark of his own wisdom, human wisdom (20d–e), is that he does not think himself wise about these matters, while the people that he has cross-examined believe themselves to possess a wisdom 'more than human' (20e).

Arguably, the story of the oracle in the *Apology* has a normative and paraenetic purpose. For Socrates suggests that the god[8] probably used him

[8] Burnyeat 1997, 4, underscores that while Socrates frequently refers to ὁ θεός, 'the god' (e.g. at *Ap*. 20e, 21b), and while the members of the jury assume that he is talking of Apollo, Socrates never mentions Apollo by name.

as an example in order to highlight the disproportion between divine wisdom and human wisdom and show what is involved in the latter (23b). His own labours on behalf of the god illustrate both how we ought to seek human wisdom and what human wisdom consists in: a certain sort of self-knowledge, i.e. one's capacity to assess the limits of knowledge and ignorance in oneself and others in relation to the perfect knowledge of virtue and value that only the gods may possess (23d–e). Socrates' account of his endeavours to gain self-understanding appear intended to serve as a paradigm of the way to acquire human wisdom, namely through the lifelong examination of one's own moral beliefs and of the moral beliefs of others (28e). Importantly, in his defence speech, Socrates stresses that his labours were motivated by his perception of himself as a servant of the god. He appears convinced that the gods exist, are far wiser than we are, and we ought to obey their commands and fight against the tendency to think ourselves their equals in wisdom or anything else (29a).

As I claimed previously,[9] these ideas are present or alluded to in the opening scene of the *Charmides*. Especially relevant to Critias' speech is a contrast intimated in the prologue of the work between the *logoi*, discourses or arguments, intended to engender virtue in the soul and those merely aiming to sharpen one's wits for practical purposes (157a–d). On the one hand, the tale of Zalmoxis is designed to launch Charmides into a journey somewhat comparable to Socrates' own, i.e. a journey during which Charmides will gradually discover the limits of human wisdom and become increasingly aware of what he does not know but may think that he knows. On the other, Critias' clever interpretation of the meaning of 'Know Thyself' points back to his ambiguous remark in the prologue, that his ward's *dianoia* (mind, thinking, wits) will be greatly improved by the conversation with Socrates (157c9–10). It seems that Critias' own engagement in dialectical exercise has enhanced his cleverness and ingenuity. But whether it has also contributed to the cultivation of his soul and the development of his understanding remains to be seen.

It will become apparent that the speech does not in any way relate temperance or self-knowledge to the method of *dialegesthai* or the goal of coming to terms with one's epistemic limitations concerning value. Unquestionably, the speech is an interpretative *tour de force* comparable to Critias' ingenious reading of Hesiod (163b–c), and it highlights and elaborates Critias' explicit commitment to a kind of intellectualism (163e1–164d3).

[9] Chapter 1, 23–8.

Nonetheless, as we shall see, no element of the speech indicates that the acquisition or possession of self-knowledge requires the moral and psychological qualities prominent in the Socratic search, such as perseverance, concentration, and courage. I propose that we approach Critias' interpretation and use of the Delphic inscription 'Know Thyself' bearing these reflections in mind.

Let us retrace once more the steps that led Critias to assert, albeit with some hesitation, that *sôphrosynê* is the same thing as knowing oneself (*gignôskein heauton*: 164d3–4). The elenchus immediately preceding the speech showed that, if temperance is the doing or making of something good, the experts in first-order arts or sciences can do temperate deeds and be temperate without necessarily having awareness of their temperance and, therefore, without knowing themselves in respect of the value of their actions or productions. Critias emphatically refused to accept this implication – that a person could be temperate without knowing himself to be (164d2–3). He briefly alluded to the possibility of withdrawing one or more of his earlier concessions (164c7–d2), but in the end chose a different path: capitalise on the belief that he articulated in the aforementioned process, namely that one can have temperance only if one knows oneself. Despite some qualms,[10] he advances the far stronger claim that temperance is just that, knowing oneself.[11]

Given the above train of thought, it is reasonable to infer that Critias' conception of self-knowledge involves some reference to value in a more or a less rigorous sense of that term. Moreover, Critias appears to have in mind some kind of second-order or higher-order knowledge, as opposed to the specialised expertise belonging to the first-order arts and sciences. For it seems that, according to Critias, the temperate person has a kind of knowledge that is both more general and more valuable than any first-order expertise. More general because, as Critias appears to suppose, the domain of temperance or self-knowledge is not restricted to any particular first-order art but ranges over all first-order arts. More elevated, because those endowed with temperance or self-knowledge will always be in a position to make correct value-judgements about the deeds and productions of the first-order experts, whereas, as the preceding elenchus has shown, these latter may not be. Even before Critias improvises his speech, then, we have reason to think that his conception of self-knowledge will be markedly different from Socrates' own.

[10] σχεδόν: 164d3. [11] I treat 'self-knowledge' and 'knowing oneself' as equivalent.

We should look at the details of Critias' analysis of the Delphic inscription. Some features of the speech corroborate the suggestion that he thinks of self-knowledge in a way quite different from Socrates. An important difference is that, unlike Plato's Socrates in the *Apology*, he believes that he understands the exact meaning of the god and that he is superior to most men in that regard. First, he states that he fully agrees with the dedicator of the Delphic inscription about its true purpose: the engraved words 'Know Thyself' should be read as the god's greeting (*prosrhêsis*) to the worshippers entering the temple (164d6–e2). Also, he contends that the common greeting 'Be Joyful' is a wrong form of salutation, whereas the right salutation would be 'Know Thyself' (164d7–e2).

Critias sharply distinguishes those who do understand the inscription correctly from those who do not (164e7–165a7) and suggests that the members of the former group are precious few. He appears to assume that, in addition to himself, only the dedicator of the inscription and perhaps a few others understand 'Know Thyself' in the right manner, as the god's greeting to those entering his temple. On the contrary, ordinary people don't understand what the god intends to tell them and make the mistake of taking 'Know Thyself' as a piece of advice. The reason why they fail to grasp the god's riddle is that they are misled by synonymy. While Critias himself realises that, from the god's perspective, 'knowing oneself' and 'being temperate' mean or refer to the same thing, ordinary folk assume, mistakenly, that these two expressions mean or refer to different things. Therefore, they miss the true message of the god, which implies that self-knowledge and temperance entail each other or are identical. And they pass through life without ever understanding that we ought to desire temperance more than we desire joy or health.[12] Thus, Critias presumes to act like the diviners of the Delphic temple: he decodes for the sake of the common men the god's enigmatic speech. He says that the god speaks in riddles, not stating plainly what he means but challenging us to discover his hidden meaning (164e6–7). And he explicitly attributes to the god the thought that he also states on his own behalf, i.e. that 'Know Thyself' really means 'Be Temperate' (164e5–165a1).

It is worth pressing these issues further, because they can be informative about Critias' character, his views, and the direction he is likely to give to the enquiry.

First of all, why does he insist that 'Know Thyself' ought to be interpreted not as a piece of advice, but as a greeting? Philosophically, pieces of

[12] Another common form of greeting is 'ἔρρωσο', 'Be Healthy'.

advice and salutations are different sorts of speech act, which imply different sorts of relations between the involved parties and focus on different kinds of goods. Typically, protreptic or apotreptic advice applies to a particular action or type of action. In the latter case, advice is frequently equivalent to a precept, a general rule telling us what we ought or ought not to do. 'I advise you to avoid foolish risks', 'You do not seem to care for others but you should', 'If possible, you should avoid telling lies'. In the former case, the advice may consist in the specific application of a general rule or may be produced ad hoc. 'Don't dive from such a height, it is risky', 'This time you should think about your sister's feelings', 'In principle it is bad to lie, but in this case I advise you to do so'. Generally, the purpose of advice is to help one secure some sort of good – moral or prudential, greater or lesser, more abstract or more concrete.

Moreover, advice usually implies an asymmetry between someone who is offering the advice and another who receives it. The advisor is supposed to know better, see clearer, have more experience, or be in some other way superior to the advisee. If the Delphic inscription is understood in the traditional manner, it is a piece of advice given by the god and presupposes a vastly asymmetrical relationship between the divine and the human. Just as the god advises his worshippers to do nothing in excess or to avoid giving rash pledges, so he advises them also to try to know themselves. On the other hand, if 'Know Thyself' is read as a greeting, it does not have such an exhortatory character, and it is questionable whether it entails any asymmetry between god and man. According to some scholars,[13] Critias leaves open the possibility that the god may stand on an equal footing with those whom he greets and who greet him in return[14] – an idea that is incompatible with traditional religious views regarding the relation between the divine and the human spheres. Other elements of the speech can also put strain on the traditional boundary between these two spheres: the nagging suspicion that Critias is turning the god into his own mouthpiece; Critias' belief that a few exceptionally intelligent thinkers, including himself, have access to the god's true meaning; and his intellectual arrogance vis-à-vis ordinary people unable to decipher the god's message, which drives a wedge between them and men like himself rather than between men and gods.

Hence the question arises whether the speech lends support to the ancient tradition designating Critias, as well as Prodicus and Diagoras, as

[13] See Lampert 2010 and note 20 in this chapter. [14] See Lampert 2010.

atheists,[15] which probably originated in a list composed by Theophrastus[16] and was subsequently used by other ancient authors including Epicurus (Philodemus, *De piet*. col. 19 Obbink) mainly for polemical purposes. The question is especially pressing because Critias' speech appears to be in line with the surviving fragment from the *Sisyphus* (a text fathered on Critias or Euripides, but in fact composed probably by some other author who remained anonymous),[17] according to which the notion of divinity was invented by an exceptionally clever and resourceful man in order to control humans through fear (DK 88 B25). How to answer the aforementioned question, however, is not a straightforward matter.

On the one hand, even though Critias' claims in the speech indicate intellectual pretension and arrogance, they fall short of implying that the gods don't exist.[18] In fact, one might argue that Critias presupposes both the god's existence and his benevolence to those entering his temple. Moreover, if we assume, as some scholars have done, that the object of a greeting is a general and comprehensive good,[19] then Critias' claim that the god intends to greet the worshippers entering his temple by the salutation 'Be Temperate' can be taken to point to an idea agreeable to Socrates as well (156e–157a): no human good is greater than *sôphrosynê* and, therefore, temperance rather than joyfulness[20] ought to be the overarching goal of human life.[21] Furthermore, the fact that Critias interprets the inscription as a greeting addressed by the god to men does not necessarily

[15] On the semantic range of ἄθεος, 'atheist', and the cognate name ἀθεότης, 'atheism', see Sedley 2013, 329 and n. 1.

[16] See Sedley 2013, 330.

[17] See Sedley 2013, 337, who makes the case that the *Sisyphus* circulated as an excerpt and was not an entire play.

[18] This is one of the meanings of ἀθεότης, 'atheism', and the sole meaning relevant to our discussion.

[19] On the other hand, the object of a piece of advice is frequently taken to be some specific benefit.

[20] The common greeting 'χαῖρε!' (164d7) means 'Be Joyful!'.

[21] Hyland 1981, 88–93, maintains that Critias' interpretation of the inscription as a greeting indicates the openness and receptivity of the visitor to the temple of Apollo. As Socrates 'greets' the unknown through philosophical questioning, so the visitor 'greets' the god in an open and interrogative, i.e. temperate, manner. According to Hyland, the endorsement of that stance amounts to self-knowledge because it results from the recognition of human incompleteness. On this view, self-knowledge as described by Critias is identical to the Socratic stance: temperate action is the taking of that stance, which Critias renders in terms of a greeting. However, Hyland adds, the irony is that Critias, the dramatic author of the greeting metaphor, does not assume the interrogative stance at all, but rather the opposite. Briefly, I object to Hyland's interpretation for the following reasons. (1) I do not find in Critias' speech anything indicating 'the interrogative stance'. A greeting need not indicate openness and receptivity; it is a complex speech act and, on the present occasion, the god's greeting is best interpreted as pointing to a major, global good, as opposed to a specific and merely prudential one. (2) Critias is not so concerned with the attitude of the visitor entering the temple as with the god's intention with regard to the worshippers. (3) Unlike Hyland, I find nothing inherently wrong in the traditional reading of the inscription as a piece of advice. In particular, I do not see why the

show that he treats these two parties as equal.[22] A salute does not always require that one salutes back, nor is it necessary that the latter person, i.e. the one who returns the salute, perceives the former, i.e. the person who saluted first, as an equal. In these respects, therefore, Critias' speech appears compatible with traditional religion and perhaps Socratic morality as well.

On the other hand, the speech has a whiff of the intellectual climate in Athens in the last decades of the fifth century BC, i.e. the period that the dramatic date of the *Charmides* belongs to. For the Athens of that period provided two crucial necessary conditions for the emergence of atheism as a theoretical stance: the development of the materialist physical system that came to be known as atomism; and the articulation of a social anthropology explaining the origins of religious belief through *nomos*, 'convention'.[23] So far as we can tell, however, atheist authors did not openly assert their beliefs and did not circulate their writings under their own name for fear of persecution. Even if Critias were an atheist, it is unlikely that he would ever have stated his beliefs publicly in speech or in writing. But he could have conveyed them covertly and indirectly, and he could be represented as doing so. I think that his speech in the *Charmides* is sufficiently ambiguous so as to be taken to indicate covert atheism or to be consistent with it. While Critias appears to take for granted the existence of the god, he also may seem irreverent and even blasphemous insofar as he claims to be one of the few who understand the god's true meaning. While he talks about the god's greeting to those who enter his temple, he does not say anything directly bearing on religion or the nature of divinity. As for his ingenious interpretation of the Delphic inscription, he omits a central element of what 'Know Thyself' implies for most Greeks, i.e. the need to become aware of our limitations as human beings and to avoid *hybris* with regard to the gods.

Philosophically, the impact of Critias' speech is clear and important. By interpreting the Delphic inscription in the way he does, he supports and

god's advice to the worshippers would preclude them from remaining 'open and aporetic'. The fact that Critias proposes a new interpretation of the inscription does not have to do with the desire to cultivate an 'open and aporetic' attitude, but rather with his desire to stress the great value of temperance or self-knowledge for the good life. On this point, see also the remarks of Tuozzo 2011, 184–8.

[22] Contra Lampert 2010, who contends that greetings must be between equals and that, therefore, by interpreting the inscription as a greeting, Critias treats the god as an equal and winks to other atheists like himself. Worse, according to Lampert, Critias treats Socrates as someone in the know, i.e. as someone who also thinks that there are really no gods.

[23] Sedley 2013 argues convincingly in defence of that claim. As he points out, Plato's *Laws* X 885e–886c and 888b–c present atheism as a widespread current in Athens.

strengthens the intuition motivating the speech, namely that it is impossible for a person to be temperate but be ignorant of himself in respect of his temperance. The speech advances the view that, in truth, 'Know Thyself' means 'Be Temperate', and that knowing oneself and having temperance amount to the same thing. One implication of this definition, which will become crucial later in the argument, is that no one can be temperate on account of their expertise in some particular domain. Rather, if certain first-order experts happen to have temperance, this will be because they possess self-knowledge, not because they have scientific knowledge of their respective fields. Another feature of Critias' conception of temperance has begun to emerge as well. As mentioned, the speech seems to me to intimate that temperance or self-knowledge differs from the other forms of (expert) knowledge in significant ways, notably in respect of being more general and higher-order than they are. Critias has not yet articulated these aspects of his own conception of the virtue, nor has he drawn attention to the peculiarly self-referential character of knowing oneself. He will do so in the debate that follows.