

Notes, Documents, and Queries

Plato's Use of Sport Analogies in the *Lesser Hippias*

*Richard M. Fox**

In "Plato's *Lesser Hippias*: A Neglected Document in Sport History," Earl R. Anderson argues that the *Lesser Hippias* reveals "a dimension of subtlety" which "has to do with Plato's exploration of the limits of metaphor, and particularly of athletic metaphors, in philosophical discourse."¹ Even more forcefully, he contends that Plato was opposed to the use of such metaphors, for he says that "Plato was the earliest writer to question the validity of athletic metaphors in the realm of ethics,"² and he asks, rhetorically, "Why did Plato select athletic metaphors to illustrate the logical shortcoming of analogical argument?"³ Anderson writes:

The present analysis has shown that *Lesser Hippias* is a fundamental text in the history of such metaphors, for in it, Socrates points out that if we accept as valid the metaphor of the moral life of man as an athletic contest, we must also accept the position that a man who does wrong intentionally is better than a man who does wrong without intending to.⁴

Thus Anderson's thesis is based primarily on the apparently unsatisfactory outcome of the *Lesser Hippias*: namely that the person who errs voluntarily is better than the person who errs involuntarily. Since the conclusion of this dialogue seems to contradict conventional morality or ordinary moral intuitions, Anderson assumes that it must, therefore, be rejected by Plato; and if it is rejected by Plato, Plato must think there is something wrong with the process of reasoning by which it was reached. Anderson supposes further that, if Plato thinks there is something wrong with the reasoning, the mistake must lie in using analogies from sports, or analogies generally, in attempting to reach philosophical conclusions.

These are not the only considerations Anderson adduces to support his thesis, but they do indicate, I believe, the main line of his thought. In addition, he notes, for example, that Plato argues for the exclusion of poets from his ideal

*Mr. Fox is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio.

state,⁵ and he cites a passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in which Aristotle comments upon a false inference based on mistaken analogy.⁶ Anderson also mentions recent writers, such as J.W. Keating and Ike Balbus, who have questioned the applicability of sport analogies to ethics, but Anderson cites these figures, I believe, not to strengthen his interpretation of Plato, but to show the relevance of Plato's position to recent debates in sport philosophy.

As to the first point in Anderson's main argument, that the conclusion of the dialogue is unsatisfactory, it may be worth observing that many philosophers, including Plato, have not been slaves to conventional wisdom or so-called common sense. Indeed, the aim of many philosophers, including Plato, has been to show that what appears to be true, real or good is often not the case. Hence one should be reluctant to infer that Plato rejects a position simply because it contradicts common sense.

Admittedly, Socrates, who we may suppose speaks for Plato, does seem to have reservations about the conclusion of the *Lesser Hippias*, for he says at the end, "Nor can I agree with myself, Hippias,"⁷ But he also immediately adds, "and yet that seems to be the conclusion which, as far as we can see at present, must follow from our argument,"⁸ Earlier in the dialogue, Socrates maintains,

. . . my opinion, Hippias, is the very contrary of what you are saying. For I maintain that those who hurt or injure mankind, and speak falsely and deceive, and err voluntarily, are better far than those who do wrong involuntarily.⁹

But, again, he also adds, "Sometimes, however, I am of the opposite opinion."¹⁰ Earlier in the same paragraph, Socrates also notes that his opinion often differs from that of others and even those who are supposed to be wise.

Thus, if we take Plato at his word, it seems that he does accept the conclusion of this dialogue, or at least that he has a strong inclination to accept it, even if at other times he also questions it.

Indeed, there is evidence elsewhere that Plato believes that a person *cannot* err willingly, or variously, that a person always does what he thinks is right or good¹¹ This is the doctrine that virtue is knowledge, and it is regarded by many scholars as one of Plato's chief doctrines. It also happens to contradict the widespread belief that people *can* choose to do what they think is wrong. Hence, if the doctrine that virtue is knowledge really expresses Plato's considered opinion, he would be forced to reject the conclusion of the *Lesser Hippias*, as the option of erring willingly simply would not exist. That is, a person could not do a wrong thing while at the same time believing it is wrong. This may in fact be evidence that the *Lesser Hippias* is not one of Plato's works; but, in any case, we should notice that, if Plato does reject the conclusion of the *Lesser Hippias*, it is not simply because it contradicts common-sense.

But let us suppose that Plato rejects the conclusion and that, therefore, he also thinks there is something wrong with his argument. Does it follow that he thinks there is something wrong with using analogies, especially sport analogies, in philosophical argumentation? Not necessarily, for, obviously, the argument may go wrong for other reasons. For example, the problem may be, not that the argument is based on analogies or sport analogies, but that the analogies in it are badly drawn. That is the kind of mistake suggested by Aristotle in the passage cited by Anderson, for Aristotle says that a person who limps willingly is not really limping but merely pretending to limp. Thus, following Aristotle's suggestion, we might suppose that the argument in the *Lesser Hippias* suffers from equivocation, as, say, the word "lying" in Plato's examples may mean telling an untruth, in the sense of saying something false, or it may mean deceiving someone about what one believes is true. Thus a person who lies unwillingly may indeed be lying in the first sense, because he does not know the truth, but not in the second sense, because he does not intend to deceive. Or there may be equivocation in the use of "good," for a person may be good in different senses, as a person who is good at running may not be good at knowing the truth, just as a person who is good at either of these things may not be a good person.

But does the argument really suffer from such confusions? Socrates argues that the person who runs slowly voluntarily is a better runner than a person who runs slowly involuntarily, because the supposition is that a person who runs slowly voluntarily can run faster and that the person who runs slowly involuntarily is running as fast as he can. Likewise, the person who tells a lie willingly is better than a person who tells a lie unwillingly, in the sense that the former knows the truth and the latter does not. That is, the former liar is better at knowing the truth, just as, in the previous case, the former runner was better at running. So far, the characters in the dialogue do not seem to be misled by any mistaken analogy. Running slowly voluntarily is not like limping voluntarily, as running slowly voluntarily is indeed running slowly, even if limping voluntarily is not really limping. And, although Plato *might* have mistaken two different senses of "lying," or two different senses of "better," he does seem to be quite clear and consistent in his use of these terms.

One may question whether the persons in Plato's example are lying in the same sense, but Plato supposes that they are both saying something false, and hence that both are lying in this sense, and that both are misleading others with false information, and hence deceiving them. The only difference is that the one person deceives intentionally and the other not. So, although the argument might turn on an equivocation, it seems to me that it does not. Rather, I submit, the apparently unsatisfactory outcome of the dialogue rests on the assumption of Hippias (and perhaps also Anderson and ourselves) that voluntary deception is worse than involuntary deception. But, after all, in this dialogue, *that* is the very point at issue.

What Plato is quite clear about in the *Lesser Hippias* is that the person who errs willingly is a better person, because such a person *knows more* and, he assumes, *virtue is knowledge*. What we do not like about his conclusion, I suspect, is that *we* do not believe that virtue is knowledge—and what *Plato* does not like about it is that, if people can err voluntarily, virtue is not knowledge. So Plato is tempted to both accept and reject the conclusion, as it agrees with part of what he means by saying that virtue is knowledge but not all of it.

His doctrine seems to be that the wiser person is the better person, for a person always does what he thinks is right. Therefore, if a person lies voluntarily, it can only be because that person thinks the lie is justified, and not because he or she wishes to do something wrong. What he fails to note in this dialogue is that the person who knows more about *how* to lie may not know more about *when* to lie, or that the person who knows more about running may not know more about the justification of acts. The ultimate justification of anything, he tells *us* in the *Republic*, depends on its harmony with other things. So, from his point of view, the problem in the *Lesser Hippias* is not that the argument is based on analogies or sport analogies, but that the argument does not go far enough in considering other factors which may affect the justification of lying.

Plato's considered position on the question of justified deception is, of course, too large an issue to be treated properly in this paper. The same may also be said of the even larger issue of Plato's use of analogy. However, it is worth mentioning that the evidence on either of these topics is not all one sided. It is true, of course, that Plato argues in favor of banishing the poets from his ideal state, on the ground that the poets do not tell the truth; but there are also other arguments in the *Republic* in favor of the poets, and Plato, himself a poet, is not beyond telling noble lies. In fact, if we accept Anderson's thesis, we must suppose that Plato is deceiving *us* in the *Lesser Hippias*, leading us to believe that he accepts voluntary deception when he really does not.¹² But, then again, if he is deceiving us, why should we suppose that he does not believe in voluntary deception—unless, perchance, we think he is deceiving us involuntarily? That is, Anderson's thesis seems to reduce Plato's position to absurdity, for it leaves Plato no defense for his own apparently deceptive practices.

Anderson supposes rightly that Plato is too good a philosopher to be taken in by obviously bad arguments, but he fails to show that the arguments in the *Lesser Hippias* really are bad. However, it does seem to be true that the dialogues of Plato are literally filled with fallacious arguments, and, as Anderson himself suggests, Plato often seems to be pulling our leg. Generously, one might maintain that Plato accepts only the good arguments and rejects the bad, or, following Anderson's thesis, that Plato rejects bad metaphorical arguments and accepts only good non-metaphorical ones; but this would ignore

the fact that Socrates is often the one who presents the bad arguments and that Plato regularly employs metaphors in argumentation. If Plato rejected all analogical or metaphorical arguments he would be forced to reject, it seems, the whole of his own philosophy.

Yet there is even some evidence to support this interpretation, as Plato tells us in his *Seventh Epistle* that he never wrote his philosophy,¹³ and, in the dialogues, he often indicates that his accounts are only a semblance of the truth. Plato sometimes expresses the view that not only metaphors and analogies but language itself is incapable of capturing the truth, as language is a poor copy of the forms. However, in the *Republic*, in the figure of the divided line, for instance, he also seems to hold that the hypotheses expressed in language, so often tested in the dialogues, are stepping stones to the truth.

Thus the facts of the matter seem to be these. Plato himself uses arguments from analogy to establish philosophical conclusions, and, although he sometimes rejects such arguments, he sometimes also accepts them. For example, he seems to accept the conclusion of the main argument in the *Republic* based on the analogy between the soul and the state. But, obviously, he also rejects or amends other arguments when they do not seem to withstand his critical test. Therefore, Plato distinguishes between hypotheses which he feels can withstand the test of investigation and those which cannot, although he sometimes fails to reach a conclusion, or fails to make up his mind, or later amends a previously accepted view.

Plato is, after all, a mathematician, accustomed to reasoning by analogy, who seems to have inherited his doctrine of forms and his theory of harmony from the Pythagoreans. (The use of analogical reasoning in mathematics may be illustrated, for example, by the proportion “two is to four as four is to eight,” and, as far as I can see, there is nothing obviously wrong with using such analogies.) Plato is also a logician who realizes that definitions are formed by noting similarities and differences: seeing how things are both like and unlike one another. Hence, as both mathematician and logician, he shows how one can reason inductively from examples, by means of hypotheses, to the discovery of principles expressed in definitions. However, he also seems to hold that the examples and hypotheses, both of which are necessary to the investigation, are also not sufficient, for one must also gain insight into the principles. Only then, it seems, is there knowledge of the forms.

My argument, therefore, is that Anderson does not establish his thesis: namely, that Plato thinks there is something wrong with using analogies or, specifically, sports analogies in philosophical argumentation. On the contrary, I have considered evidence which suggests strongly that Anderson is mistaken in his interpretation. Indeed, the argument in the *Lesser Hippias* is not dependent on the use of sport analogies, for, in addition to citing running,

wrestling and archery, Plato makes exactly the same point, in exactly the same way, by talking about geometry, medicine and astronomy.¹⁴ In Anderson's paper, the disjunction between sport analogies and analogies generally only confuses the issue, as he sometimes seems to be making a point about sports analogies in particular, and sometimes, about analogies in general. If Plato were questioning the validity of analogies generally, sport analogies would not be an exceptional case; but if Plato did think there was something specifically wrong with sport analogies, why does Anderson suggest that Plato was questioning *all* analogical arguments?

In any case, our concern, it seems to me, should not be whether the analogies in question are sport analogies but whether in fact the analogies hold. Thus there appear to be some respects in which, say, sports and ethics are analogous and other ways in which they are not. For example, there is some reason to believe that voluntary deception can be justified in sports or games in a way that it cannot be justified in other contexts, for deception is often required as a tactic in winning games. On the other hand, it is not obvious to me that voluntary deception is never morally justified, as we are sometimes justified in deceiving children, say, for their own good, or even adults, for the sake of confidentiality. Nor are all deceptions in sports or games justifiable, for some are permitted by the rules and others not. A good poker player tries to hide his strategy and his emotions from the other players, but he is not allowed to hide cards up his sleeve or to deal from the bottom of the deck. Thus it would seem that moral rules which prohibit voluntary deception are unlike the rules of sport which allow it, but they are also like other rules of sport which also prohibit such deception.

The permission or prohibition of other types of voluntary deception, in sports or in morality generally, may depend on a number of factors. It might be true, for instance, that a person who chooses to run slowly in a race is not really trying to win, and hence not really doing the best job he or she is supposed to do. Such a person might even be throwing the race. On the other hand, he or she might also be trying to be a good sport, in what I take to be Anderson's use of the term, choosing to allow another less talented person to win. The point is that the justification of such actions seems to depend on a number of circumstances other than the mere fact that they are cases of voluntary deception or, for that matter, cases chosen from sport. The problem with the argument in the *Lesser Hippias*, therefore, is that it does not go far enough in considering such circumstances, and the main problem with Anderson's argument is that he fails to look beyond Plato's use of analogy, or sport analogy, to consider Plato's theory of moral justification.

Notes

1. *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), p. 103.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
7. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans., B. Jowett, (N.Y.: Random House, Inc., 1937), Vol. II, p. 729.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 724.
10. *Ibid.*
11. In Plato's *Meno*, for example, Socrates says, "Is it not obvious that those who are ignorant of their nature do not desire them; but they desire what they suppose to be goods although they are really evils; and if they are mistaken and suppose the evils to be goods they really desire goods?" (Jowett, Vol. I, p. 356).
12. Anderson writes, "If his position seems unexpected, even perverse, we should consider that he is not being candid with Hippias, (*Op. Cit.*, p. 106) and "Socrates himself, like Odysseus, is practicing deception . . ." (*Ibid.*, pp. 106-107).
13. "There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences . . . it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself." (*Plato's Epistles*, trans., Glenn R. Morrow, N.Y.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1962, p. 237)
14. Anderson himself was aware of these other analogies, for he says, "Socrates continues with parallel cases from medicine, music, navigation, archery, and so on . . ." (*Op. Cit.*, p. 108).