

Hippias Minor - Structural Summary

1. The *Idea*

Dynamis (δύναμις) is ability or power, the characteristic required for an agent to achieve an end.

2. The *Eidos*

In Plato's time, there were three main fields of *dynamis* when considered as the characteristic of human agency:

- a) political *dynamis*
- b) technical *dynamis*
- c) physical *dynamis*

Plato dramatizes ability as having only two main aspects, the political and the technical; he evidently regarded physical *dynamis* as a function of the other two types.

3. The *Paradeigma*

The specific aspects themselves are necessarily clear-cut, extreme, and unchanging, and each *paradeigma* consequently acts like a model, being clear-cut, extreme, and unchanging:

- a) *politikos* - a generic person representing social *dynamis*. The *dynamis* is indicated not by the achievement of any ends, but by a show of the social means which would facilitate social ends. Such means include wealth, connections in high society, and good breeding.
- b) *technikos* - a generic person representing technical *dynamis*. An expert at a *technē* is a *sophos*, which only means a wise man when the *technē* pertains to critical thinking. Most *technikoi* are the craftsmen who are morally neutral *per se*, but Plato is interested in the two diametrically opposed *technikoi* or *sophoi* at the extremes of the technical spectrum:
 - i) the *sophistēs*. For the sake of this demonstration of ability, Plato posits someone

- actually able and expert at all *technai* known to the Many. The *sophistēs* purports to be a *sophos*, and he actually is *sophos* in all these *technai* (crafts, skills). His end is not to be good at his *technai*, but to appear good to the Many.
- ii) the *dialektikos*, actually able and expert at the one *technē* currently unknown to the Many. His end is to be good at his *technē*, although in doing so, he appears bad to the Many, who regard him as lacking ability and confounding those who do have ability.

4. The *Deigma*

What appear to be historical figures are actually one or other exemplar with additional extrinsic features drawn from historical figures.

- a) *politikos*
 - i) Eudicus - an aristocrat. He acts as the voice for a crowd of potential students. We do not see taxes gathered or policies carried out, but we are treated to one particular sort of social end. This is the ease with which the *politikos* gets his way, simply through intimating his wishes. This is an impressive display of power, but the reader is allowed to see that the predictability of the *politikos* is exploited by Hippias and Socrates for their own ends. The end the *politikos* achieves in this dialogue, then, is neither good nor bad, but ineffectual, as he is merely allowing others to do what they want to do in any case.
 - ii) The crowd of aristocratic potential students for whom Eudicus is the voice. They say nothing, but they are the audience Hippias wishes to impress.
- b) *technikos*
 - i) Hippias, a sophist. Historically, Hippias was a highly accomplished teacher, proficient in many skills, and is the most appropriate figure to help make the paradigmatic expert at all *technai* at all credible. This character is not to be regarded as merely boasting about how good he is, but as advertising his very real expertise in every *technē* in order to encourage students to enroll in his courses. His ability to attract wealthy students is yet another indicator of his

ability, this time his success as a teacher.

- ii) Socrates, a dialectician. Dialectic is the one *technē* Hippias lacks. Neither Hippias nor the Many recognize dialectic as an ability. He is consequently regarded as lacking ability, while also offending those with social and technical ability.

5. The Set-Up

The *paradeigma* of technical ability is divided by Plato into technical ability known to the Many, and technical ability unknown to the Many. Hippias represents the man of technical ability known to the Many, and as such, he has all the technical abilities known to the Many. Socrates represents the man of technical ability not known to the Many, and this amounts to dialectic alone. To demonstrate the worth of appearing rather than being good, Plato grants Hippias the ability to appear good to the Many in every *technē* known to them. Socrates, lacking any ability known to the Many, appears to them to be worthless, even harmful. We must appreciate that the ultimate end for Hippias is not to be good at all his *technai* although he actually is good at them, but to appear good to the Many. The ultimate end for Socrates is to be good at his *technē*, even though his actions cause him to appear bad to the Many.

Since technical ability is only one of the aspects of ability, it is necessary to represent social ability as well. The other aspect, physical ability, Plato appears to have subsumed to technical and social ability. Plato not only represents social ability, but exploits it to great effect in the confrontation between Hippias and Socrates. Social ability is represented by Eudicus, a young aristocrat, who is the effective spokesman for an audience of young aristocrats, to whom Hippias must appear good in order to enrol them to his courses, and for whom Socrates engages with Hippias in an attempt to provoke in them critical thinking.

6. The Dramatic Setting

Hippias the sophist has just delivered an exhibition of his manifold ability to an admiring crowd. He successfully appears good to the Many, which is required for him to attract

students. Earning much money through teaching appears to demonstrate yet more of his abilities, such as teaching and eristics, and Hippias consequently gains further admiration as an apparently good person.

7. The Ability to Manipulate Others

Eudicus and the other aristocrats would like to cross-examine Hippias before committing to a course with him. Only the wealthy can spend time in philosophy, but they really see it as a type of conspicuous consumption rather than a means to self-improvement. It is difficult to improve when you are already the best (*aristoi*). They elicit the help of Socrates, whom they know is too much of a nonentity to mind being made to look stupid by Hippias. Hippias knows that they will ask for Socrates' assistance, and he does not object to Socrates being his debating partner. Hippias knows that he will look even more able than ever with Socrates as his foil. Socrates had maintained his silence throughout the exhibition precisely to be able to participate in this display debate. He has a trick up his sleeve designed to make Hippias look absurd, both to himself and to the others. Socrates' intention is not to win a debate through eristic ridicule, but to evoke shock leading to critical thinking.

8. Odysseus and Achilles

Hippias regularly uses a speech about how to become good, using Nestor advising Neoptolemus. It may be in this same speech that he points out that Homer made Nestor most *sophos* (he is actually most senior), Achilles best (*aristos*), and Odysseus most versatile (*polytropos*). It is left to the reader to understand (or perhaps to remember from Hippias' exhibitions) that Hippias claims that he himself embodies all three qualities, as he is the most *sophos* and best and versatile at all *technai*. Socrates cleverly uses Eudicus' absent father to elicit Eudicus' support for the uncontroversial claim that Homer made Achilles the best, while Odysseus is the worst, being the most "many-turning" (the literal sense of the word "versatile", *polytropos*). Socrates claims to disagree (making himself look utterly stupid). He claims that Odysseus tells the truth, while Hippias lies. All of this is designed to make

Hippias support the father of Eudicus, and argue against the most *polytropos*, which is indeed what Hippias does. The main conversation is thus incidentally about lying, but it is essentially a long attack by Hippias on himself. Hippias eventually wins the debate, simply by denying the logic of the argument at the very end, and acting shocked at the outrageousness of Socrates' position.

9. The Failure of Socrates

None of the *deigmata* must change, since they are the representations of the various types of ability from which the reader is supposed to learn. Plato is not criticizing Socrates and his method. Indeed, Plato would not have chosen Socrates for the extrinsic features added to the *paradeigma* of the dialectician had he been critical of it. The *deigmata* are all satisfied that they have done everything in their ability to achieve their various ends. Eudicus has successfully displayed his social ability by appearing to have engineered a philosophical debate between the great sophist and a fall-guy for the amusement of the *politikoi*. Hippias has successfully put on a display apparently to the satisfaction of the audience. Socrates has set up logical trap after logical trap designed to catch Hippias off guard and cause him to question his technical ability to appear good to everyone all the time, while also providing the audience with an opportunity to be puzzled, even shocked, and ultimately moved to think critically. Socrates is not to know that he is in a Platonic dialogue in which models cannot change. Hippias is concerned only with appearing good to his audience, and the aristocratic audience is easily influenced by Hippias' facile protestations which fly in the face of logic.

10. The Success of Plato

Plato has presented *dynamis* coherently and consistently, to the best of his formidable ability. That is all he can do. The rest is up to the reader.