

The Sophrosune Problem

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Abstract

“The *Sophrosune* Problem” attempts to define the meaning of *sophrosune* as it was understood by the ancient Greeks using the philosophical texts of Plato, Homer’s *Iliad*, and Thucydides’ the *Peloponnesian War*. Although the ancient Athenians were preoccupied with the notion of *sophrosune*, very few of the historical figures measure up to the ideal. Perhaps the Athenians’ attempts to reconcile the Homeric virtues with the notion of *sophrosune* produced some of the confusion over the meaning of *sophrosune*. Socrates, as he is portrayed by Plato, is one of the few if not the only person who seems to live up to this ideal.

The term *sophrosune* has been commonly translated as “temperance,” “moderation,” and “control of self.” The difficulty in defining this term as it was understood by the classical Athenians is challenging. In order to accurately define what the term *sophrosune* meant to the Athenians, it is necessary to examine the philosophical texts, historical commentary, and the literature of the era.

“Control of self” seems to be a more accurate definition for the term *sophrosune* because “temperance” and “moderation” are the result of controlling one’s impulses. If *sophrosune* is defined as “control of self,” then it is logical to suppose that in order to control one’s self, one must have a deep understanding of the desires that motivate his or her behavior.

Greek texts describing historic events and the superhuman and cunning exploits of many heroes reveal the flawed nature of the Athenian understanding of *sophrosune*. Although the “heroes” of Homer’s *Iliad* and the central protagonists of Thucydides’ the *Peloponnesian War* possess the Homeric excellences of skill in battle and the ability to inspire other warriors, they lack the introspective natures necessary to cultivate a *sophron* state of being or moral excellence. Many of these characters are *akratic* because when they do have moments of clarity or revelation, they often do not have the strength of will necessary to act upon the insight they have gained, or they sometimes act in direct opposition to what they know on some level is the greater good. It seems that “control of self” is not sufficient grounds for proclaiming that an individual is *sophron*. Perhaps a more complete definition of *sophrosune* may be the vigilant cultivation of and care of the soul, which requires constant introspection and self-reflection. This perpetual state of contemplation leads to concentrated self-awareness, moral excellence, and the ability to consistently act in a *sophron* manner.

Although many prominent Athenians claimed to be *sophron*, it is clear that they did not completely comprehend the meaning of the term. It is interesting to note that in a culture that

was so preoccupied with the notion of *sophrosune*, very few of the historical figures measure up to the ideal. Perhaps the Athenians' attempts to reconcile the Homeric virtues with the notion of *sophrosune* produced some of the confusion over the meaning of *sophrosune*. Socrates, as he is portrayed by Plato, is one of the few if not the only person who seems to live up to this ideal.

In classical Athens, Homeric virtue was the measure of a man's worthiness. The heroic figures of a Homer's *Iliad* reveal much about the values of Athenian culture. The characters Agamemnon and Achilles, supposed heroes of the *Iliad*, lack self-knowledge and suffer from *akrasia* or they are incontinent. Although Agamemnon is praised for his cleverness, and Achilles is praised for his god-like stature and skill in battle, it is clear that neither of these men is introspective or concerned with the "good." Instead, Agamemnon and Achilles are motivated by the need to attain glory and the desire to satisfy their more base urges. Each character contends that his actions are just, yet each man's actions reveal the pettiness and selfishness of his actions.

Agamemnon and Achilles are arrogant and bloated with a sense of self-righteousness. In Book One of the *Iliad*, the Greek army has been plagued and punished by Apollo because Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis, Chryses's daughter. He accuses Calchas of fabricating a prophesy that demands that he return Chryses's daughter in order to end the misery of his men and guarantee their safe voyage home (112-120). After a bitter argument, Agamemnon reluctantly agrees to return the girl but demands Achilles's "prize," Briseis (111-120). Achilles cries like a child and appeals to his mother, the goddess Thetis, to beg Zeus to help him get his revenge.

Hem the Greeks in between the fleet and sea. Once they start being killed, the Greeks may appreciate Agamemnon for what he is, and the wide-ruling son of Atreus will see what a fool he's been because he did not honor the best of all fighting Achaens. (425-431)

Achilles willingly sacrifices the lives of his fellow soldiers so that others may be aware of his greatness in battle and to secure revenge against Agamemnon. He feels justified in his actions because he has been wronged, but he does not take the time to analyze his motivations and acts with haste.

Agamemnon possesses intellectual excellence and the ability to reason, but he applies his intellectual skills selfishly to obtain what Aristotle would characterize as the "goods of the body" and "external or instrumental goods." His excessive *hubris* is evident in his treatment of Achilles regarding Briseis.

Since Phoebus Apollo is taking away my Chryseis,
Whom I am sending back aboard ship with my friends,
I'm coming to your hut and taking Briseis,
Your own beautiful prize, so that you will see just how much

Stronger I am than you, and the next person will wince
At the thought of opposing me as an equal.

His intellectual excellence is employed for his own personal gain rather than the cultivation of the soul; therefore, he lacks moral excellence. Achilles and Agamemnon are consumed with their own egocentric desires, and they are both willing to sacrifice the lives of their men to fulfill these yearnings. They each possess certain excellences, but they do not possess the right combination of these excellences to achieve a *sophron* nature.

It is also important to note that neither of these men, especially Achilles, is consistent in his behaviors. Achilles is driven by his emotions; therefore, his actions are erratic. In Book twenty-four of the *Iliad*, the kindness that Achilles shows Priam reveals that Achilles does possess compassion, but he only performs this selfless act at the end of the epic (557-565). In Aristotelian terms, Achilles could be defined as incontinent. His erratic behaviors are motivated by sentiment, not reason or contemplation. Throughout the course of the *Iliad*, Achilles seems unable to grasp the egotism of his behaviors because he lacks self-knowledge. When one considers that Agamemnon and Achilles, who behave like petulant children, are considered two of the most virtuous heroes in Greek lore, it is easy to understand why Athenian men may have been confused about the meaning of *sophrosune*.

Alcibiades, as he is portrayed in the text of *Alcibiades I*, also possesses rhetorical and athletic excellence, but these gifts are eclipsed by the chaotic nature of his career in politics, diplomacy, and war. The *Alcibiades* dialogue is set in 432 BC, when Alcibiades is approximately eighteen years old. It is most likely a middle dialogue, and unlike some of the earlier dialogues, it seems that Socrates does have an agenda and that he does know the answers to the questions that he poses. Socrates is portrayed as mentor who attempts to guide the young Alcibiades to make the best use of the excellences that he possesses. In the following lines, Socrates comments upon young Alcibiades's extreme ambition and hubris.

SOCRATES. For you seem to me, if some god should say to you,
"Alcibiades, do you wish to live having what you now have,
or to die immediately,
if you are not to be permitted to gain greater?"
It seems to me you would choose to die. (2. 13-17)

Much to Alcibiades' irritation, Socrates continues to elaborate upon the depth of Alcibiades' hunger for power and his arrogance. Socrates notes that if the same god mentioned above allowed Alcibiades to have power only in Europe and did not allow him to interfere with the affairs in Asia, he would not accept these terms either. The character Socrates attempts to present these negative aspects of Alcibiades' character to him so that he may acquire some level of self-awareness.

SOCRATES. if you are not to fill with your name and your power
all, as one might say, of humanity;

and I think that except for Cyrus and Xerxes
you believe no one has existed worthy of a word.
So that you have this hope, I know well and am not guessing

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One must keep in mind that when Plato created this dialogue, Alcibiades had already displayed the tyrannical behavior that is only hinted at in the text. Plato wrote the dialogue in retrospect to what had already taken place, and he had the benefit of hindsight. It is plausible that Plato is not only allowing the reader to gain a historical perspective of what motivated this enigmatic and powerful figure but to point out the moral deficiencies that exist in Alcibiades.

One of the most significant aspects of the dialogue is Socrates' insistent questions regarding Alcibiades' qualifications as a leader and his ability to council others on "peace and other affairs of the state" (5. 3-4). Socrates performs an elenchus with Alcibiades to determine how it is that he knows when it is the appropriate time to go to war and with whom.

SOCRATES. So what then?

On which are you counseling the Athenians to war,
those doing the unjust or the just?

ALCIBIADES. This you are asking is tricky;

for even if someone decides that it is necessary
to war on those doing the just, he would not admit it.

This particular exchange reveals Alcibiades' willingness to perjure himself in order to achieve his own selfish ends. In section eight of the text, Socrates questions Alcibiades about how an individual can discern the just and the unjust in order to better advise others.

SOCRATES. How so, dear Alcibiades?

Has it escaped your notice that you do not know this,
or did it escape me
your learning and attending school with a teacher,
who taught you to discern the more just and the more unjust?
And who is he?

And tell me so that you may introduce me too as his pupil. (8. 1-7)

Socrates points out the ridiculousness of Alcibiades' claim to know what is "the more just and the more unjust." Alcibiades becomes defensive and claims that Socrates is mocking him and asks Socrates, "Don't you think I could know about justice and injustice in any other way?" (8.13-14). In the following exchange, Socrates reveals the root of Alcibiades inability to gain knowledge of what is just and unjust.

SOCRATES. Yes, if you could discover it.

ALCIBIADES. But don't you believe I could discover it.

SOCRATES. And very much, if you inquired.

ALCIBIADES. Then don't you think I might inquire?

SOCRATES. I do, if you thought you didn't know.

Socrates is aware that Alcibiades' *hubris* prevents him from realizing that he does not actually understand the meaning of what is just. His lack of life experience and self-knowledge prevent him from understanding such a complex concept.

Alcibiades claims that his knowledge of what is just has been gleaned from the "many" (9. 10). Socrates quickly discounts this response saying, "Not in serious teachers are you taking refuge in appealing to the many" (9. 11). Socrates skillfully points out that the "many" cannot possibly teach one what is just or unjust because they do not know what is just themselves. The "many" cannot possibly share an enlightened consensus on the meaning of what is just.

In section ten of *Alcibiades I*, Socrates asks Alcibiades if he has learned what is just from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and from the heroic exploits of past generations of Athenians. Alcibiades agrees that his understanding of what is just has been garnered from these very sources, and Socrates questions how he could gain insight on the meaning of what is just from those he has not known personally. He points out that it is impossible for Alcibiades to have no knowledge of what is just because he has learned it from anyone nor does he know it himself (10. 56-60). Plato uses this exchange between Socrates and Alcibiades to call attention to the flawed nature of the Athenians' understanding of not only what is just but the Athenian reliance upon the concept of Homeric virtue as a measure for proper behavior. Plato reveals that introspection and the care of the soul are necessary to achieve a *sophron* state of being and moral virtue.

Whether or not this exchange actually occurred between Alcibiades and Socrates is questionable; however, it is clear that Alcibiades never conquered his *hubris* and continued to act for his own benefit rather than that of the state. Alcibiades was often praised for his valor in battle, but his shifting loyalties and erratic behavior during the Peloponnesian war and his susceptibility to flattery reveal that he never achieved a *sophron* nature. Alcibiades will be forever immortalized as a drunken blustering fool who bursts in on Agathon's symposium, ignoring the rules of consumption and drinking the wine without mixing it with water. His rumored affairs with married and unmarried women further enhance an image of a man who is not in control of his desires.

In stark contrast to the aforementioned characters, Plato attempts to provide an exemplary model of the essence of *sophrosune* through his depiction of Socrates in the *Charmides*. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates asks those who are gathered about "the present state of philosophy and about the young men, whether there were any who had become distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both" (153D). Critias immediately singles out Charmides as an extraordinary beauty and describes him as a philosopher and poet as well (154C).

The men call Charmides over on the premise that Socrates has a cure for his headaches. Socrates is careful to note that the Thracian doctor who gave him the charm warned that “one should not attempt to cure the body apart from the soul” (156D). Socrates claims that the charm in question will provide the charmed one with *sophrosune* and that when the soul acquires *sophrosune*, “it is easy to provide health both for the head and for the rest of the body” (157A). Socrates establishes an important link between the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body. Critias claims that Charmides is already *sophron*. He notes that Charmides has “the reputation of being the most temperate young man of the day” (157D). Socrates performs an elenchus on Critias and Charmides, who would later become two of the Thirty Tyrants, and they attempt to define *sophrosune* but are unable to do so effectively.

Charmides seems to be excellent in a number of ways. He is physically beautiful, and he is known for his skill in writing poetry. When questioned about whether or not he is *sophron*, to his credit, Charmides provides a very honest answer. He hesitates to say “yes,” because he does not want to be perceived as arrogant, yet he does not want to answer “no” and insult his uncle either (158D). Charmides seems to be greatly influenced by Critias, and defers to his uncle when questioned (162B). Charmides postulates that *sophrosune* is “quietness and modesty.” He is primarily concerned with image as opposed to substance. A person may be quiet in the company of others and pretend to be modest when complimented, but the illusion of these two traits is easily contrived. Observers may be easily fooled by these illusory, superficial traits, but a tranquil countenance and false modesty do not guarantee that a person has a well-formed soul.

When Charmides is unable to define “minding one’s own business,” a definition that he had gleaned from Critias, Critias is visibly annoyed (162C). Plato gives a somewhat humorous account of Critias’s reaction. “Critias couldn’t put up with this but seemed angry at Charmides just the way a poet is when his verse is mangled by the actors” (162D). Critias’s initial notion that *sophrosune* entails “minding one’s own business” implies a focus on individual needs and desires as opposed to a frame of mind in which one is focused on the good. A self-centered focus is not necessarily negative, as long as the individual is concentrating on the cultivation of the soul. Critias’s behavior in *Charmides* and later accounts of his role as one of the Thirty Tyrants indicate that his focus on himself was not motivated by his need to improve the condition of his soul.

The discussion between Critias and Socrates quickly turns to the question of whether or not *sophrosune* is the doing of good works and whether or not the doer of good deeds must be aware that he is *sophron*. Socrates asserts that in order to be *sophron*, one must know himself and be aware of the internal and external motivations that prompt his behavior.

Neither Critias nor Charmides has taken the time to cultivate a well-formed soul. They attempt to project the image of being *sophron*, but it is clear to the reader that their “*sophron*” natures are superficial at best. Plato juxtaposes Charmides (who is proclaimed by Critias to be *sophron*) with Socrates (who claims to know nothing but who behaves in a temperate or *sophron* manner). Plato allows the reader to glimpse the characteristics that would lead them

to their later behaviors as members of the Thirty Tyrants. Critias's and Charmides's misunderstanding of the meaning of *sophrosune* is mirrored in the words and deeds of Agamemnon and Achilles in the *Iliad*. Each of these individuals does not have self-knowledge; therefore, each of them is deluded as to what motivates his actions. Without knowledge of the motivational factors that influence their behaviors, these men are unable to obtain intellectual excellence about moral things or *phronesis*. Because these individuals lack *phronesis*, they are unable to exert control over the forces that drive them.

According to Plato, Socrates was primarily concerned with the cultivation of the soul and the maintenance of the well-formed soul. Socrates displays temperance in his actions. Upon seeing Charmides, the men seated at Socrates's table behave foolishly and immaturely, literally shoving each other in order to secure a seat next to Charmides (155C). Socrates is immediately attracted to Charmides' physical beauty. He says, "I saw inside his cloak and caught on fire and was quite beside myself" (155D). Socrates freely admits that he is affected by his more base urges, yet he does not give into them. He chooses instead to concentrate on whether or not Charmides has a well-formed soul. It is Socrates's knowledge of self and his awareness of how this urge may affect his behavior that enable him to control himself and not act upon those desires. Although Socrates claims that he does not know the meaning of *sophrosune*, he demonstrates the introspective behavior necessary to cultivate the soul and behave in a *sophron* manner.

Charmides's behavior is understandable because he is young and he is influenced by Critias who he perceives is wise. Critias seems to be influenced by the Homeric heroic ideal. Like Agamemnon and Achilles, he is arrogant and bloated with a sense of self-righteousness. In the *Charmides*, Plato remarks upon Critias's and Charmides's illustrious ancestry (157E). As a child of wealth and privilege, Critias enjoyed the very best education and as an adult he benefited from the company of the leading thinkers of his day. He appears to have had every advantage, yet he was not satisfied. His hubris and his lust for power and prestige eventually lead to his violent death.

Xenophon characterized Critias as a ruthless, amoral tyrant, whose crimes would eventually be the cause of Socrates' death. This negative view of Critias was continued by Philostratus, who called him "the most evil... of all men" (Philostratus 1.16). Critias's role as a leader in the group of Thirty Tyrants and the fear that they inspired is described in the following passage:

Critias was also a leading member of the Thirty, whose brutal reign of terror in 404/403 BC was vividly depicted by Xenophon (*Hellenica*, Book 2). The reign of terror unleashed by the Thirty saw summary executions, property confiscations, and the exile of thousands of Athenian sycophants, democrats, and metics. Even Theramenes, one of the founding members of the Thirty, was executed without a trial after he dared to openly oppose Critias. Another apparent victim of the Thirty was the still-exiled Alcibiades, who remained in his fortified estates in Thrace. According to the report of Alcibiades' later

biographers-Cornelius Nepos (*Alcibiades* 10) and Plutarch (*Alcibiades I* 38.5)-it was his old supporter and fellow Socratic companion Critias who gave the assassination order in 403 BC. (*Critias: Political Career*, par 2).

Critias's notion that *sophrosune* is "minding one's own business" is very revealing. It indicates a self-serving mind-set and lack of introspection. Critias, and those like him, delude themselves into believing that their tyrannical actions are warranted because they believe themselves to be just. Unlike Socrates, they are unable to regulate their behaviors because they do not have an honest understanding of the forces that motivate them and they do not sincerely strive for the good.

The heroes and protagonists of the *Iliad*, the *Alcibiades I*, and the *Charmides* do not have knowledge of self; therefore, they do not understand the thoughts and desires that prompt their behaviors. They are consumed by egocentric desires, and they lack balance and the ability to focus on the greater good. Conversely, Socrates claims to know nothing and spends his life in search of self-knowledge and understanding. Since he only admits to being able to define that which he does not know, he is not guilty of the hypocrisy and self-delusion of the other characters. Many of the heroes and protagonists of Classical Athens provide a superficial image of virtue whereas Plato's Socrates offers substance. Socrates' continuous introspection and reflection guide him to an awareness of self that in turn leads to *sophron* behavior.

According to Plato, Socrates is the exemplar of *sophrosune*, so as modern-day readers we have some idea what it meant to be *sophron*, or at least which characters are not *sophron*.. Unfortunately, knowing how to define *sophrosune* leaves us no closer to understanding why it was so very important to the Athenians. In his book *Fishcakes and Courtesans*, James Davidson argues that for the Athenians, "the pleasures of the flesh, eating and drinking and sex, are also animal passions, and for all the connoisseurship a degenerate man shows around the dinner-table, he is giving in to desires he shares with the meanest of creatures" (305). Davidson explains that the Athenians recognized these urges in themselves and felt a "civic responsibility to manage all appetites, to train themselves to deal with them, without trying to conquer them absolutely" (313). For the Athenians, if uncontrolled, the primal passions inherent in each man posed a threat not only to the individual man but to the society in which he lived. The ever-present threat of tyranny fueled this preoccupation with temperance and moderation. According to Davidson, Athenians were highly suspicious of any man whose appetites outpaced his ability to support them. He describes what he calls the "tyranny of desperation" as a situation in which the would-be tyrant is forced to oppress others in order to secure the means to indulge his extravagant appetites (299).

The Athenian fascination with *sophrosune* is reflected in the Athenian philosophical texts of the era and in the anthropomorphic gods they worshiped. Dionysus stands as an exemplar of the animal passions while Apollo represents reason and civilized behavior. Through these gods and the Delphic festival they shared, the Athenians acknowledged the duality of human nature and the interconnectedness of passion and reason. Plato emphasizes the Apollonian ideal of "know thyself" as the means of cultivating the soul and de-emphasizes

the Homeric virtues of skill in battle and oration. For the ancient Athenians, the animal passions were carefully regulated by societal rules such as the mixing of the water and the wine at the symposium. More importantly, passions and desires could be controlled through careful introspection and self-knowledge. The man dedicated to the attentive nurturing of and care of the soul, which requires constant introspection and self-reflection, could obtain a perpetual state of contemplation, which in turn would lead to concentrated self-awareness, moral excellence, and the ability to consistently act in a *sophron* manner.

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Biography

Dawn Higgs received her BSE in 1997, from Henderson State University. Having then taught secondary English and oral communications for six years in Arkansas public schools, she returned to Henderson State University where she completed her Master of Liberal Arts degree with a major emphasis in English and a minor emphasis in philosophy in 2005.