Delusions of Grandeur: The Interpretation of Plato's *Hippias Major*

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE 10th DAY OF DECEMBER OF 2015

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

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OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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Abstract

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My dissertation is an interpretation of Plato’s Hippias Major, in which Socrates investigates τό καλόν (usually translated as “the beautiful” or “the noble”). My reading of the Hippias Major focuses on the importance of appearing beautiful, to others and thereby to oneself, and reveals the way in which the impulse to appear beautiful is connected to the desire for the immortal preservation of oneself and one’s own. The impulse to appear beautiful is essential to political life, insofar as the pleasure of praise effects a kind of harmony between the private good and the common. This impulse, however, is also a fundamental impediment to Socratic philosophy, as it prevents the critical examination of oneself and one’s opinions, while hindering a truly erotic experience of the beautiful. In examining these issues, my dissertation seeks to establish the Hippias Major’s connection to and consonance with other more popular Platonic dialogues, such as the Republic, Symposium, and Phaedo.
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# Delusions of Grandeur:
The Interpretation of Plato’s *Hippias Major*

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Introduction: On the Difficulty of Beautiful Things

In Plato’s *Hippias Major*, Socrates poses the question τί ἐστι τοῦτο τὸ καλὸν – what is this thing, the beautiful? This question is so important that Socrates repeatedly suggests life is not worth living for anyone who cannot answer it.¹ Even a cursory reading of Plato’s dialogues confirms that the nature of the beautiful is a fundamental question for Socratic philosophy. The *Hippias Major* is the only Platonic dialogue explicitly devoted to answering this question, and so it plays a particularly important role in the Platonic corpus.

Despite these considerations, the *Hippias Major* has been generally ignored by contemporary scholarship. This is due in large part to the fact that the dialogue features a number of characteristics that many scholars deem “Un-Platonic.” The style, for instance, has struck some as so overly comic and crude that they have rejected the dialogue as spurious. In so doing, these scholars bear a striking similarity to Hippias himself, who rejects Socrates’ questions about a lowly pot because they are inappropriate to a refined discussion. Be that as it may, the *Hippias Major* does present interpreters with a number of difficulties, which at first blush can make the dialogue seem idiosyncratic and disordered. These appearances have led scholars to question the value, if not authenticity, of the dialogue, and as a result the *Hippias Major* has not received the attention it deserves.²
The task of demonstrating the true value of the *Hippias Major* and the task of understanding what Plato intends to convey by means of the dialogue require the same thing. One must resolve the apparent difficulties by explaining how even the most seemingly inappropriate or incongruous parts of the dialogue are in fact fitting, and how the dialogue as whole forms a rich and coherent consideration of the nature of beauty, despite any initial appearances to the contrary. To this end, it is helpful to begin by simply enumerating the main difficulties and questions posed by the dialogue.

An immediate difficulty arises in even trying to articulate Socrates’ primary question in the *Hippias Major*, due to an ambiguity in the idea being examined, τὸ καλὸν. The meaning and connotations of τὸ καλὸν are so broad that choosing an English translation is unusually problematic. The idea of τὸ καλὸν has an important aesthetic sense, and with this in mind many interpreters choose to translate it as “the beautiful.” But, the idea also has a political and moral sense, and in an attempt to capture this some choose to translate it as “the noble.” Still others try to strike a balance between these two, translating it as “the fine.” It is important to note from the outset that there is a way in which the political sense of τὸ καλὸν is the focus of the *Hippias Major*, as indicated by the extended opening discussion of Hipppias’ political activities, which sets the stage for Socrates’ question (281a – 286c). But the dialogue also suggests that the political sense can and should be understood on the model of the aesthetic; this appears most clearly in the examination of Hipppias’ second answer, which features a discussion of the beautiful statue Athena Parthenos (289c – 291c). This discussion indicates that the aesthetic sense is broader and in certain way more primary.
than the political, which is why I have chosen to translate τὸ καλὸν as “the beautiful” throughout. Nevertheless, both senses of τὸ καλὸν should be kept in mind while reading the *Hippias Major*, and an interpretation of the dialogue must explain how the aesthetic and political senses are related and encapsulated by one idea. In addition to the explicit question regarding the beautiful, the dialogue presents the interpreter with a number of implicit questions, the following of which seem to me to be the most important for understanding the dialogue as a whole.

In order to learn about the beautiful, Socrates requests the help of Hippias, a renowned sophist from Elis, apparently in Athens on a diplomatic mission during the Peace of Nicias. Socrates approaches Hippias, not the other way around. Why does Socrates want to speak with Hippias in particular? This question is all the more glaring due to the fact that Hippias, for all his intellectual acumen, appears quite foolish in his conversation with Socrates. Why is Hippias the proper interlocutor for such an investigation of the beautiful?

The *Hippias Major* begins with a lengthy discussion of wisdom and law, as these relate to Hippias’ public and private activities. How does this discussion of Hippias’ public and private activities serve as the proper introduction to the question of the beautiful? How might the issues and problems that come to light in the subsequent search for the beautiful be foreshadowed or illustrated by this preliminary discussion?

When he asks Hippias to teach him what the beautiful is, Socrates requests that he be allowed to imitate a man who recently perplexed him with the same question and whom Socrates claims always refutes him (whom I therefore refer to throughout as “the
Refuter”). As a result, much of what Socrates says in the dialogue is not spoken in his own voice to Hippias, but rather in the voice of the Refuter as he would respond to Socrates, were Socrates to answer him as Hippias instructs. Although Socrates uses similar rhetorical devices in other Platonic dialogues, as when he imitates the Laws in the *Crito* (50a), in no other dialogue is a similar conceit as elaborate and extended as it is in the *Hippias Major*. Why does Socrates use such an elaborate rhetorical device in his conversation with Hippias? Why is it necessary that Socrates conduct his inquiry into the beautiful in the guise of the Refuter?

When Hippias attempts to explain what the beautiful is, he repeatedly cites particular examples of beautiful things, as opposed to explaining what all beautiful things have in common that makes them beautiful. That is to say, Hippias explains what is beautiful but not what the beautiful is. Although Socrates suggests that Hippias may not understand the question, he does not correct Hippias as explicitly as he could, the way he corrects Meno, for instance (*Meno* 72a). Why does Hippias repeatedly make this mistake, and why does Socrates allow him to do so? Is this mistake, confusing particular embodiments with the form itself, somehow appropriate to the question of the beautiful?

Toward the end of the dialogue, in what appears to be a consideration of aesthetics, the discussion abruptly turns toward issues of ontology, in particular to the question of whether certain affections can apply to two things together but not each individually. Socrates suggests that this is possible, whereas Hippias denies it vehemently. Socrates’ suggestion so angers Hippias that he condemns Socrates and his
whole method of investigation. How does this seemingly anomalous ontological
digression fit with the rest of the dialogue? And why is Hippias so incensed by Socrates’
claim?

The language and style of the *Hippias Major* raise a few related questions. The
dialogue features a great deal of comic vocabulary, as well as broad mockery of Hippias
(much to the dismay of many scholars). Why should a dialogue investigating the
beautiful and the noble be so comic and, in certain respects, so ugly and low, as, for
instance, in its consideration of a pot of boiling pea soup (288c-d)? Even more striking
perhaps, there is not one reference to erotic desire in this dialogue devoted to the
beautiful. This omission is made all the more puzzling given that the two dialogues
following the *Hippias Major* in Plato’s dramatic chronology (excluding the *Hippias Minor*,
which takes place two days later) are the *Phaedrus* and the * Symposium*, which also take
place during the Peace of Nicias. Beauty is a central theme in both dialogues, and both
dialogues feature extended discussions of erotic desire. How is silence regarding erotic
desire appropriate to a discussion of beauty with Hippias?

Finally, at the very end of the *Hippias Major*, Socrates claims that, thanks to his
association with Hippias and the Refuter, he now knows what is meant by the ancient
proverb, “The beautiful things are difficult.” What does Socrates mean by these
enigmatic closing lines? What is the difficulty of beautiful things?
Part One: Beautiful Wholes

Section I (281a1 – 283b4): Wisdom and the Good

Socrates refers to the first section of his conversation with Hippias as “a great proof of how much both [Hippias’] own wisdom and that of the human beings of today differ from the ancients” (283a).¹ Hippias is the exemplar contemporary wise man, and the first section of Hippias Major is devoted to examining his activities, beliefs, and motivations, which to varying degrees characterize contemporary wise men as such and distinguish them from ancient wise men (and, more importantly, from philosophers such as Socrates). The first question facing a reader of the dialogue is how exactly Hippias and his like differ from wise men of the past. What exactly has this “great proof” revealed?

The dialogue opens with Socrates greeting Hippias and noting how long it has been since Hippias last visited Athens, which induces Hippias to speak of his political activities. Hippias boasts that he has had no leisure due to his political service to his home city Elis, on account of which he has visited many cities as her foremost ambassador, above all Sparta (Elis’ ally and Athens’ enemy at the time of the dialogue). This political service has kept Hippias from Athens.

Hippias’ comically vain answer to a question that Socrates had not explicitly asked highlights the immense pride he takes in his political service. From the start, however, Hippias’ boasting has somewhat confused altruistic undertones. On the one
hand, Hippias gives the impression that he has sacrificed all his private time, his leisure, in service to Elis; on the other hand, he is obviously quite pleased to be held in such high esteem by his city as a result. Socrates’ response, in which he praises Hippias for being “a truly wise and perfect man” (281b), echoes these undertones; Socrates claims that in Hippias’ private activities, although he takes a great deal of money for himself from the young, he is able to benefit them still more than he himself is benefitted. Similarly, in his public activities, he is able to do good for his city, thereby earning a good reputation for himself among the many. This description of Hippias’ private and public activities raises two related questions: what is Hippias’ primary motivation, benefitting himself or benefitting others (be it people in private or the city in public)? And what are the specific benefits that Hippias is able to convey?

Having drawn attention to Hippias’ semi-altruistic private activities, Socrates turns back to his public activities, asking why the renowned wise men of the past refrained from such political practices as Hippias describes.² Sensing an implicit critique, Hippias retorts that the ancients lacked the power and were unable by prudence to accomplish both the common things and the private. According to Hippias, the ancients were less prudent and less powerful than he is. As such, they had to choose between private activities or public, and they chose private, avoiding the political practices whereby one accomplishes the common good. Hippias here implies that he is exceptionally powerful and prudent, capable of acquiring both the common good of the city and the private good of individuals, himself and others. This belief, however, presupposes that there is no essential conflict between the private good of each
individual and the common good of the city as whole. In other words, according to
Hippias, there is no problem of justice. Hippias has harmonized the acquisition of the
common with that of the private, eliminating any apparent mutual exclusivity. Or, so he
believes. Whether and by what means such a harmony might be effected remain
questions.

Socrates proceeds to draw out the implications of Hippias’ claim. Arts progress,
such that the craftsmen of the past are necessarily poor in comparison with those of the
present. Wisdom is a kind of art, and so ancient wise men are necessarily poor
compared to Hippias, a modern wise man. When Hippias agrees to this, Socrates
restates these implications using particular examples and somewhat more derogatory
language. He asks whether, if an ancient wise man such as Bias came back to life, he
would be laughable compared to Hippias, just as the sculptors maintain that Daedalus
would be ridiculous were he born now and produced the works that made him famous.
Although Hippias again agrees, he adds that he nevertheless praises the men of the past
more than the men of today, since he is wary of the envy of the living and fears the
wrath of the dead. Socrates’ open disparagement of the ancients was impolitic;
sometimes, it is prudent to dissemble. Socrates responds that Hippias is both naming
and thinking nobly. As the argument has unfolded, Hippias has been induced to
acknowledge the need to dissemble directly after suggesting a harmony between the
private and common good as well as noting the progress of the arts and sciences. This
need for dissimulation, however, suggests that Hippias’ acquisition of his own good may
not be perfectly harmonious with the good of others, despite earlier suggestions to the
contrary. One is thus led to wonder whether the need for dissimulation (to avoid arousing envy, in particular) might point to certain tensions that Hippias, for some reason, has not fully grasped.

After Hippias mentions his own habit of dissimulation, Socrates claims that he can testify that Hippias’ art has indeed progressed as Hippias claims, “in regard to having the power to practice public affairs along with private” (282b). Socrates then cites the examples of Gorgias and Prodicus, contemporary wise men who visited Athens as ambassadors in a public capacity and were well reputed for their public speeches, while in private they made exhibition speeches for Athenian youths and thereby earned for themselves great sums of money. Socrates then notes that none of the ancient wise men thought it worthwhile to earn money in this way or to make exhibitions of their own wisdom before all sorts of people, since the ancients were naïve and unaware of the great value of money. Until this point, the difference between ancient and modern wise men seemed to be that moderns practice both public affairs for the common good while also pursuing their private interests, whereas the ancients were only capable of pursuing their private interests. But Socrates here adds that the ancient wise men differed in their private activities, as well. Not only did they refrain in public from political service, but in private they also refrained from displaying their wisdom before “all sorts of people” and thereby making money for themselves, since they were unaware of the great value of money. This new difference raises new questions. What exactly is the great value of money, which the moderns grasp but the ancients failed to see? Is there an underlying connection between the ancients’ decision to refrain from
public political service and their decision to refrain from private exhibitions of their wisdom before all sorts of people for pay? And is there some further connection between the ancients’ refusal to display their wisdom before all sorts of people and Hippias’ acknowledgement of the need to dissemble, mentioned moments earlier?

After highlighting the difference between the private practices of ancient and modern wise men, Socrates piles more praise on Gorgias and Prodicus, exclaiming that each of these men has earned more money from wisdom than any other artisan, and before them Protagoras did as well. Hippias, goaded by Socrates’ praise of rival wise men and himself apparently filled with envy, exclaims that Socrates knows none of the beautiful things about this, for Socrates does not know the wonderful amount of money Hippias himself has earned. He cites in particular the time he went to Sicily while Protagoras resided there and earned more than 150 minas, after which he returned home and gave the money to his father, so that he and the other citizens were filled with wonder. Hippias concludes by boasting that he himself has made more money than any other two sophists combined.

Hippias’ boast about his private activities suggests an answer to the question regarding the value of money for modern wise men. For Hippias, the value of money is not primarily its usefulness for purchasing goods and services. If it were, the fact that Hippias made his money in Sicily while the older and well respected Protagoras resided there would be irrelevant, as would be the relative size of Inycum. But Hippias emphasizes these details. Moreover, Hippias makes sure to add to his description of the amount of money he made the fact that on returning home he gave the money away to
his father, an act which filled his father and other citizens with wonder. This suggests that the true value of money for Hippias is not its usefulness for purchasing goods and services but rather the fact that those who can acquire great sums of money are honored by the many, as are those who donate a great deal of money to others. Earlier, Socrates indicated that a desire for honor from the many motivates Hippias’ public activities (281c); here it becomes clear that this motivates his private activities as well. Hippias (and, in so far as he is the exemplar, modern wise men more generally) are fundamentally motivated in both their public and private activities by a desire for honor from the many.

As we began by noting, Socrates concludes this section of the conversation by claiming that what Hippias has said is “a great proof of how much both [Hippias’] own wisdom and that of the human beings of today differ from the ancients” (283a). But Socrates is careful to distance himself from the apparent conclusion of this proof, stating that “according to [Hippias’] argument, the ignorance of our predecessors is great” (283a). Whereas Hippias has been able to earn great sums of money, it is said that Anaxagoras was left a great deal of money but lost it all, so mindless he was at being wise, and similar things are said about other wise men of the past. Socrates adds that it is the opinion of the many that the wise man himself must be wise especially for himself, and that the mark of this is whoever has earned the most money. The many believe that wisdom is primarily selfish, that the wise man benefits himself above all. He is exceptionally prudent, as Hippias had boasted of being. They also believe wealth to be an unqualified good and as such a mark of wisdom. But these
opinions are in tension with the fact that the many honor Hippias for his public service, which is aimed not at acquiring wealth for himself but rather benefitting the city and its citizens. This tension suggests a fundamental confusion in the opinion of the many. Although they believe wisdom is primarily selfish and that the wise man should benefit himself above all, they nevertheless honor the man who spends his time and money benefitting others at his own expense. The aforementioned confused altruism of Hippias’ public and private activities reflects this basic confusion in the opinion of the many, to which he is so attached. Further, it is Hippias’ attachment to the opinion of the many that leads him to believe that the private good and the common can be easily harmonized, for such a harmony is effected by his desire for honor – a private good that is purchased by “selflessly” benefitting others, in public and in private. But this admittedly paradoxical characterization of Hippias’ motive raises the question of his overall prudence. How does Hippias hope (however confusedly) to be benefited by being honored by the many?5

The first section of *Hippias Major* reveals that Hippias, and so modern wise men more generally, are motivated above all by a desire for honor from the many. This fuels their semi-altruistic public and private activities, leading them to benefit the city publicly and the young in private. Their desire for honor reveals a fundamental attachment to certain confused opinions of the many, which will become more evident as the dialogue unfolds. The fact that ancient wise men refrained from these public and private activities suggests that the ancients lacked the desire for honor from the many, as well as the desire for the wealth that inspires such honor. Money and honor are held by the
many to constitute the greatest goods for a human being; the ancient wise men
apparently had a different opinion, as well as a low estimation of the many and their
ability to judge the good of someone or something. The ancients were evidently less
shackled to the opinions of the many than modern wise men.

As noted earlier, Hippias does not see any tension between the common good
and the private, in large part because his desire for honor from the many effects an
apparent harmony between them. The opening section, however, alludes to possible
tensions of which Hippias is unaware. Most obviously, Hippias himself acknowledges
the need for a false show of humility, so as not to arouse the envy of others. But,
Hippias is himself envious of other wise men, as his reaction to Socrates’ praise of his
contemporary rivals reveals. Hippias’ desire for honor appears to stem from something
like an unreflective self-love, which cannot abide hearing others praised, insofar as the
praise of others implies a slight to oneself. This envy raises the question of exactly how
much, and in what ways, the pursuit of one’s own private good necessarily puts one into
conflict with others, in particular when one is pursing something like honor from the
many. Additionally, we saw that Hippias believes that wisdom is an art and as such
advances, so that modern wise men are necessarily more powerful and more prudent
than the ancients, able to acquire both the private and common good. Socrates drew
out the implication of this belief in the progress of wisdom, namely that an ancient wise
man such as Bias would appear ridiculous compared to Hippias. Bias was well reputed
for his exceptional justice and piety. Socrates’ example then suggests a way in which a
belief in the progress of wisdom, such as that held by Hippias, threatens to undermine
respect for not only ancient wise men but also ancient beliefs, in particular ancient religious beliefs. The just and pious Bias appears laughable compared to Hippias. But one might wonder whether these ancient religious beliefs serve some important function, in particular for the good of the city. If this were true, Hippias’ private education in progressive arts and sciences, by undermining certain ancient religious beliefs, might actually harm the city, meaning that the private good and the common would not be as easily harmonized as Hippias believes. One might suspect further that ancient wise men, not blinded by their attachment to the opinion of the many, were more aware of these tensions than Hippias, and as a result deemed it imprudent to engage in either public service or private displays of their own wisdom before all sorts of people. Far from exemplifying an advance in wisdom, Hippias and his like may represent an advance in a particularly important form of ignorance and imprudence, which is connected to the desire for honor from the many and the unreflective self-love which generates this desire. These suspicions, which are merely aroused in the first section of dialogue, are confirmed in the second, in which Socrates turns to an examination of Spartan law and education (both legal and illegal).

The opening section of the dialogue explicitly examined the question of the difference between ancient and modern wise men; but before proceeding to the second section of the dialogue, one should also consider the implicit question of the relation of between these two groups of wise men and Socrates, the lover of wisdom. From his opening speech onwards, it is evident that Hippias is a kind of anti-Socrates. Whereas Hippias has no leisure due to political service to Elis that keeps him from Athens,
Socrates appears to have nothing but leisure, avoids such political service, and hardly ever leaves Athens. Many other points of opposition emerge in the course of the dialogue, such as Hippias’ wealth and Socrates’ poverty. Moreover, Socrates ends by quoting Solon, an ancient wise man, regarding the difficulties of ruling. In these ways, Socrates seems more akin to the ancient wise men than to Hippias. Having said that, Socrates himself does not engage in political affairs even in the less pedestrian ways that characterize ancient wise men like Pittacus and Bias, nor does he investigate nature in the ways that characterize ancient wise men like Thales and Anaxagoras. In both political matters and investigations of nature, Socrates appears to be doing something different, something new. An earlier reference to Socrates’ ancestor Daedalus alludes to this fact. When Socrates asks whether Bias would be laughable compared to Hippias, he likens this situation to the sculptors’ claim that Daedalus would appear ridiculous were he born now and produced the works that made him famous. Socrates, however, is himself not only a descendant of Daedalus, but also claims that he is cleverer than Daedalus was at his art (Euthyphro 11b-e). Although one already suspects that Hippias does not exemplify an advance in wisdom, this reference to Socrates’ ancestor gives one reason to wonder whether Socrates does. After all, Socrates more than anyone else makes others look ridiculous. As the upcoming sections will reveal, whatever threat Hippias and his progressive, cosmopolitan wisdom might have been to the city is greatly mitigated by his desire for honor; he is a domesticated wise man. The same cannot be said for Socrates.
Section II (283b4 – 285b7): Persuasion and Paternal Law

Section I featured a discussion of Hippias’ public and private activities, in particular as they relate to his claim that modern wise men are more prudent than ancient wise men, because moderns are able to succeed in both private and public pursuits, whereas ancients could not. The goods that Hippias acquires for himself from these pursuits were said to be money and honor from the many; money, however, came to light as primarily a means to honor. The goods that he conveys to others, in private and in public, were left unstated. Despite Hippias’ boast of prudence, there were subtle indications that the various goods he acquires and conveys may not be as harmonious as he believes. In particular, the fact that Hippias makes ancient wise men look ridiculous and that he must dissemble to avoid the envy of others suggested there may be certain tensions among these goods. In Section II, Socrates focuses on these tensions by directing the conversation to Hippias’ failure to practice his private pursuits in Sparta. In this way, the Section II poses two related questions: what exactly prevents Hippias from benefitting himself and others in private while pursuing his public affairs in Sparta, and how might this qualify or contradict Hippias’ earlier boast about the prudence of modern wise men?

Having agreed that wealth is the proof of wisdom, Socrates asks Hippias where he has earned the most money, suggesting before Hippias can respond that it must be Sparta, where Hippias has visited the most often.1 Hippias exclaims that he has never
made any money in Sparta, a fact that Socrates calls “marvelous” and “wondrous” (283c). Socrates then asks whether Hippias’ wisdom makes those who learn it better with respect to virtue, which Hippias affirms. Despite suspicions to the contrary, modern wise men do not corrupt the youth; Hippias knows what virtue is and how to teach it to others (or so he believes). This being the case, Socrates asks why the Spartans refuse to pay Hippias for his education in virtue. After Socrates exhausts a list of possible reasons, Hippias is forced to tacitly acknowledge that his powers of persuasion are limited, for he was unable to persuade the Spartan sons and fathers to accept his company.² Socrates emphasizes that Hippias must have been unable to persuade Spartan fathers that he could benefit their children, because presumably fathers would not begrudge that their own children become the best possible.

Hippias’ sweeping claim that his wisdom makes those who learn it better with respect to virtue is ambiguous. What does Hippias mean by “better with respect to virtue”? In asking Hippias why the Spartans refused to pay Hippias for his education, Socrates’ alludes to two possible meanings of this phrase, which are potentially at odds. When Socrates first asks whether Hippias’ wisdom makes those who learn it “better” with respect to virtue, he uses the Greek word Βελτίων, which has moral connotations (283c). In this case, “better with respect to virtue” seems to be mean “more moral.” But, in his next question, when Socrates asks whether Hippias was able to make the sons of the Inycinians “better” but not the Spartans, Socrates instead uses the Greek word ἀμείνων, which connotes strength or ability.³ In this case, “better” seems to mean stronger or more powerful, without reference to a moral standard. Socrates uses
Once more before switching back to βελτίων. The alternation between βελτίων and ἀμείνων raises the question of whether Hippias’ education would make the Spartan youth more moral or merely make them more powerful in some amoral way. More pointedly, might Hippias’ education make the youth more powerful and less moral? By raising this question, Socrates alludes to a point raised in Section I, namely that the power of Hippias’ wisdom is always progressing, and as a result his wisdom tends to undermine respect for ancient wise men and their wisdom, especially as concerns justice and piety. Hippias embodies the tension between the progressive power of (a certain sort of) wisdom and respect for ancient wisdom and morality. Socrates’ alternation between βελτίων and ἀμείνων reminds one of this tension, setting the stage for his next series of questions.

Socrates’ suggestion, which Hippias is forced to tacitly concede, is that Hippias was unable to persuade Spartan fathers and sons to accept his company, which would make the sons better with respect to virtue. As Socrates hypothesizes, Hippias could not persuade the Spartan youth that he could help them, more than “their own [people],” progress toward virtue (283e). Likewise, he could not persuade the fathers to hand over their sons to Hippias’ care rather than to take care of the sons themselves, for the fathers presumably did not begrudge “their own sons” become the best possible (283e). But why do Hippias’ powers of persuasion fail in this case, when confronted with the fathers and sons? Is there something about the family that curtails persuasion about becoming better with respect to virtue? Does the family somehow stand in the way of persuasion about the good?
Having alluded to some impediment to persuasion inherent in the family, Socrates immediately introduces the topic of Spartan law, asking Hippias whether the Spartans have good laws. Hippias, echoing common opinion, affirms that they do. But, as Socrates argues, in cities that have good laws, virtue is most honored, and because Hippias knows how to teach virtue, he ought to be highly honored and earn the most money in places with good laws like Sparta, just as one who knows how to teach horsemanship would be highly honored and earn the most money in Thessaly. Hippias, sensing the negative implications of Socrates’ reasoning, counters that it is against the “paternal tradition” for the Spartans “to change their laws or to educate their sons contrary to what is customary” (284b). In response, Socrates asks whether Hippias means that it is against the “paternal tradition” to “act correctly,” which Hippias denies. Socrates then points out that the Spartans would be acting correctly by educating their youth in a better way, implying that if Hippias’ education were in fact better, paternal tradition would allow it. Hippias, again on the defensive, agrees that they would be acting correctly to educate their sons in a better way, but notes that it is against the law for the Spartans to employ a “foreign education,” being sure to add that if anyone had ever earned money in Sparta for an education, he would have received by far the most, for they enjoy listening to him and they praise him – but it is not the law.

Hippias’ reference to the “paternal tradition” that prevents his private education in Sparta occurs moments after Socrates implied that there is some impediment to persuasion regarding the good related to Spartan fathers and sons. Hippias’ comments about the paternal tradition clarify the nature of this impediment. According to Spartan
law and the paternal tradition on which it is based, new changes and foreign influences are bad. *Res ipsa loquitur.* The old and one’s own – in other words, the “paternal” or “ancestral” – are good. “Acting correctly” is identified with acting in accordance with the ancestral ways. Hippias’ use of the term “paternal tradition” suggests some essential connection between the family and the law’s identification of the good with the ancestral; it suggests that the attachment to one’s own and deference to the older as such, which is writ large in the Spartan law, originates in the Spartan family. What role does the respect for the ancestral play in the family? On the one hand, the unreflective love of one’s own, in the form of the familial attachments, binds the family together. On the other hand, the deaf deference to the older as such gives a father his authority over his sons. The respect for the ancestral gives the family its unity and order. It is beneficial for the family as a whole.

The identification of the ancestral with the good is the impediment within the family to persuasion regarding the good. Faced with Spartan fathers, Hippias is met with resistance on two related fronts. First, Hippias’ education in his own brand of wisdom would make the youth similar to himself and dissimilar to their Spartan fathers. Hippias would become their intellectual father and the sons his intellectual heirs. A father’s natural love of and desire to preserve his own rebels at this and lashes out in a sort of self-defense. The implication of this, however, is that a Spartan father’s understanding of what is better and worse for his sons, what is good, is essentially intertwined with his unreflective love of his own, a natural manifestation of a more primary self-love. This presents a fundamental impediment to persuasion about what is
Second, Socrates’ suggestion that Hippias’ powers of persuasion failed when confronted with the family comes directly after his subtle reminder that Hippias’ wisdom undermines respect for the ancient. A father’s authority over his son is based in large part on the mere fact that the father is older. Hippias’ education in progressive wisdom would undermine the respect that a father derives by virtue of being older; it would undermine the sons’ deference to the older as such. In addition to his attachment to his own, a father’s demand to be honored by his sons and remain a respected authority figure, yet another manifestation of unreflective self-love, deepens the impediment within the family to persuasion regarding the good. Although this impediment is more manifest in Sparta, there is no reason to think it is limited to Spartan fathers only. Despite Hippias’ claim to have noticed the envy of the living (282a), he seems unaware of the potential envy that his education may arouse in fathers as such regarding their sons. Just as Hippias could not abide hearing other wise men praised, since such praise offends his unreflective self-love, so too fathers cannot abide giving their own sons to another to be reared, thereby losing their standing as an authority figure and the honor that accompanies such a standing.

Hippias’ reference to the paternal tradition behind Spartan law suggests that this respect for the ancestral, which most naturally unites the family and gives a father his authority, extends beyond the Spartan family to the city of Sparta as well. How this happens remains a question for now. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the political community of Sparta (just as in the Spartan family) the old and one’s own, the ancestral, is identified as good, whereas the new, progressive and foreign is identified as bad. It
follows that a Spartan citizen as such, and the Spartan law more generally, resist persuasion about what is good just as a Spartan father does, since the family and the city are animated by the same basic drive, an unreflective attachment to one’s own and deference to the older as such. But this observation raises the question of whether hyper-conservative Sparta is idiosyncratic in this respect. Might the example of Sparta illustrate a more fundamental truth about cities and laws more generally? Might even hyper-liberal Athens be opposed, in some fundamental respect, to the new and foreign (as Socrates’ trial and execution for “making novel gods” and corrupting the youth suggests)? If so, modern wise men like Hippias, in confidently displaying their own wisdom before all sorts of people for pay, would not be as prudent as they think, since they are unaware that the acquisition of their private good comes at the cost of the supposed good of fathers and the city. This is precisely what Socrates indicates in the next section of the argument.

Hippias’ comments suggested that Spartan law, standing on paternal tradition, identifies the good with the ancestral and accordingly prohibits Hippias’ progressive and foreign education. Socrates now subjects this understanding of Spartan law to dialectical analysis, to determine whether such paternal law is truly “law” in the precise sense. He begins by asking Hippias whether law is harmful or beneficial to a city. Hippias responds that law is established in order to benefit, but law can sometimes be harmful, if the law is established badly. Hippias begins with the common sense understanding; law is whatever has been set down and is regarded as such. Law is a matter of opinion; beneficial and harmful laws are equally laws. Socrates, however,
counters that those who establish laws set them down as the greatest good for a city, without which it is impossible to live with good order. Hippias grants that this is the case, and so Socrates concludes that whenever those who attempt to establish laws mistake what is good, they mistake the lawful and law, as well. Laws are, by definition, beneficial. And so law is not merely a matter of opinion, because what is beneficial is not merely a matter of opinion. Beneficial and harmful laws are not equally laws; in fact, insofar as a law is harmful, it is not truly a law at all. Hippias concedes that what Socrates says is correct “in precise speech,” but adds that human beings are not accustomed to use words in this way. Socrates, again looking for more precision, asks whether Hippias means those who know or those who do not know, to which Hippias replies that he means “the many.” Socrates then forces Hippias to make explicit what he had left implicit, asking whether the many know the truth. When Hippias denies that they do, Socrates asks whether those who do know the truth believe that the more beneficial for every human being is more lawful than the less beneficial, which Hippias affirms, albeit somewhat guardedly; he senses, presumably, that this agreement invalidates most, if not all, conventionally accepted laws. Socrates asks further whether things are as those who know believe, which Hippias also affirms. Socrates then reiterates that, according to Hippias at least, the education he offers, despite being foreign, is more beneficial for the Spartans than their local education and that the more beneficial things are more lawful. From these premises, Socrates draws the conclusion (from which he distances himself) that, according to Hippias’ argument, it is actually more lawful for the sons of the Spartans to be educated by Hippias and less lawful to be
educated by their own fathers – presuming Hippias really will benefit them more, which Hippias forcefully reasserts. It follows, Socrates now adds, that the Spartans break the law by not giving Hippias gold and handing over their sons to him. Hippias happily accepts this bizarre conclusion, noting that Socrates appears to be stating the argument to his advantage, and so there is no reason to oppose it. Socrates ends this line of argument with a completely heterodox conclusion, namely that the Spartans (who moments ago Hippias unquestioningly believed to have good laws) are in fact lawbreakers regarding the most important matters, even though they seem to be the most law-abiding.

The fact that Socrates attributes this argument to Hippias, coupled with the fact that the conclusion is humorously paradoxical, should give one pause. How exactly did the Spartans go from seemingly having good laws to being revealed as lawbreakers regarding the most important matters? The argument begins with the question of whether law is harmful or beneficial, and it turns on a certain ambiguity in the term “beneficial.” “Beneficial” and “harmful” are relational terms; what is beneficial for one thing may be harmful for another (Protagoras 333e – 334c). Socrates and Hippias begin by agreeing that law is beneficial for a city (284d). After noting the imprecise speech of the ignorant many, they agree that the few who know believe that the more beneficial for all human beings is in truth more lawful than the less beneficial (284e). In this transition, “beneficial for the city” is replaced by “beneficial for all human beings.” But this unexamined substitution raises the question of whether what is beneficial for a city, considered a whole, is beneficial for all or every human being (or, even more limitedly,
for all human beings within that city). Hippias proceeds to affirm that it is “more beneficial for the Spartans” to be educated with his foreign education than with the local education, and then that it is more lawful for the sons of the Spartans to be educated by him rather than by their own fathers, since the sons will be benefited more by him. In this exchange, “beneficial for the Spartans” is replaced by what is beneficial for the sons of the Spartans, raising the question of whether what is beneficial for the Spartans as a whole, or for the Spartan fathers in particular, is the same as what is beneficial for the sons of the Spartans. Finally, Socrates concludes that the Spartan fathers break the law not giving Hippias gold and turning their own sons over to him. In this way, the argument culminates by interpreting what is beneficial (and, as a result, what is lawful) as what is beneficial for Hippias, in particular.

The humorously paradoxical conclusion draws attention to the ambiguity in applying the term “beneficial.” Hippias does not clearly or precisely distinguish the difference between what is good for him and what is good for others. Socrates' conclusion, in which the true law requires fathers to give Hippias their own valued possessions (money and sons), highlights the tension between what is good for Hippias and what is good for fathers. Hippias’ good is coming at the expense of the fathers’ good. Since the good of the fathers was shown to be the root of the good for the city of Sparta more generally (namely, a respect for the ancestral), the conclusion implies that, in his private activities, Hippias’ pursuit of his own good comes at the expense of the good of the city, the very good he purports to produce in his public activities. Hippias is
imprudent, although he does not know this about himself, since he does not see the obvious tensions among the goods he pursues.

But how could Hippias be so blind to these tensions? The answer is suggested by his reaction to Socrates’ paradoxical conclusion, that the Spartans break the law by not giving Hippias their money and their sons. Hippias accepts this without question, noting that there is no reason to oppose Socrates since the argument appears to be in his favor; it is “pro-Hippias” (285b). This is Hippias’ standard for accepting or rejecting an argument, as opposed to the argument’s truth or falsity. Socrates earlier alluded to the fact that Spartan fathers, and Spartan law more generally, resists persuasion about what is truly good due in large part to love of their own, which takes the form of attachment to the familial, a natural manifestation of a more basic, unreflective self-love. Hippias’ unquestioning acceptance of Socrates’ paradoxical conclusion suggests that he too is animated by this same unreflective self-love, albeit in a slightly different form. He is not animated by a desire for wisdom, but by a desire to appear wise to the many, a desire to have a name for wisdom; this desire characterizes modern wise men, or sophists, as such. Hippias began this discussion by boasting that he is exceptionally prudent because he can acquire both the public and private good, for himself and others. This was his proof that, as a wise man, he is superior to the wise men of the past. Were Hippias to acknowledge the tensions discussed above, he would have to acknowledge that he is not “a perfect man” (281a). Perhaps he is no better than the ancient wise men; perhaps he is worse. This acknowledgment would cost him the honor and praise of the many, who (however mistakenly) believe that he is wise and capable of benefiting himself, his
friends and the city more generally. His unreflective self-love compels him to choose the reputation for prudence over true prudence, and so he blinds himself to the tensions to which Socrates alludes. Ironically, Hippias himself resists persuasion about what is truly good for the same basic reason that Spartan fathers and the city of Sparta more generally cannot be persuaded to accept Hippias’ education – that is, unreflective self-love.

The irrationality of Hippias’ desire to be honored for wisdom by the many is highlighted by his agreement with Socrates that the many are ignorant of the truth; they speak or, more literally, “they name” [ὀνομάζειν] imprecisely. How could one rationally desire a name for wisdom among people who are ignorant and name imprecisely? Is it even possible for those who know the truth to speak meaningfully to the many and convey any wisdom to all sorts of people? Are not those who know the truth bound to be misunderstood by the many, since the many (in some important sense) speak a different, imprecise language? In order to be honored for wisdom by the many, it is necessary that one display to the ignorant many whatever they believe to be wise, whether or not it is truly so. In order to be honored by the many, the modern wise man must bow to confused and imprecise conventional opinions. His private education in wisdom is, above all, an education in the convictions of the many. As the next section of the argument makes clear, although Hippias does stand in a certain tension with the city and its laws, this tension is greatly alleviated by his desire to be honored by the many, which compels him to speak, and indeed to think, according to the convictions of the ignorant many and the city more generally.
The first section of the dialogue suggested that Socrates, not Hippias, is an advance in wisdom and that Socratic philosophy, not sophistry, is the true threat to the city and its laws. The second section develops this suggestion by presenting an example of Socratic dialectic applied to Spartan law. Using precise speech, Socrates discovers that Spartan law, which is among the oldest and most revered of Greek laws, is in fact not law at all. Socrates’ analysis reveals that common opinion about the law is fundamentally mistaken, and Spartan law is thereby invalidated. Admittedly, Socrates attributes this argument to Hippias, presumably because the argument interprets the law as that which is beneficial for all human beings (as opposed to beneficial for the city as a whole), and it relies on the dubious premise that Hippias’ education benefits the Spartan youth. Correcting for these points, the sounder argument would be that law is what is beneficial for the city as a whole, and Hippias’ progressive and foreign education is harmful to the city, since it undermines respect for the ancestral. And so Spartan law, and its prohibition against Hippias’ education, is truly law. Nevertheless, insofar as this corrected argument defines law as that which is good for the city as a whole, and not necessarily for each and every individual, even this corrected argument undermines the authority of Spartan law. For how could anyone rationally obey laws that are, at least in some circumstances, harmful to oneself? Socratic dialectic seems to reveal that Spartan law is either not truly law, or it is truly law, but laws are not rationally binding, since they are often harmful.

The main difficulty with Socrates’ final argument arises from the fact that, according to common opinion, law is some combination of the two options sketched
above; that is to say, law is beneficial for the city as a whole, and it often harms individual people; and yet, even or especially when law is harmful, it is good for individual people to follow the law, which is to say that it is (in some sense) beneficial for them. As the next section will reveal, the law’s problematic coupling of the harmful and the beneficial, of the bad and the good, is a paradigm for the problem of beauty more generally. Given Socrates’ comments about the imprecise speech of the ignorant many, one cannot escape the question of whether such a coupling is possible. Might this coupling be an impossible illusion caused by imprecise speech and imprecise thought? Like law, might beauty as it is commonly understood disappear under the precise analysis of Socratic dialectic?
Section III (285b7 – 286c3): Beneficial Education

In Section II, Hippias’ boast of prudence was called into question by a discussion of the Spartan prohibition against his private education. The discussion suggested that within the family and the city more generally the ancestral is identified as good, and so Hippias’ progressive and foreign education is outlawed as harmful. His pursuit of the private good for himself and for the Spartan youth is in tension with his public pursuit of the common good. It would seem that what is beneficial for Hippias privately is harmful to the city publicly, and vice versa. Section III develops these points by providing specific examples of what Hippias is prohibited from teaching as well as what he is praised for in Sparta. What, then, is added to our understanding of the basic tension between public and private goods by the specific examples of what the Spartans blame and praise? And is there any way that this tension might be alleviated?

Having agreed that, according to Hippias’ argument, the Spartans are lawbreakers for prohibiting Hippias’ private education, Socrates asks what they do praise Hippias for and enjoy hearing. Socrates suggests a number of possible subjects: astronomy, geometry, calculations, and the power of letters, syllables, rhythms and harmony – roughly, the seven liberal arts. After Hippias emphatically denies each in turn, Socrates implores Hippias to tell him what the Spartans do enjoying hearing, professing his own inability to discover it. Hippias, somewhat contemptuously, declares that the Spartans enjoy hearing about “the generations of heroes and human beings
and the founding of cities, how in ancient times they were settled, and, in sum, the entire account of ancient things” (286d). Hippias complains that on account of the Spartans he has been forced to learn and practice all such things.

Hippias chooses to refer to the stories he recounts in Sparta as “ancient accounts” [ἀρχαιολογίας], a rare Greek word occurring nowhere else in Plato, as opposed “mythology,” which Socrates will use in his response. Dramatically, Hippias’ choice of words is determined by the fact that “ancient accounts” sounds more respectable than “mythology”; but Hippias’ description also draws attention to the central importance of ἀρχή (the beginning, origin or first cause) in these accounts, which suggests a connection between these accounts and the Spartans’ respect for the ancient as such. Generally, Hippias is praised in Sparta for giving accounts of origins, and in particular the origins of the political world. According to these accounts, the Spartans’ ancestors in ancient times were heroes, and as such they were superior to those living now, “dwelling nearer to the gods” (Philebus 16c). In this way, these ancient accounts both foster respect for the ancestral as well as help transfer such respect from the family onto the city, by depicting all citizens as having the same heroic ancestry. Moreover, if one considers particular examples of the kind of ancient founding myth here discussed (such as that of Minos or Lycurgus), a common feature emerges. According to these ancient accounts, the ancestor heroes who founded cities in ancient times did not merely lay down laws that they themselves opined to be best; rather, the laws were given to them by the gods. Minos, for example, was guided by Zeus, and Lycurgus by Apollo (Laws 624a-b). The laws promulgated by ancient heroes were vouchsafed by the
gods, and so they have the force of divine authority. The city and its laws stand on these divine foundations. Accordingly, the political world, with its various distinctions between cities and peoples, is not the result of human art or convention. It is not artificial; it is divine. These ancient accounts explain and justify the political order of the world, and the citizens of any particular city are united by this shared understanding of the world. Using the language of the Republic, the ancient accounts are “noble lies” (414c).² Hippias is praised for recounting these founding myths in Sparta because, by instilling in the Spartans beliefs that make them dutiful citizens, these ancient accounts benefit the city as a whole.

With this in mind, one can understand by contrast why Hippias’ private education in the liberal arts is prohibited. As already noted, the arts and sciences are progressive, and as a result they undermine respect for the ancient as such. Moreover, the arts and sciences are apolitical; a mathematician as such is neither Spartan nor Athenian. Insofar as one understands the arts and sciences, one is cosmopolitan. In these ways, the arts and sciences undermine the attachment to one’s own, politically understood. More primarily, the arts and sciences are themselves an attempt to account for origins or first causes. But instead of accounting for the origin of the city and the political world more generally, they are an attempt to account for the origin of the cosmos as a whole, the first principles of the natural world, in contradistinction to the political world. In sciences such as astronomy, which Socrates mentions first, these first principles are understood to be material causes acting according to natural necessity.³ Paternal law and natural science provide mutually exclusive accounts of the
The scientific accounts of origins undermine the ancient political accounts; in light of the progressive scientific accounts, the laws, as well as the gods who supposedly bestowed them, appear to be artificial, inventions of man which exist merely by convention. The distinctions between cities and peoples appear arbitrary, and the walls of the political world collapse. A man is no longer seen as primarily a part of this or that city, but rather a part of the cosmos as a whole. Most importantly, the authority of paternal law loses its force and is replaced by human wisdom, and so the ancestral ceases to be identified with the good.

In response to Hippias’ complaint that, due to the Spartans, he has been forced to learn all the ancient accounts, Socrates quips that Hippias is fortunate that the Spartans do not enjoy it if someone lists the Athenian archons beginning from Solon, for Hippias would have difficulty learning such a list thoroughly. Offended at Socrates’ suggestion that he would have difficulty, Hippias counters that if he hears fifty names just once, he can remember them all. Socrates grants that this is true, but claims that he was not thinking of Hippias’ mnemonic skill. Although Hippias surely hears this as a concession, it is more likely, given Socrates’ knowledge of Hippias’ various skills, that Socrates was not thinking of Hippias’ mnemonic skill because it was not relevant. The exchange then raises two related questions: why does Socrates choose to contrast the ancient accounts praised by the Spartans with a list of Athenian archons beginning from Solon? And, if not Hippias’ memory, what was Socrates referring to when he claimed that Hippias would have trouble learning such a list completely?

Socrates’ quip puns on the word ἀρχή, juxtaposing “ancient accounts”
of founding heroes with a catalogue of Athenian “archons” (ἄρχοντες) beginning from Solon. The contrast between the two confirms the political importance of the ancient accounts discussed earlier. Socrates’ suggested list of Athenian archons begins with the Athenian law-giver Solon, who served as eponymous archon in 594BC and famously repealed old laws, replacing them with a new, more democratic Athenian constitution. After reforming Athenian law, Solon voluntarily gave up power and went into exile for 10 years, leaving instructions that the Athenians were not to deviate from his laws in his absence. Soon thereafter, however, Athens descended into anarchy and eventually tyranny, the likes of which Solon had legislated to prevent. Eventually, in 507BC, Cleisthenes assumed control of Athens and once again reformed its constitution, but as Aristotle notes: “By these reforms the constitution became much more democratic than that of Solon. The laws of Solon had been obliterated by disuse during the period of tyranny, while Cleisthenes substituted new ones with the object of securing the goodwill of the masses” (Athenian Constitution 22). Solon, though wise, was not a hero nor confidant of the gods, and the people quickly abandoned his newly established laws. Unlike the ancient founding myths, the catalogue of Athenian archons does not foster a respect for the ancestral, nor does it instill the belief that the city and political world more generally have divine origins. In fact, it suggests the opposite. The list (though historically accurate) is not beneficial for the city, and so the Spartans would not praise Hippias for reciting it.

Socrates’ comment that Hippias would have trouble learning such a list thoroughly highlights another important difference between the catalogue of Athenian
archons and ancient founding myths. The political turmoil of Athens in the time after Solon’s legislation is reflected in the list of Athenian archons by the fact that the list contains gaps. In years of civil war, years in which the city of Athens effectively ceased to exist, there was no archon. There was anarchy. Socrates alludes to these gaps in the list, and so to the periods of anarchy, with his claim that Hippias would have difficulty learning the list thoroughly. The difficulty Hippias would face has nothing to do with the strength or weakness of his memory; rather, the difficulty would arise from the fact that the list is incomplete, which highlights the incompleteness of the city of Athens itself. Athens is not a “large and permanent body of being occurring by nature,” to use one of Hippias’ later phrases (301b). The founding myths Hippias recounts in Sparta instill the belief that the city, with its divine origins, is a kind of eternal whole, persisting from ancient times until the present. The catalogue of Athenian archons, on the other hand, gives the lie to this belief. Athens and its laws are in a state of constant flux; one constitution leads to anarchy and then to tyranny, which is itself replaced by a new constitution. Athens is a conventional whole at best, and it is hard to see how the “Athens” of Socrates’ time is in any real sense the same as the “Athens” of Solon’s time – assuming Athens can be said to exist at all. If one is looking for an eternal, lasting whole, one must look beyond the city walls, perhaps to the natural cosmos. A citizen as such is not part of an eternal, lasting whole.

Hippias’ misinterpretation of Socrates’ comment reveals that he is unaware of these issues and the true role he plays in Sparta. After quickly passing over Hippias’ misplaced boast about his memory, Socrates alludes to the beneficial role Hippias plays
for the city while simultaneously belittling him. Socrates claims that the Spartans likely enjoy Hippias because he knows many things, by which he means that the Spartans use Hippias to entertain them with myths, just as children use old women. Hippias began his conversation with Socrates by boasting of his role as an ambassador in Sparta regarding the most important matters (281a-b). “Ambassador” [πρεσβεύτην] derives from the Greek word for a (respected) old man [πρέσβυς]. Socrates now mocks this earlier boast by likening Hippias to an old woman [πρεσβύτης] who entertains children with stories. Despite this mockery, it is nevertheless true that old women who tell stories to children have a profound effect on their development and the character of the men they become. As Socrates emphasizes in the Republic, mothers shape the souls of the young with stories (377c). In this way, Socrates’ mockery alludes to Hippias’ role in the first and most important stage of educating the youth.

Socrates’ disparaging characterization of Hippias’ public service induces Hippias to boast about his role as an educator of the youth in Sparta. Hippias emphatically asserts that recently he managed to gain a great reputation in Sparta regarding beautiful pursuits, by relating the things the young ought to practice. As Hippias explains, he has a beautifully constructed speech which, as its preface, recounts how the young hero Neoptolemus once asked the aged Nestor what practices are beautiful and will make a young man highly reputed. After this preface, Nestor proposes very many things that are “lawful and altogether beautiful” [νόμιμα καὶ πάγκαλα] (286b). Hippias recently recited this speech as an exhibition in Sparta, and he will soon recite it again in Athens, in the school of Pheidostratus, at the request of Eudicus the son of Apemantus.
Despite the prohibition against a foreign education, Hippias has found a way to receive praise in Sparta and educate the youth. He does this by forgoing the cosmopolitan arts and sciences and instead providing the sort of education that pleases the Spartans and that their law deems beneficial. The preface of his speech, in which the young Neoptolemus asks the aged Nestor what is beautiful, exemplifies the respect for and deference to the ancestral at the heart of the city and family, as regards the most important questions of how to live. And although Hippias does not mention specific examples of the beautiful practices he recommends, he does say that they are “lawful” or “customary.” In these ways, Hippias’ education in Sparta comes to light as nothing more than an exhortation to respect the ancestral and live in accordance with custom and law. Far from smuggling his cosmopolitan wisdom into Sparta, Hippias has himself become a vehicle for the beliefs that are beneficial to the city.

This description of Hippias’ education in Sparta helps complete the picture of the modern wise man. As his boast once again highlights, Hippias is himself motivated above all by the desire to be honored by the many. His desire for honor arises from an unreflective self-love, which is also at the heart of the family and city, albeit in different forms. In order to be honored by the many, Hippias must do whatever the many believe to be beautiful. And in order to be honored for wisdom in particular, Hippias must display to the many whatever they believe to be wise. He must speak and think as the many do, which is to say imprecisely and according to what customary. Hippias’ education does not determine the beliefs of the Spartans so much as it reflects them; he is the embodiment of the beliefs and motivations of the city. Despite appearing
subversive, the modern wise man is the foremost citizen, an expert in the lawful and customary things. In his speech, Nestor advises Neoptolemus that, in order to earn a great reputation, he should pursue the beautiful and customary pursuits; the modern sophist follows this advice. For this reason, although there are ways in which his private education in the arts and sciences can undermine the common good of the city, the modern wise man is relatively benign. His desire for honor makes him a willing public servant and thereby alleviates some of the tension between the private good and common, for he holds honor from the many to be a private good acquired by “sacrificing” for the common good of the city. This is exemplified above all by Hippias’ activities in Sparta, where he is content to dismiss the arts and sciences and recite mythology, just so long as he is praised. In all these ways, the modern wise man’s desire for praise from the many makes him more of an embodiment of the beliefs of the city than any real threat to them.

With this in mind, it becomes clear why Hippias in particular is the perfect interlocutor for Socrates’ investigation of the question of beauty. Hippias’ description of the speech he gives in Sparta suggests that the many praise what they believe to be beautiful, and so Hippias’ own desire for praise has compelled him to become an expert in what the many believe to be beautiful. Hippias is a distillation and embodiment of what is commonly said about beauty. As the next section will make clear, Socratic philosophy proceeds by the critical analysis of what is commonly said, and so Hippias is an invaluable resource. Moreover, Hippias’ desire for praise appears to be a desire to confirm that he is beautiful, to see himself as beautiful in the eyes of others, a desire
which arises from his unreflective self-love. In his exceptional concern with appearing beautiful, he can help clarify not only what is said about beauty but also what one hopes to achieve in being beautiful.

Because Hippias is the embodiment of the beliefs and motivations of the many, one can expect that any confusions or limitations of the many will be reflected in confusions and limitations of Hippias and his argument. Indeed, we have already seen that Hippias gives voice to one confusion of the many, in particular; namely, the imprecision of the way the many speak about law and custom. As Socrates’ earlier argument revealed, the many do not clearly distinguish between law understood as beneficial for the city and law understood as beneficial for the individual. Before Socrates’ argument, however, Hippias himself was content to speak of law in the customary and confused sense. The fact that Hippias’ speech in Sparta recommends the lawful and customary things as completely beautiful suggests that beautiful laws should be kept in mind as a particularly important example of beautiful things more generally. Indeed, lawful things recur throughout the dialogue as a particularly problematic, and particularly revealing, case of the beautiful (e.g. 289b). Might the confusion and imprecision revealed in the conventional understanding of law, discussed in the opening of the dialogue, point to an imprecision and confusion about beautiful things more generally? Are Hippias and the many confused about who or what the beautiful benefits? And how might such a confusion arise?

Socrates’ opening discussion with Hippias drew attention to another limitation of the many; namely, fathers resist rational persuasion about what is truly good out of an
unreflective self-love, which makes itself felt in the respect for the ancestral. Hippias already revealed that he possesses this same basic impediment to persuasion when he implied that he accepts or rejects arguments based on whether or not they are “pro-Hippias.” Hippias’ unreflective self-love not only motivates his desire for praise from the many, but it hinders rational persuasion about what is true or good. Socrates’ inability to persuade Hippias and lead him toward philosophy will reflect a more fundamental inability to persuade the many and make the city as a whole philosophic. Furthermore, Hippias’ own claim to omniscience reflects the city’s claim to know the answers to the most important questions (such as “what is beautiful?”), which are codified in law.

In these ways, the interaction between Socrates and Hippias comes to light as an image for the relation of Socratic philosophy to the city more generally. As the dialogue unfolds, their interaction reveals that the most fundamental impediment to Socratic philosophy is this unreflective self-love that in various forms animates the individual, family and city. This unreflective self-love resists acknowledging one’s own flaws for fear of appearing ugly and bad. Above all, since wisdom appears beautiful and ignorance ugly, it resists acknowledging one’s own ignorance; it prevents “human wisdom” and self-knowledge. Socrates, on the other hand, will come to light as animated by a very different form of self-love, which by comparison necessarily appears self-flagellating.

Hippias concludes by inviting Socrates to come in two days time to a schoolhouse in Athens, where he will be exhibiting his speech on beautiful pursuits, as well as many other things worth hearing, since Eudicus the son of Apemantus asked him
to. Hippias adds that Socrates should bring others like himself who are able, when they hear, to judge what is said. Athens and Sparta are manifestly different in any number of respects. The identification of the ancestral with the good is far stronger in conservative Sparta than in progressive and unstable Athens, as evinced by the Spartan prohibition against new and foreign education. Socrates’ earlier analysis of Spartan law, which concluded that Spartan law was harmful and so not truly law at all, would surely be condemned as blasphemous in Sparta, since Spartan law is believed to have divine origins. This is not the case in Athens. But the fact that Hippias believes his speech, which encourages respect for the ancestral and obedience to the lawful and customary practices, will be praised in Athens as well as Sparta points to the underlying similarity between the two cities. And the fact that he is delivering the speech in a schoolhouse at the request of a young man who is identified by his patronymic reminds one that the primary locus of this deference to the ancestral is the family, in a father’s attachment to his own sons and demand to be a respected authority figure. This passion burns in a father as such, and it resists persuasion about what is good. Admittedly, Hippias’ desire to be praised has alleviated some of the resulting tensions between himself and both the family and the city more generally. Socrates’ relation to the family and the city remains a question.

In the next section, we will see more fully how and why Socratic philosophy is in radical tension with the common good of the city, although one can already anticipate the reasons by considering the fate of Spartan “law” when subjected to the precise analysis of Socratic dialectic. Hippias unwittingly alludes to this in his description of
Socrates as one who is able “to judge what is said” [κρῖναι τὰ λεγόμενα] (286c). Hippias begins the conversation by boasting that Elis chooses him as the most capable judge of the speeches given by each of the cities (281a), but Hippias proves able to judge only whether or not what is said is in accordance with what customarily believed. Socrates, on the other hand, judges what is customarily said in a more precise sense. “To judge” [κρῖναι] means, primarily, “to separate” or “distinguish.” At the end of the dialogue, Hippias will lash out at Socrates for his custom of doing just this; Socrates and his like are always “cutting up in the arguments each of the things that are” (301b). Socrates takes neither mythological tales nor materialistic causes as first principles or ἁρχαί with which to explain the world. Rather, he appeals to the hypothesis of the forms, and he uses the forms to analyze what is customarily said and believed, a practice which makes him fundamentally more heterodox than Hippias could possible conceive. Hippias’ violent reaction to Socratic dialectic will illustrate the danger Socrates faces in displaying his wisdom before all sorts of people, even in liberal Athens (a danger that Hippias is relatively blind to as regards himself). This danger should be kept in mind in the next section, when Socrates proceeds to pose his questions to Hippias in the guise of an unnamed Refuter. As this elaborate dramatic device illustrates, Socrates himself requires certain “pretexts” or “cloaks,” and Socratic philosophy is necessarily esoteric.
Section IV (286c3 – 287e3): Posing the Question, “What is the Beautiful?”

In Section III, the tension between the private good (the primary goal of wisdom) and the common good (the primary goal of law) was shown to be somewhat alleviated by the modern wise man’s desire for praise, a private good for the sake of which he is a willing public servant. The modern wise man is an expert in the opinions of the many and motivated by the same unreflective self-love that, in a different form, animates the family and the city. In these ways, the modern wise man is more of an embodiment of the city than any threat to it. With this in mind, the interaction between Socrates and Hippias comes to light as a paradigm for the relation of Socratic philosophy to the city more generally. In Section IV, Socrates poses the question of beauty to Hippias. What then do we learn about the relation of Socratic philosophy to the city by the way in which Socrates chooses to pose this question and the way in which Hippias reacts to it?

Socrates moves quickly past Hippias’ invitation to his upcoming exhibition with an ambiguous reply that leaves his fate in the hands of god. He asks instead about something of which Hippias just now reminded him, namely the beautiful. As Socrates explains, he was recently perplexed during an argument when someone asked him about beauty, after which Socrates vowed to learn the answer from a wise man, so he would not be refuted and ridiculed a second time. Accordingly, Socrates now asks Hippias to teach him what the beautiful itself is, since Hippias must know and the lesson is likely small and easy for him. Socrates’ flattery induces Hippias to confidently affirm
that he can teach this to Socrates, in response to which Socrates asks whether he could imitate the man who had perplexed him by raising objections, in order (Socrates claims) to get as much practice as possible and thereby learn more firmly. Having claimed that the lesson is small and easy, Hippias has no choice but to grant Socrates’ request to be allowed to raise objections while imitating that man (whom I will refer to hereafter as “the Refuter”). In the voice of the Refuter, Socrates proceeds to pose the primary question of the dialogue: “What is the beautiful?”

Socrates’ imitation of the Refuter is one of the most unusual aspects of the *Hippias Major*. At various points throughout the dialogue, Socrates fleshes out the character of the Refuter, adding details that, when properly understood, reveal much about Socrates himself. These details will be addressed as they arise. But Socrates’ introduction of the Refuter raises a few preliminary questions, the most basic of which concerns Socrates’ choice to refrain from speaking in his own voice, as he does in most other dialogues. This choice becomes even more puzzling when one considers that Socrates will later intimate that the Refuter is, in some sense, Socrates himself. Why then does Socrates not only appeal to the Refuter but go so far as to imitate him, emphasizing that he will “become that man” as much as he can (287b)? What is the need and significance of this elaborate rhetorical device?

The way in which Socrates characterizes his interaction with the Refuter suggests a preliminary answer to these questions. Socrates claims that, having been perplexed by the question about beauty, he vowed to learn the answer from a wise man so that he could go back to the Refuter and “do battle again over the argument” (286d). Similarly,
Socrates suggests that he and Hippias will attempt to “conquer” the Refuter (287a). Socrates’ language here is uncharacteristically warlike and spirited. As we have already seen, Hippias is extremely concerned with besting rival wise men (e.g. 282e). Socrates’ description of his interaction with the Refuter appeals to Hippias’ own concern with eristic disputation, in which honor and victory matter more than truth. The fact that Hippias views discussion in this way implies that, were Socrates to pose his questions and objections to Hippias in his own voice, Hippias would perceive them as an attack. Socrates would be the enemy, and Hippias likely would be far more recalcitrant, if not wholly unwilling to speak with Socrates. As it stands, Socrates’ cover story about the Refuter facilitates discussion with Hippias in two ways. First, it flatters Hippias by portraying Socrates as a supplicant in need of help from the heroic Hippias. Hippias thereby becomes Socrates’ powerful ally in a shared battle against a common enemy, the Refuter. Instead of offending Hippias’ vanity by questioning and criticizing him, Socrates appeals to Hippias’ vanity by asking for his help. Second, by imitating how the Refuter would reply to Socrates were Socrates to answer as Hippias instructs, Socrates acts as an intermediary between Hippias and the Refuter, such that Socrates is able to take the brunt of the Refuter’s abuse and criticism on himself, so as not to offend Hippias. And any resentment that the questions and criticisms may nevertheless generate in Hippias will be directed toward the imagined Refuter, instead of Socrates himself (e.g. 288d). In these ways, Socrates’ imitation of the Refuter is necessitated by Hippias’ unreflective self-love, which seeks praise and rejects any argument that is not “pro-Hippias” (285b). As Socrates explains in the Republic, in imitation (as opposed to
narration), the poet hides himself (393c-d). By imitating the Refuter, Socrates is able to hide himself and thereby safely converse with Hippias.

A detail in Socrates’ description of his own interaction with the Refuter suggests a particular reason that Hippias’ extraordinary vanity would be threatened by Socrates’ questions, were Socrates to interrogate Hippias directly. Socrates claims that, as he was blaming some things as ugly and praising others as beautiful, the Refuter hubristically asked him “from where” [πόθεν] he knows what sorts of things are beautiful and ugly, after which the Refuter asks whether Socrates is able to say what the beautiful is. The first of these two questions draws attention to the origin of Socrates’ supposed knowledge of ugly and beautiful things. Were this question applied to Hippias, the answer suggested by the opening discussion would be that his supposed knowledge of beautiful and ugly things comes from the many (or, from lawmakers and custom more generally); for, as we have seen, Hippias is a vehicle for the opinions of the many, as shown by his speech in Sparta recommending the lawful and customary things. This is further confirmed by the fact that, when Hippias attempts to teach Socrates about the beautiful in what follows, he explicitly appeals to testimony of “everyone” (e.g. 288e). But the opening discussion already indicated a problem with the testimony of the many. As Socrates and Hippias agreed, the many are ignorant, and they are not “acustomed” [εἰώθασιν] to use words precisely (284e), as Socrates’ analysis of Spartan law revealed. This is why Socrates emphasizes that, when Hippias teaches him what the beautiful itself is, Hippias should “try to speak as precisely as possible” (286e). Furthermore, Socrates indicates that the Refuter does not speak with this customary imprecision by
noting that it is the “custom” [ἔθος] of the Refuter to ask first and foremost about the beautiful, about what it is – which is to say that it is the custom of the Refuter to attempt to articulate precisely the thing itself (287b). Such a precise analysis of Hippias’ opinions would reveal that he does not know what he thinks he knows, but merely parrots the imprecise and confused opinions of the many. But Hippias’ vanity would never allow him to openly acknowledge his own ignorance in this way, and so Socrates must imitate the Refuter and take Hippias’ opinions, as well as their critique, on himself.

In this way, Hippias (and modern wise men more generally) are fundamentally opposed to Socratic philosophy. The contrast between Hippias and Socrates suggests that Socratic philosophy entails, perhaps above all, knowledge of one’s own ignorance and therewith self-knowledge. But Hippias, driven by unreflective self-love, refuses to acknowledge any of his own shortcomings or insufficiencies. He has learned thoroughly the customary opinions of the many so that he can be praised and thereby confirm for himself that he is wise. He seems to himself to know and dismisses any evidence to the contrary.

This observation helps explain why the *Hippias Major* is one of the most overtly comic of Platonic dialogues, featuring an unusually large amount of burlesque language. More than any other interlocutor, Hippias seems to himself to be beautiful and wise, as Socrates’ opening address highlights. His conversation with Socrates, however, reveals that he is neither. Couple this with the fact that Hippias seems relatively unable to harm Socrates and he is the perfect subject for comedy, as outlined in the *Philebus* (48c – 49c). In so far as Socratic philosophy reveals that one does not
know what one thinks one knows, it would appear to be essentially comedic. But it also, for this very reason, risks appearing ugly and shameful, especially when contrasted with Hippias’ god-like claim to omniscience. Hippias himself is repulsed by the apparent ugliness of Socratic philosophy, as evinced by his indictment of Socrates’ “scrapings and clippings of speeches” at the end of the dialogue (304a). Although the erotic desire for something beautiful may be a helpful guide toward philosophy, the un-erotic desire to confirm one’s own beauty is perhaps the greatest impediment.

In the voice of the Refuter, Socrates proceeds to ask Hippias about beauty. Socrates begins by noting that, if the Refuter heard Hippias’ speech about beautiful pursuits, he would ask first and foremost about the beautiful, as is his custom. Socrates then imitates the Refuter, asking Hippias whether it is by justice that the just are just. When Hippias agrees that it is by justice, the Refuter asks further whether this justice is something. Hippias agrees that it is. The Refuter then poses similar questions about wisdom and goodness, before asking whether all beautiful things are beautiful by the beautiful, and by it as something that exists. Hippias agrees to this as well. The Refuter then poses the Socratic question, “What is this thing, the beautiful?” In response, Hippias asks whether the one who asks this wants to learn what is beautiful (or, in other words, what particular thing is beautiful). Socrates clarifies that it seems to him that the Refuter does not want to know what is beautiful, but rather what is the beautiful. Hippias, however, claims that there is no difference between these two questions. Although he grants that Hippias knows “more beautifully,” Socrates gently presses the distinction, asking Hippias to observe that the Refuter is not asking what is beautiful, but
rather what is the beautiful. Hippias, apparently affronted by Socrates’ insistence on this distinction, asserts that he understands the question and will answer what is the beautiful, adding boldly that he will never be refuted.

In posing his question, the Refuter emphasizes two qualities of the beautiful. First, it is “by the beautiful” that all beautiful things are beautiful; that is to say, the beautiful is, in some sense, a cause of the beauty of beautiful things. Second, this cause of the beauty of beautiful things is itself something that, in some sense, is or exists. Both of these claims, however, are extraordinarily opaque, in that they presuppose some unstated understanding of what it means to be and to be a cause. Additionally, the way in which the Refuter formulates his question seems designed to admit of a certain misunderstanding of the causation and existence of the beautiful; that is to say, by emphasizing that the beautiful is something that exists, the Refuter welcomes a sort of reification of the beautiful, which at the very least facilitates Hippias’ citing particular examples of beautiful things as his answer. In this way, the Refuter’s formulation of his question blurs the distinction between a beautiful thing and the beautiful that he seeks, a distinction that Socrates himself highlights. Although Socrates implies that Hippias misunderstands the question from the very beginning, Socrates does not correct this misunderstanding explicitly; instead, he allows Hippias to make it repeatedly. Based on these observations, it appears that, in this conversation with Hippias, Socrates is interested in examining a certain misunderstanding of this question (which is to say, a certain misunderstanding of “the forms”), a misunderstanding that Hippias and his like are, for some reason, particularly inclined to make.
Socrates is at pains to indicate, although not correct, one primary way in which Hippias misunderstands the question; namely, Hippias does not see any difference between the question “What is beautiful?” and the question “What is the beautiful?” In other words, he does not see any difference between particular beautiful things and the form of the beautiful.\textsuperscript{11} It is important to remember, however, that Hippias is not a stupid man (in the conventional sense). In fact, by any number of measures, he is extraordinarily intelligent. The fact that he is so intelligent, and nevertheless so foolish, is what makes him a particularly interesting, and particularly comedic, character. This being the case, Hippias’ failure to grasp the distinction that Socrates notes cannot be explained away by merely asserting that Hippias is dense or obtuse. But, if not a lack of intelligence, what is the cause of Hippias’ repeated failure to grasp the basic difference between the many beautiful things and the form of the beautiful itself?

Given that Hippias will cite the testimony of “everyone” to justify his answers, one might suspect that his failure to distinguish between the many beautiful things and the beautiful itself is a reflection of an inability of the many to make such a distinction. This suspicion is confirmed by a passage in the \textit{Republic}, where Socrates and Adeimantus agree that it is impossible for the many to be philosophic, because the many cannot “accept or believe that the beautiful itself, rather than the many beautiful things, or that anything itself, is, rather than the many particular things” (493e – 494a).\textsuperscript{12} But this observation just pushes the question back one step: what is the source of the resistance in the many to accepting and believing in the forms as distinct from the many particular things? The earlier argument highlighted the respect for the ancestral (that is,
the deference to what is older and attachment to what is one’s own) as a potential impediment to persuasion. Might there be a way in which the respect for the ancestral resists persuasion about the existence of forms as distinct from the many particular things?

With this question in mind, the deeper significance of the Refuter’s first question to Socrates comes to light. As noted earlier, having heard Socrates praise some things as beautiful and blame others as ugly, the Refuter asked “from where” Socrates knows what sorts of things are beautiful and ugly (286c). By asking about the origin of Socrates’ supposed knowledge, the Refuter alludes to the fact that most people believe they know what is beautiful and ugly because they have heard what is beautiful and ugly from lawmakers (or, from custom and the city more generally). Hippias himself contributes to this belief by recounting a speech in which he, in the voice of the elder Nestor, recommends “many things lawful and altogether beautiful.” Generally speaking, most people believe they know what things are beautiful and ugly because they accept the conventional opinions about these things, which are codified in the laws of their particular society. Their respect for the ancestral leads the many to cherish these lawful opinions. Once again, a passage from the Republic confirms this view. As Socrates notes, “we have from childhood convictions about what’s just and beautiful by which we are brought up as by parents, obeying them as rulers and honoring them” (538c). Just as the many cherish their family, so too they cherish their particular beliefs about what is just and beautiful. The fact that both Hippias and the many resist acknowledging the form of the beautiful as something distinct from the many beautiful
things suggests that something about the form of the beautiful threatens the cherished convictions about the lawfully accepted beautiful things. But how might this be?

Socrates’ opening discussion with Hippias suggests one way in particular that the forms threaten lawful beliefs. The most salient difference between the speech and thought of the many and the answer sought by the Refuter (that is, an articulation of the form) is precision. As the discussion of Spartan law revealed, the many are not accustomed to using words precisely. In asking about the thing itself, however, Socrates and the Refuter demand a precise articulation. The insistence on articulating the form of a thing is, above all, a demand for a kind of precision in speech and thought. But the numerous lawful beliefs held by the many about what particular things are beautiful are necessarily imprecise, for a few different reasons. First and most generally, laws are themselves a kind of “second sailing,” as the Eleatic Stranger explains in the Statesman (300c). Ideally a king with intelligence would rule without laws, sitting beside each individual and prescribing for each whatever is suitable in the particular situation. This, however, is not possible for human beings, and so lawmakers craft laws. But law, which aims at general rules, is not able to comprehend what is best for everyone with precision, since people are dissimilar and circumstances are constantly changing. When the lawmaker does legislate by way of paternal tradition, he necessarily prescribes what is for the many and for the most part. So, for instance, it is just to give back what one has taken from another, for the most part; there are, however, notable exceptions (Republic 331c). The acknowledgement that there is a form of the beautiful that is distinct from the many lawfully accepted beautiful things entails a tacit
acknowledgment the many lawfully accepted beautiful things are not simply beautiful, which means that there are circumstances in which they may be ugly. Socrates’ particular strategy of refutation in the *Hippias Major* highlights this shortcoming of particular lawful beliefs; for each customarily accepted beautiful thing that Hippias cites, Socrates shows that there is some way in which the beautiful thing is also ugly, making it seem as though “what the law says is no more beautiful than ugly” (*Republic* 537e – 539a). These considerations suggest that both Hippias and the many cherish their lawful opinions and so resist acknowledging that there is some form of the beautiful distinct from the lawfully accepted beautiful things, for the very acknowledgement of the form throws into relief the imprecision and consequent incorrectness of their lawful opinions.

More basically, the mere acknowledgement of the form of the beautiful as distinct from the many particular things believed to be beautiful entails an acknowledgment of a standard of truth higher than simple respect for the ancestral, a standard by which one can judge the many particular things conventionally held to be beautiful and ugly and thereby judge the claims of the lawmaker. The Refuter’s later suggestion, that the beautiful is “the fitting and the nature of the fitting itself” points to the possibility that this standard is supplied by nature, as opposed to mere convention. Respect for the ancestral, which holds the particular conventional beliefs of the city in honor, resists acknowledging the existence of this separate standard of nature, which necessarily threatens these cherished beliefs. Although Socrates’ attempt to understand nature by means of the forms, his own “second sailing,” appears to be a
method new and different from that of earlier wise men, Socratic dialectic nevertheless poses a similar threat to respect for the ancestral laws and customs (and so to the foundations of the city) as the progressive natural science of men such as Anaxagoras was shown to do. Additionally, because the law prescribes many particular beautiful things but does not articulate the form of the beautiful, admitting that there is some form of the beautiful distinct from the many beautiful things would necessitate that Hippias and the many at the very least acknowledge that they do not know what the beautiful is, and so that there is some shortcoming in their conventional understanding. Their unreflective self-love and attachment to convention resists acknowledging the forms for this reason as well.

Socrates’ earlier discussion of Spartan law exemplifies the way in which accepting the forms threatens the conventional beliefs that are cherished by Hippias and the many. As Hippias makes clear, Sparta is conventionally said to have good laws. But in light of the more precise articulation of law as necessarily beneficial for a city, Spartan law, which is in many ways harmful, came to light as in truth unlawful. The conventional and imprecise belief in the lawfulness of Sparta is thus undermined and replaced with completely heterodox belief that the Spartans are lawbreakers in the most important matters.

This particular example of the power of Socratic dialectic to undermine conventional beliefs highlights another important way in which certain lawful opinions are imprecise. Socrates’ earlier discussion of law suggests that the many do not clearly distinguish between what is good for the city, considered as a whole, and what is good
for the individual. Hippias exemplifies this same confusion in his willing public service; he seems to believe that he is in some nebulous sense good or benefitted because he sacrifices his time and energy in order to benefit the city, and thereby earn praise. This particular imprecision, however, is beneficial for the city (as it disposes private citizens to sacrifice on its behalf), and it appears more intentional than the necessary imprecision arising from the generality of law. As will be discussed in Section VI, the political myths that Hippias recounts in Sparta are designed to foster this confusion, instilling the belief that the same thing is advantageous to the individual and the city, since the individual is fundamentally a part of the city. Beautiful laws recur throughout the *Hippias Major* as a particularly problematic example of the beautiful. These considerations suggest that the precise articulation of the beautiful in the case of laws threatens devotion to the laws by revealing that such devotion is based on a particular imprecision and confusion; namely, the beauty of laws is actually based on a confusion of the good of the individual with the greater good of the city, and that the private good and the common cannot be unified in the way that one wants. This possibility, however, raises deeper questions: are beautiful laws particularly problematic because they contain this unique confusion and imprecision? Or rather, might beautiful laws be particularly problematic because they make manifest a confusion and imprecision inherent in the pursuit of all beautiful things? Might a consideration of beautiful laws and practices reveal what is meant by the proverb that beautiful things are difficult?

Although the preliminary discussion between Socrates and Hippias raises these important questions, they can only be properly addressed after a careful consideration
of the dialogue as whole. But the very fact that these questions are raised points back to the question of the relation of Socratic philosophy to the city, and so we return to the general questions with which we began this section. Seeing that the interaction between Socrates and Hippias appears to be a paradigm for the relation of Socratic philosophy to the city more generally, what do we learn about that relation from the opening interaction between Hippias and Socrates?

To begin, Hippias confidently claims that he knows the beautiful practices that a young man ought to pursue and, moreover, that the answer to the question “What is the beautiful?” is small and worth nothing (286d). Hippias’ confident claim to knowledge reflects the city’s own claim to know the answers to the most important questions of how to live, answers which are codified in its laws and customs. Both Hippias and the city make a claim to a certain omniscience regarding the most important matters. On account of his unreflective self-love, Hippias refuses to acknowledge any of his own limitations, especially as regards his knowledge, and so resists any genuine inquiry. His resistance to inquiry reflects a resistance inherent in the city itself, which takes the form of a dogged respect for the ancestral (that is, the deference to what is older and love of what is one’s own), on which the laws and custom stand. Although Hippias is in many respects cosmopolitan, a knower of the liberal arts, in the most important respects he shares the imprecise, conventional speech and thought of the many, especially as regards questions of how to live. Socrates will attempt to understand the form of the beautiful by means of the precise analysis of his imprecise speeches. It appears from this that Socratic philosophy
attempts to understand what is by nature through the precise analysis of the confused and imprecise conventional opinions of the city, which the many take to be manifestly true. Socratic dialectic judges the customary and lawful speeches (Cratylus 390c). In this way, Socratic philosophy is radically antinomian and heterodox, far more so than the cosmology of earlier wise men like Anaxagoras, whose method of investigating nature only incidentally undermines the political world. The fact that Hippias appears to believe the materialistic accounts of the cosmos as well as the morality that follows from the political accounts of world suggests that the city too can exist, at least for a time, with this contradiction or incoherence within it. That is to say, progressive science and law are in tension, but the tension is somewhat indirect and therefore possible to overlook. The tension between Socratic philosophy and law, however, is far more direct and manifest, since Socratic dialectic proceeds by the means of the analysis of the lawful opinions of the many.

Socrates will reveal that Hippias does not know what he thinks he knows; his supposed wisdom is merely false opinion, and so he lacks self-knowledge. Hippias is delusional. Insofar as Hippias appears unable to take revenge on Socrates were Socrates to reveal his delusion and laugh at him openly, Hippias is ridiculous (Philebus 49b-c). Although the city (which is to say, the many) is likewise confused and delusional, the many are not powerless to take revenge, as Socrates’ trial and execution highlights. For this reason, the city is not ridiculous but rather dangerous and hateful to Socratic philosophy – albeit a necessary condition. Finally, just as Hippias resists the distinction between the many particular beautiful things and the form of the beautiful,
so too does the city more generally. The authority of the ancestral, with its laws and conventions, is the only acknowledged standard. And the fact that Socrates cannot pose the question of beauty to Hippias in his own voice, but needs to hide behind the veil of the Refuter, illustrates the fact that Socratic philosophy cannot openly examine the opinions of the city. Not only would doing so be unproductive, but it would be imprudent and dangerous, as Hippias’ veiled threats at the end of the dialogue suggest. Despite what Hippias may think, it is not wise to display one’s wisdom – especially Socrates’ “human wisdom” – before all sorts of people, even in liberal Athens. Socratic philosophy needs disguises; it needs a certain rhetoric. Just as Socrates hides from Hippias beneath his imitation of the Refuter, so too Plato hides from the many beneath his imitation of Socrates.
Section V (287e3 – 289c8): Hippias’ First Answer, a Beautiful Virgin

The preliminary discussion concluded with Hippias’ proclamation that he will answer the question “What is the beautiful?” and that he will never be refuted. Hippias then boldly asserts that, if it is necessary to tell the truth, a beautiful virgin is a beautiful thing [παρθένος καλὴ καλὸν]. The most immediate question facing the reader is why Hippias would choose a beautiful virgin as his first paradigm of beauty. The exchange that follows highlights Hippias’ primary motivation for this choice. Swearing by his customary oath, Socrates claims that Hippias has answered beautifully and “reputably” [εὐδόξως]. But Socrates wonders whether, if he gives this answer, he will answer the question and do so correctly, and further whether he will never be refuted. Hippias asks rhetorically how he could be refuted about a thing that seems true to everyone. When Socrates presses the question further, Hippias becomes incredulous, asking whether the Refuter would still attempt to refute Socrates on the grounds that what he says is not beautiful and, if he does make such an attempt, whether he wouldn’t be ridiculous. Socrates claims that he knows well that the Refuter will attempt to refute him, but the attempt itself will reveal whether he is ridiculous.

As this exchange highlights, Hippias chooses a beautiful virgin as his first answer because it is, in his mind, completely uncontroversial. He believes that everyone would agree that a beautiful virgin is a beautiful thing. No one can refute him – because no one disagrees. Hippias evinces a similar confidence in all of his answers.1 Here again we...
see that Hippias’ “wisdom” is above all knowledge of the convictions of the many. Furthermore, his comments allude to what he believes to be the value of such wisdom. As he claims, everyone who hears what he says will “testify” [μαρτυρήσουσιν] that he speaks correctly, and thus he cannot be refuted (288a). Hippias here uses the language of the courtroom, foreshadowing his final comments to Socrates, to the effect that it is worth much to be able to compose a speech well and beautifully in a law court and, persuading the people, to earn the largest prize, the salvation of oneself, one’s money, and one’s friends (304b). Hippias is concerned above all with preserving himself and his own things (as these are conventionally understood). In his mind, “refutation” is equivalent to punishment, the sort that the many have the power to inflict when angered. Hippias has learned what the many believe, so that he can speak in ways that please them and win praise, appearing beautiful and thereby preserving himself and his things. Any truth that the many would testify against is as good as false for his purposes.

For the many, the paradigm of beauty is a beautiful virgin. The reference to a beautiful young woman clearly alludes to the erotic experience of beauty. Although it is important to begin by noting this allusion to erotic love, it is equally important to note how muted the topic of erotic love is in the *Hippias Major*. As noted in the Introduction, the term “ἔρως” does not occur even once in the *Hippias Major*, a significant omission in a dialogue devoted to examining beauty; in this respect, the *Hippias Major* stands in stark contrast to the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, closely related dialogues in which beauty is also a prominent theme. The importance of this omission will be clarified in
the course of examining Hippias’ three answers, but for now it suffices to observe that Hippias himself appears to be an extremely un-erotic man. Hippias’ extraordinary and unreflective self-love has engendered the conviction that he is perfect, a fact to which Socrates alludes by calling referring to Hippias as “perfect man” in their opening exchange (281b). This conviction is why Hippias cannot admit his own ignorance nor, more generally, long for something outside of himself, for such longing requires acknowledging that one is in some respect lacking (Symposium 204a). When Hippias cites a beautiful virgin, he is not speaking from his own erotic experience, as one might otherwise assume. There is no knowing reference to the charms of love or the power of sexual attraction. Rather, Hippias coldly cites a beautiful virgin, confident that what he says is believed by all and, as such, irrefutable. It is also significant that Hippias does not simply cite a beautiful young woman, but a beautiful “virgin.” The first paradigm of beauty connotes erotic innocence, erotic restraint or perhaps even freedom from erotic desire. These connotations will become central to the argument that follows, but at the outset the example of a beautiful virgin draws attention to erotic love, with a view to its absence from the Hippias Major.

Socrates’ initial response to Hippias’ first answer highlights the way in which Hippias has misunderstood the question. Socrates begins by wondering aloud whether he would answer the question that was asked, were he to give the answer suggested by Hippias. In the voice of the Refuter, he then clarifies the question. All the things Socrates says are beautiful would be beautiful, if the beautiful itself is what? Socrates then asks Hippias whether he should answer that, if a beautiful virgin is a beautiful
thing, it is on account of this that these things would be beautiful. As Socrates’ reformulation emphasizes, the Refuter is asking about the beautiful as the cause of the beauty of beautiful things. Hippias has not articulated the beautiful in this sense, but rather cited a paradigm of beauty. He has not answered the question “What is the beautiful?” but rather the question “What is beautiful?”, which is not surprising, given that he moments earlier denied any difference between these two questions (287d).

This exchange confirms the earlier explanation of the cause of Hippias’ repeated mistake. It is not an intellectual failing, per se. Hippias is not making a theoretical or metaphysical error, except incidentally. The Refuter alludes to the real cause of Hippias’ error in his reformulation of the question. He asks Socrates, “All these things that you say are beautiful, these would be beautiful, if the beautiful is what?” As this reformulation highlights, asking for the cause of the beauty of beautiful things necessarily calls into question whether the things we say and believe to be beautiful, our conventional opinions, are so in truth. What would make the things that we claim to be beautiful beautiful in truth? Hippias, for his part, is incredulous at the Refuter’s insistence on restating the question because he cannot believe that anyone would doubt the truth of what he has said; he cannot imagine that anyone would try to claim that what he has said is not beautiful. Hippias is convinced that he knows what things are beautiful; they are the things that are conventionally and lawfully believed by the many to be beautiful. For Hippias, law is the discovery of what is. Given this, the question of what causes the beautiful things to be beautiful is, in a certain respect, irrelevant. A primary motivation for the search for the cause of beauty is to verify that
what one believes to be beautiful is so in truth. This is unnecessary if one already knows (or thinks one knows) what particular things are beautiful. Moreover, to reiterate, the search for the cause is itself a threat to conventionally held beliefs, for it presumes a standard of truth beyond what the law says, beyond simple respect for the ancestral. This is made most clear in cases, as in Sparta, where the laws are said to have divine origins, for in such cases the search for the cause is tantamount to blasphemy, insofar as it calls into question the supposed declarations of god. Hippias, like the many, is so attached to the conventional opinions about beauty that he refuses to acknowledge some further cause for the lawfully accepted things, by which what is conventionally said might be called into question. Hippias is not too stupid to understand Socrates’ question; he is too conventionally moral to seriously entertain it. His whole hearted attachment to the lawful opinions prevents any philosophic inquiry from beginning in earnest. In this way, despite his intellectual acumen, Hippias embodies the fundamental resistance to philosophy at the heart of the city. This is why Socrates cannot directly correct his mistake, as he could with less conventionally moral interlocutors (such as Meno, for example). To use an image from the Republic, Hippias has memorized the shadows on the cave wall, but he is unwilling and unable to turn to see their cause, since doing so requires some recognition that the shadows are merely shadows.

Faced with Hippias’ fundamental resistance to the question, Socrates proceeds to explain what the Refuter would say, were Socrates to give Hippias’ answer. The Refuter begins by asking Socrates whether a beautiful female horse is a beautiful thing, specifically the one which even the god praised in an oracle, asking further how they
could dare to deny that a beautiful thing is beautiful. Although the oracle to which the Refuter alludes is unknown, Hippias’ response suggests its most relevant aspects. First and foremost, the oracle suggests that beautiful things are praised even, or especially, by the gods. Hippias agrees that what Socrates says is true, since the god spoke this oracle correctly, for entirely beautiful horses are born among his people. In his response, Hippias alludes to the fact that his home city of Elis was renowned for the breeding and raising of horses. Based on this response, the oracle cited by the Refuter appears to involve a god praising the beautiful horses born and bred in Elis. Rhetorically, Socrates (in the guise of the Refuter) is appealing to Hippias’ political love of his own to garner his assent. The importance of the allusion to horse breeding is emphasized by the specific language used by the Refuter. The Refuter highlights the fact that the horse is female not only by referring to it in the feminine case, but by adding the term θηλεία, which denotes the female of a species. The term is derived from the Greek verb θάω, meaning “to suckle.” In these ways, the Refuter’s first example brings to mind not only beautiful horses, but beautiful horses giving birth to and nourishing beautiful horses, suggesting that the topics of procreation and nourishment (or, generation more broadly) have some as of yet unclear importance to the argument. This is further suggested by the contrast between this example and Hippias’ first example, a beautiful virgin, which also called to mind the topic of procreation, by its emphatic absence.

The Refuter asks next about a beautiful lyre, whether it too is not a beautiful thing. The lyre is a musical instrument prized by the god Apollo, and so commonly
associated with harmony and order; it is often used as a metaphor for lyric poetry more generally. For these reasons, it is not surprising that Hippias quickly affirms that a beautiful lyre is a beautiful thing. While a beautiful mare gives birth to something beautiful (that is, a beautiful mare), so too does a beautiful lyre produce something beautiful, beautiful music. This similarity distinguishes the mare and the lyre from the Refuter’s final example, which Hippias finds extraordinarily objectionable, a beautiful pot.

Socrates makes sure to distance himself from the next question, anticipating that Hippias will be offended. Socrates claims that he knows well, judging from the Refuter’s way, what “that one” will ask next; he will ask about a beautiful pot, whether it is not a beautiful thing. The object in question is a χύτρα, a globular pot made of rough clay or mud, undecorated, and placed directly on fire or coals to heat water or cook soup; it was a very common household utensil. Such pots appear often in the bawdy comedies of Aristophanes. Appalled by the reference to a pot, Hippias asks who this human being is, exclaiming “how uneducated someone is who in this way dares to use paltry words in an august (or holy) affair” [ὡς ἀπαίδευτός τις ὃς οὕτως φαῦλα ἀνόματα ὄνμαζεν τολμᾷ ἐν σεμνῷ πράγματι] (288d). Hippias’ exclamation highlights his concern with the proper use of words. But, for Hippias, whether words are proper is not determined by their truth or falsity, their precision or imprecision, but rather by their perceived refinement or cheapness, their beauty or baseness. An “educated” man is a cultured man, a man who has a sense of propriety and knows what words and speeches are generally considered appropriate to such an august affair. Here again we see
Hippias’ fundamental attachment to lawful and conventional opinions, in particular regarding the conventional use of words. Pots may be appropriate to speak of in a base comedy, but not in a serious and beautiful discussion such as the one in which he and Socrates are engaged. Additionally, Hippias’ exclamation is another early indication of some connection between the beautiful and the divine, insofar as Hippias seems to believe the conversation about beauty is itself a holy affair, deserving something akin to religious reverence; Hippias is morally indignant that someone would desecrate their discussion by mentioning something as base and mundane as a pot. Some things are simply not discussed in polite society. Indeed, Hippias’ demand to know who the Refuter is suggests that he desires to blame, if not punish, the Refuter for his shameful impropriety. Just as beautiful people and things are to be celebrated and praised, shameful people and things are to be ridiculed and blamed.

In response to Hippias’ accusation, Socrates admits that the Refuter is uncultured, adding that he is “not refined but trashy, thinking of nothing other than the truth” (288d). With this admission, Socrates clearly indicates that such concern with propriety and refinement as displayed by Hippias is often, if not always, in tension with thinking about the truth. Such a concern with being or appearing beautiful hinders philosophic inquiry. Thinking about the truth often means thinking, and speaking, about things that are commonly believed to be shameful and vulgar, and so appearing ugly to others. Socrates and the Refuter are free from the concern with propriety and the conventional use of words that binds Hippias.⁶
After alluding to the limitation set on Hippias by his attachment to conventional opinions, Socrates declares that the Refuter must nevertheless be answered and that Socrates himself will precede Hippias in answering. Socrates then suggests that if the Refuter were asking about a pot with a certain form, which he describes in detail, it would be necessary to agree that the pot is also a beautiful thing. Given Socrates’ description of the pot, Hippias is forced to concede that a beautiful pot is a beautiful thing. He does, however, add the reservation that, although even this utensil is a beautiful thing when beautifully made, as a whole it is not worthy of being judged as beautiful compared to a mare, a virgin, and all other beautiful things. This exchange raises two related questions: what is it about Socrates’ description that forces Hippias to acknowledge that the pot is a beautiful thing? And what is added to our understanding of beauty by Hippias’ added reservation?

Socrates claims that it would be necessary to agree that a beautiful pot is a beautiful thing if the pot in question “had been molded by a good potter, smooth and round and beautifully fired, like some of those beautiful pots with two handles, those which hold six choes, very beautiful ones” (288d). A passage from Plato’s _Timaeus_ suggests what may be significant about the pot being “smooth” [λείος]. Timaeus claims that “roughness results from the combination of hardness with non-uniformity, while smoothness is the result of uniformity’s contribution to density” (63e8). “Smooth” connotes a kind of uniformity [ὁμαλότης]; that is, unity and sameness. The importance of these connotations is further suggested by the description of the pot as “round” [στρογγύλος]. This is the same word used by Aristophanes in Plato’s _Symposium_ to
describe the original and complete human being. As he recounts, “the whole form of the human being was round [στρογγύλος], with back and sides in a circle…” (190e).

Socrates’ description again highlights the unity, as well as the completeness, of the pot. Socrates next describes the pot as “beautifully fired.” One might think that this refers to the artwork that often adorned Greek pottery, but a χύτρα was generally unadorned. Instead, the phrase suggests that the baking process has made the pot hard and solid, without evident cracks (especially with respect to larger pots, in which case pieces of the pot were molded separately and baked together). Once again, the phrase emphasizes that the pot is a unified, complete, and solid whole. Socrates then further specifies the type of pot to which he is referring, saying “…like some of those beautiful pots with two handles, those which hold six choes.” A “choe” is a unit of measure equal to approximately 5.76 pints, and so six choes is approximately 4.3 gallons – a relatively large pot. As Aristotle notes, beautiful things must be large. More importantly, though, the particular measure that Socrates suggests, “six choes,” was a common “round” measure; Aristophanes, for instance, uses the phrase as a euphemism to mock the portly Pasias. So, not only is the pot large, but once again there is an emphasis on its roundness, and so on its unity and completeness. The fact that the pot is “two-handed” means that it is symmetrical, again possessing a certain sort of unity and completeness.

All in all, Socrates’ description of the pot highlights that it is a large, unified, complete whole. It is a large and continuous body of being, to once again use Hippias’ phrase (301b). Based on the fact that this description forces Hippias to acknowledge
that such a pot is a beautiful thing, unity and wholeness appear to be particularly salient aspects of beauty. Hippias’ continued reservation about the beauty of the pot confirms the importance of the connection between wholeness and beauty, while at the same time adding a further consideration. Hippias grants that “even this utensil is a beautiful thing when it is beautifully made,” but he adds that “as a whole” [τὸ ὅλον] it is not worthy to judge as beautiful compared to a mare, a virgin and all other beautiful things. Hippias’ reservation about the pot draws attention to the fact that a pot is a “utensil” or “instrument” [τὸ ὁς], the implication being that, as a class, utensils are in some sense less beautiful, and so less unified and whole, than natural beings, such as mares and virgins. This suggests a hierarchy among kinds or classes, such that certain kinds or classes are essentially more or less unified and whole than others. The most unified and whole pot is still incomplete insofar as it is merely a utensil, an instrument or means, to be used by someone for some end of his own. It is not an end in itself, unlike natural beings (such as mares and virgins) to which Hippias compares the pot and for which it is an instrument. With these considerations about unity and completeness in mind, a certain order emerges among the previous examples of beautiful things (a pot, a lyre, a mare, and a virgin).

Pots are merely instruments, and as such they are not complete in themselves. They are a means for human beings to satisfy the basic bodily need to eat, and although they do provide the pleasure of food, this is a pleasure that Hippias and Socrates will later assert is not beautiful, unlike the pleasures of sights and sounds (298d – 299c). Like pots, lyres are also instruments. Unlike pots, however, lyres are instruments whose
product, music, is beautiful, providing the pleasure of sound. Insofar as people are more apt to play music for the sheer joy of playing, as an end in itself, than cook soup for the sheer joy of cooking soup, as a class lyres appear to be more whole and complete in themselves than the class of pots. Mares are in a certain sense instruments, like lyres and pots, insofar as mares are used by humans as instruments in a variety of ways, for instance as vehicles in war. Yet, as natural beings, mares also have their own end by nature. As a human being, the beautiful virgin does not appear to be a means at all. She is an end in herself, that for the sake of which the pot, lyre and mare are instruments or means. As that for the sake of which these other things exist, the class of humans appears to be the most complete and whole class or kind (at least, at this point in the argument). In this way, the virgin, mare, lyre and pot form a hierarchy, from least to most instrumental kind of being, which is to say from most to least complete and whole kind of being. For this reason, pots are not worth judging as beautiful compared to virgins and mares.

Although the hierarchy sketched out above sheds light on the completeness of different kinds or classes, it fails to account for a very important detail of Hippias’ answer. Hippias did not simply cite, as he might have, a beautiful person, or even a beautiful girl. He cited a beautiful virgin. Is there some connection between virginity and the apparent emphasis on the completeness and unity of beautiful things? In order to answer this question, one must make a more careful consideration of the particular functions of each of the beautiful things mentioned.
As noted, pots are instruments for satisfying the basic bodily need to eat. As a means to satisfying this physical need, pots are in a certain sense reminders of human neediness and incompleteness, necessitated by human mortality. Pots are a means to sustaining life and postponing death. Lyres, on the other hand, have the power to make humans forget about such physical needs, to forget about our mortality. As Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus*, when music first came to be, “certain human beings were so astounded by the pleasure that, in singing, they lost all care for food and drink, and brought their own lives to an end without noticing it” (259b-c). Whereas the lyre can make one forget about mortality, the reference to the mare alludes to the way in which mortal beings can, in some sense, overcome their mortality. As noted earlier, when referencing the mare, the Refuter does not simply use the feminine case of horse but rather θήλεια, a biological term derived from the Greek verb θάω, meaning “to suckle” and denoting the female of a species. Moreover, the oracular praise of the mare appeared to be a reference to the practice of horse breeding in Elis. The choice of words and reference highlight the biological function of mares, suggesting that their natural end includes (perhaps primarily) generation, giving birth to and nourishing young horses. As Diotima claims in the *Symposium*, “...in the eros of the beasts, in terms of the same argument as that concerning men, the mortal nature seeks as far as possible to be forever and immortal. Mortal nature is capable of immortality only in this way, the way of generation, because it is always leaving behind another that is young to replace the old” (207d).11 Although a mare can be conventionally used as an instrument, it appears to have a natural activity, one aspect of which is the preservation
of the species through generation. The reference to reproduction alludes to one possible way mortal nature can overcome its fundamental incompleteness and partake in the immortal.

With these considerations in mind, the examples given appear to be ordered not simply according to completeness and incompleteness, but with reference to a particular kind of incompleteness, human mortality. Bodily needs such as eating are an ever present reminder of our mortality. The example of the pot alludes to the way in which we satisfy these needs, postponing our mortality, albeit temporarily. The example of the lyre alludes to the way in which we can forget about these bodily needs and thereby forget about our mortality, once again albeit temporarily. The example of the breeding mare alludes to a natural way all mortal beings attempt to transcend their mortality, by participating in the immortality of the species through generation. “By this device... the mortal shares in immortality, both in body and all the rest; but the immortal has a different way” (Symposium 208b). Hippias’ original answer, a beautiful virgin, points to this “different way.” The beautiful virgin is a young woman, and as such she does not yet exhibit the degeneration of old age. Her mortality is not yet evident. More importantly, as a virgin, she appears to have transcended erotic desire and the fundamental limitation such desire betrays. In contrast to the breeding mares, the virgin does not appear to need reproduction to partake in the immortal. She appears to have transcended generation and becoming more generally. She appears whole, unchanging and complete onto herself. That is, she appears to embody being, simply and forever. As such, she resembles an immortal goddess. The importance of this
resemblance is confirmed in the next section, which contains an explicit reference to the statue of the goddess Athena “Parthenos,” Athena the Virgin.

Based on these observations, the particular examples of beautiful objects, together with Socrates’ description of the beautiful pot, suggest the following points about the beautiful. Beautiful things are whole and complete of their class or kind. What it means for something to be whole and complete will differ depending on the class to which the object belongs; what it means to be a whole and complete pot is obviously different than what it means to be a whole complete human being.

Wholeness is determined by the being or form of a particular thing. These observations suggest that the appearance of being or form is itself beautiful. At Socrates’ reference to a pot, Hippias likely imagined a small, rough, cracked, unsymmetrical pot, in which the form is obscured by the muddy material. Socrates’ subsequent description was of a well formed pot, in which the being of the pot is manifest. The discussion suggested further that certain classes are more or less whole and complete depending on the degree to which the members of the class are merely instruments or means. The simply instrumental or useful is not in itself beautiful. A member of the most whole and complete class would be an end in itself. Judging from the examples given, this initially appears to be the class of humans. A beautiful human being is that human being who most clearly embodies the being or form of the human, one who appears to be, simply and unchanging, free from the decay of becoming. Such a human being appears to have transcended the needs of the body and the influence of becoming. More specifically,
such a human being appears to have transcended mortality. The beautiful virgin appears to be an immortal goddess.

This observation leads to a paradox regarding beautiful human beings. The beautiful human being, by virtue of being beautiful, appears to transcend the human class, touching a higher and more complete class, that of the gods. The gods then appear to be the highest class, ends in themselves, and a beautiful human being appears inhumanly divine. The paradoxical way in which beauty can blur the distinction between classes is central to the next step of the argument, in which Hippias’ original answer of a beautiful virgin is refuted with reference to Heraclitus, the proponent of radical becoming.

The Refuter’s refutation of Hippias’ answer depends on a way in which beauty appears to be relative. This relativity enables the Refuter to argue that what is conventionally believed to be beautiful is in truth no more beautiful than ugly (Republic 538d-e). The previous section of the argument drew attention to two aspects of beauty. First, the beauty of a beautiful object is relative to its class or kind; a beautiful object is the most perfect or complete member of its class. Second, there is a hierarchy among classes, such that some classes or kinds are inherently more complete and, as such, more beautiful than others. How is one to understand the Refuter’s refutation in light of these two aspects of beauty?

Socrates begins this section of the argument by rephrasing Hippias’ claim. Whereas Hippias had merely said that a pot is not worthy to judge as being beautiful “compared to” [πρὸς] a virgin, Socrates claims that the most beautiful pot is ugly when
“combined with” [συμβάλλειν] with the class of virgins. Socrates makes this move by analogy with Heraclitus’ claim that the most beautiful ape is ugly when combined with [συμβάλλειν] another class. Heraclitus’ saying does not state the class with which the ape is combined, but (as many editors have anticipated), it seems to be the class of humans, in particular. Whereas Hippias had merely suggested that the beauty of pots does not rise to that of virgins, Socrates actually claims that the most beautiful pot is ugly when combined with the class of virgins, just as the most beautiful ape in ugly when combined with the class of humans. But why exactly does the most beautiful ape become ugly when combined with the class of humans, and does this actually apply to pots and virgins, as Socrates claims?

Judging from the previous section, the most beautiful ape is beautiful because it is the most perfect or complete ape; it most clearly embodies the form of an ape. Humans and apes, however, are very similar, such that an ape could easily be mistaken for a human. This similarity allows for an ape to be mistakenly categorized as or “combined with” the class of humans. When combined with the class of humans, an ape – even the most beautiful ape – appears to be an incomplete and imperfect human being. The apparent relativity of beauty arises from changing the class to which the ape belongs. Judged as a member of the class of apes, it is beautiful. Judged as a member of the class of humans, it is ugly. But, again, this relativity is only possible because an ape is extremely similar to a human. Consider, by way of contrast, Socrates’ restatement of Hippias’ claim, to the effect that the most beautiful pot is ugly when combined with the class of virgins. Although the beautiful virgin may very well outshine
a beautiful pot (which seems to be Hippias’ intended meaning), the further claim that the pot would appear ugly when combined with the class of virgins would require that a pot could be mistaken as a member of the class of virgins. Given the manifest dissimilarity between pots and virgins, however, a pot cannot be combined with the class of virgins, despite Socrates’ claim to the contrary. But Socrates’ false suggestion serves to highlight, by way of contrast, what is implied when a beautiful object does appear ugly relative to something else. Namely, the beautiful object is no longer judged as member of its own class but as a member of another, similar class. The importance of this observation comes to light in the next step of the argument, when one considers the implications of a beautiful virgin appearing ugly compared to the gods.

Ostensibly, Socrates had attempted to contradict the Refuter by reformulating Hippias’ comment, establishing a certain relativity of beautiful objects by reference to Heraclitus and thereby criticizing the Refuter’s reference to a lowly pot. Socrates then, however, uses this very relativity (as well as his own reference to Heraclitus) to refute Hippias’ original answer in the voice of the Refuter. The Refuter argues that the class of virgins will suffer the same thing when combined with the class of gods as the class of pots did when combined with that of virgins: the most beautiful virgin will appear ugly. The way in which the Refuter phrases his refutation suggests a more precise way to understand the relativity of beautiful objects. According to the Refuter, it is not simply the most beautiful virgin that is combined with the class of gods; rather, the class of virgins is combined with the class of gods. Moreover, the most beautiful virgin is not said “to be” ugly as a result; rather, she “will appear” [φανεῖται] ugly. Based on these
comments, it seems that when one judges a beautiful virgin as ugly compared to the
gods, one has combined the class of virgins with the class of gods, such that the two
classes form one, large continuous class. As a member of this larger class, the beautiful
virgin appears to be imperfect, insofar as she is mortal. When considered on her own in
the class of humans, she seems so whole and complete as to transcend the mortal,
calling to mind the immortal gods. When actually held to the standard of the immortal
gods, however, she falls short and, falling short, she appears ugly. One could say,
however, that her ugliness is merely an appearance, since she is only ugly when the
distinction between classes is obscured, and she is considered as a member of class to
which she does not naturally belong. She is a beautiful virgin, but she appears to be an
ugly god. That is to say, whether the virgin is beautiful or ugly depends on the class in
which she is placed, but insofar as she is actually a member of the class of humans and
not a member of the class of gods, she can be said to be beautiful while appearing ugly.

Nevertheless, the fact that the beautiful virgin appears ugly when compared to
the gods betrays that the class of virgins (or that of humans more generally) has been
combined with the class of gods. In other words, the class of humans and the class of
gods are believed to be in some essential way continuous. The apparent ugliness of the
beautiful virgin as compared to the gods betrays that the class of humans and the class
of gods have not been properly distinguished. Socrates alludes to this continuity of
these classes at the beginning of this section of the argument, when he derogatorily
refers to the Refuter as “human being” [Ὤ ἄνθρωπος] (289a). “Human being” can only
be understood as derogatory if one believes that it is possible to be more than merely
human. The relativity of the beautiful virgin betrays the belief that one can transcend the human class, that apotheosis is possible. The wholly and completely beautiful human being is, by virtue of his beauty, a god. Or, in other words, the gods are images of completely beautiful human beings.

In support of his claim that the most beautiful virgin will appear ugly when the class of virgins is combined with the class of gods, the Refuter cites his own saying of Heraclitus, that the most wise human being, compared to a god, will appear to be an ape in wisdom and beauty and in all other things. Socrates then asks Hippias whether they should agree that the most beautiful virgin is ugly compared to the class of gods. Hippias responds by asking rhetorically who would disagree with this. Once again, Hippias is constrained by his sense of propriety. Based on this saying of Heraclitus, it seems that an ugly human being appears to sink below its proper class, into the class of apes, whereas a beautiful human being appears to transcend its class, ascending to the gods. But when these classes are combined such that the human is actually compared to the gods, the human – even the beautiful human – falls short of the gods and appears ugly, appears to be an ape.

In general, a beautiful human being appears ugly when the human class is combined with that of the gods or, in other words, when the essential difference between humans and gods is obscured and apotheosis appears possible. The Refuter’s citation of Heraclitus, however, changes the emphasis from the relativity of beauty to the relativity of wisdom. As Heraclitus says, the wisest human being appears to be an ape in wisdom, in beauty and in all other things. This change in emphasis occurs shortly
after Socrates had referred to Hippias as “Hippias the wise” (289a). The argument thus far has suggested a connection between beautiful human beings and the gods. At this point, one might already suspect that Hippias’ desire to be praised as beautiful stems in large part from a desire to believe that he himself is akin to a god, with the eternal preservation of self thereby entailed. As Hippias and Socrates will later agree, wisdom is the most beautiful thing of all, and ignorance the most ugly (296a). Hippias’ desire to be praised as wise seems to be the primary instantiation of his more general desire to be beautiful. Based on the previous argument, though, one can see how this desire to be “beautiful and wise” prevents Hippias from even approaching philosophy. Hippias seems to believe that god-like wisdom, a sort of intellectual apotheosis, is possible; in fact, he seems convinced that he possesses such divine omniscience, based on his comments to Socrates.12 Just as a beautiful human being appears ugly compared to a god, so too human wisdom appears ugly and foolish when compared to divine wisdom. Socratic knowledge of ignorance appears ugly when one believes that divine wisdom is possible. In other words, Socratic philosophy appears ugly when one believes that law is the discovery of what is. Merely human wisdom is ugly and unsatisfying to Hippias (due mainly to the unreflective self-love that defines him). His belief that Socrates is ugly and ridiculous follows from his belief about what kind of knowledge is possible for a human being, his idealization of human nature. The fact that Socrates makes Hippias look ridiculous throughout their conversation, however, suggests that it is Socrates who possesses the beauty and wisdom actually possible for a human being as such, whereas Hippias is deluded, an ape in wisdom, ignorant of his own ignorance.
Socrates ends this section of the argument by noting that, if they agree that the most beautiful maiden is ugly compared to the class of gods, the Refuter will laugh and ask whether Socrates even remembers what he was asked. Taking a tacit shot at Hippias and his mnemonic skill, Socrates says he will affirm that he, at least, remembers what he was asked, namely what the beautiful itself is. In response, the Refuter will ask whether Socrates has answered with something which happens to be no more beautiful than ugly. Hippias is forced to agree that this is so, since in claiming that the human class is not beautiful compared to the gods, the Refuter speaks the truth. The Refuter concludes that Socrates would have answered correctly, if he had been asked what is both beautiful and ugly – but that is not what he was asked, and so Hippias’ original answer of a beautiful virgin is refuted. The Refuter’s final claim that the beautiful virgin is no more beautiful than ugly may be somewhat overstated, since she only appeared ugly relative to the gods, but it highlights the demand that the beautiful itself be a thing or class of things that are in every respect beautiful. The fact that the beautiful virgin was found to appear ugly compared to the gods suggests that the gods might be this sought after class of wholly beautiful things. Hippias, however, is prevented from giving this answer in the following section by the particular way in which the Refuter rephrases his question, which focuses on the requirement that the beautiful itself be the cause of beauty in other things. Since the comparison with the gods made the beautiful virgin appear ugly, the gods do not seem to meet this new requirement for the beautiful itself. With the question of the cause of beauty brought to the fore, however, the following section is able to focus on the possibility of the apotheosis to which Hippias’
first answer alluded. The argument will suggest that the city appears to offer a way for a human to become whole and complete, thereby ascending to the divine.
Section VI (289c9 – 291c8): Hippias’ Second Answer, Gold

In Section V, Socrates’ examination of Hippias’ first answer (that a beautiful virgin is a beautiful thing) highlighted two important qualities of beautiful objects. Beautiful objects are complete wholes (or, in other words, they are “perfect” of their kind). And beautiful objects are not mere instruments or means. The beautiful virgin appeared to be a perfect human being, whose perfection entailed a power of self-preservation transcending even generation and death, transcending the natural insufficiency of mortality. The beautiful virgin is thereby reminiscent of an unchanging and immortal goddess, and the gods themselves came to light as images of beautiful and perfect human beings. Moreover, the argument suggested that Hippias and the many believe, however latently, that apotheosis is possible. As a result, the merely human (including Socrates’ “human wisdom”) appears defective and ugly by comparison.

At the end of the argument, Hippias was forced to admit that a beautiful virgin appears ugly when compared to the gods, and so (on the assumption that the beautiful itself is a being that will not appear ugly in any respect) a beautiful virgin cannot be the beautiful itself. The logic of this refutation, however, suggested another possibility for the beautiful itself, a being of superlative beauty: a god. But Hippias does not suggest this answer. He is apparently prevented from doing so by the way in which the Refuter reformulates his question about the beautiful itself. How then does the Refuter
reformulate his question, and how does his reformulation influence the search for the beautiful?

According to Socrates, the Refuter will point out that a beautiful virgin would have been a correct answer if he had asked what is both beautiful and ugly. But the Refuter is asking about the beautiful itself, which he now characterizes as that “by which all other things are adorned [κοσμεῖται] and made to appear beautiful [καλὰ φαίνεται] whenever this form [ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἐἴδος] becomes present [προσέγνηται]” (289c). The Refuter’s reformulation of the question does not emphasize the superlative beauty of the beautiful itself; rather, it emphasizes that the beautiful itself is the cause of the appearance of beauty in all other beautiful things. The gods, however, had the opposite effect on the beautiful virgin, causing her to appear ugly by comparison. In this way, the reformulation of the question establishes a new criterion for the beautiful itself and thereby prevents Hippias from simply citing the gods as a new answer.

The Refuter’s characterization of the beautiful itself makes explicit that he is asking about the “form” of the beautiful itself, the ἐἴδος, which Socrates elsewhere calls the true cause of the beauty of beautiful objects, as opposed to the material conditions (Phaedo 100d). Once again, Hippias’ attachment to the opinions of the many prevents him from understanding that the Refuter is asking about the form of the beautiful, as opposed to a particular and lawfully accepted beautiful thing. Hippias’ misunderstanding of the question is highlighted by his own restatement of it, in which he markedly drops the word “form” (289d). Hippias then criticizes the Refuter for being extremely naive and inexpert about beautiful possessions, before proceeding to display
his own wisdom, which once again amounts to expert knowledge of the convictions of
the many. He cites what, as he emphasizes, everyone knows, claiming that he will
perplex the Refuter by answering that the beautiful is “nothing other than gold,” since
“we all know, of course, that, wherever this becomes present, even if a thing previously
appeared ugly, it will appear beautiful once it has been adorned with gold” (289e).
Although Hippias continues to misunderstand the question for reasons discussed
earlier, once again his choice of a particular beautiful object draws attention to essential
characteristics of the beautiful itself. What then is suggested by Hippias’ second
answer, gold?

The example of gold draws attention to one aspect of the beautiful in particular,
namely its value. Toward the end of this section, the Refuter contrasts gold with
figwood, which was proverbial for anything (or anyone) cheap and useless, thereby
highlighting by contrast the value and use of gold. Hippias also insults the Refuter for
his ignorance of gold, referring to him as “most naïve”; “naïve” had earlier been used to
describe the ancient wise men insofar as they were unaware of the great worth of
money (282d). Additionally, Hippias claims that the Refuter knows nothing about
beautiful “possessions” [κτήματα], suggesting that Hippias here understands the
beautiful to be a private possession, valuable for oneself. In these ways, the example of
gold highlights the value and use of beautiful objects, suggesting a connection between,
if not equivalency of, the beautiful and the good (or, as Socrates will later suggest, the
beneficial).
A second important characteristic of gold is that it shines forth and catches the eye, suggesting that beautiful things are conspicuous. In this way, the example of gold highlights the importance of appearance to the question of beauty. At first blush, there appears to be a necessary connection between appearing beautiful and being beautiful. Although something can appear good while being bad, it is more paradoxical to claim that something appears beautiful while being ugly. One should note from the outset, however, if a beautiful object is necessarily good or beneficial in a certain respect, it would be possible to distinguish the appearance of beauty from its being. The importance of this distinction is further suggested by the last, and perhaps most important, reason Hippias chooses gold as his second example of a beautiful thing.

Hippias cites gold because, in a way, gold meets the stated criterion that the beautiful be the cause of the appearance of beauty in other beautiful things. As Hippias notes, even if a thing previously appeared ugly, it will appear beautiful once it has been adorned with gold. Obviously, however, the way in which gold “adorns” a thing and makes it “appear beautiful” is different than the way in which the form of the beautiful might be said to adorn something and make it appear beautiful. By “adorned with gold,” Hippias seems to mean simply “covered with gold,” which would make an object both valuable and conspicuous. In this case, however, one might wonder whether the object adorned with gold merely appears beautiful without actually being so, since the object itself has been covered with, or hidden by, something beautiful. The Refuter’s examination of Hippias’ second answer will help clarify this distinction between appearing beautiful and being so.
In response to Hippias’ claim that the Refuter will not attempt to refute this answer, Socrates notes that Hippias has no experience with the man, how unyielding he is and how he accepts nothing easily. Hippias shrugs this off, claiming that it is necessary that he accept what is correctly said or else be ridiculous. Socrates then uses Hippias’ concern with ridicule to get his attention, claiming that the Refuter will not only refuse to accept this answer, but he will also certainly mock Socrates for giving it. Having appealed to Hippias’ concern with ridicule, Socrates explains how the Refuter will attempt to refute Hippias’ second answer of gold.

Referring to Socrates as deluded, the Refuter begins by asking whether Phidias is a bad craftsman. Phidias, whose name became synonymous with a master craftsman, was the premier sculptor of fifth century Greece, employed by Pericles in his numerous building projects to beautify and celebrate Athens. He was best known for his statues depicting the gods, such as the Athena Parthenos discussed in what follows. Faced with this question about Phidias, Socrates says that he will answer that Phidias is in no way a bad craftsman. Hippias agrees, saying that Socrates answers correctly (which is to be expected, since it is not Hippias’ habit to disagree with such a commonly held belief). Socrates responds by claiming that the Refuter will then ask whether Phidias was ignorant of the beautiful. When Socrates asks why he poses this question, the Refuter will note that Phidias did not make the eyes of Athena gold, nor the rest of the face, nor the feet, nor the hands; rather he made them ivory. He concludes that Phidias made this mistake from ignorance, not knowing that it is gold that makes all things beautiful, wherever it is added. Socrates then asks Hippias how they should respond. Hippias is
again unimpressed, saying that it is “nothing difficult”; they can respond that Phidias made the statue correctly, since ivory too is beautiful. But the Refuter presses the question by asking why Phidias did not also make the middle parts of the eyes of ivory, but rather of stone; or, he asks, is stone (a beautiful one) also a beautiful thing? Hippias responds that they should agree that it is, whenever stone is fitting, at least. The Refuter clarifies this proviso by asking whether stone is ugly when it is not fitting, which Hippias affirms. The Refuter then turns back to the original examples of gold and ivory, asking whether they make things appear beautiful whenever they are fitting, but whenever they are not fitting, ugly. Hippias hesitates to agree to this formulation, asserting instead the more general principle that whatever is fitting to each thing makes each thing beautiful.

The Refuter’s reference to Phidias’ statue Athena Parthenos – that is, “Athena the Virgin” – calls to mind Hippias’ previous answer, that a beautiful virgin is a beautiful thing. A consideration of that answer suggested that beautiful objects are complete wholes and that, in the case of a beautiful virgin, this completion entails transcending generation and decay, transcending human mortality. And so the gods and goddesses came to light as images of perfectly beautiful human beings. This interpretation seems confirmed by this subsequent reference to the statue of Athena, the virgin goddess. Nevertheless, the exchange raises new questions. Hippias believes there is nothing difficult about the question of why Phidias made parts of his statue out of ivory, as opposed to gold, since ivory, like gold, is beautiful. When asked why certain parts of the statue are made out of stone, however, Hippias feels compelled to add the proviso that,
in order to be beautiful, stone must be fitting. What is the difference between gold and ivory, on the one hand, and stone, on the other, such that stone requires this proviso, and what might this suggest about the beautiful? Moreover, Hippias begins by claiming that stone is a beautiful thing when it is fitting. But Socrates then asks whether gold and ivory make things appear beautiful when they are fitting, which leads Hippias to claim that whatever is fitting to each thing makes each thing beautiful. These, however, are two different claims. The first is that the fitting thing is itself a beautiful thing, whereas the second is that something that is fitting makes the thing to which it is fitting a beautiful thing. Is the fitting thing itself a beautiful thing, or is it the cause of beauty in something else? And what is the significance of this ambiguity?

To begin, what is it about stone, as opposed to gold and ivory, that forces Hippias to add the proviso that in order to be beautiful, it must be fitting? Most obviously, gold and ivory seem to be beautiful when considered on their own. Stone, however, does not seem to be beautiful considered on its own; rather, stone is only beautiful as a part of some beautiful whole (that is to say, when it is fitting to some greater whole). The example of stone, as opposed to gold and ivory, highlights the importance of parts and wholes to considerations of beauty. The significance of parts and wholes is confirmed by a relevant passage in the Protagoras, in which Socrates asks Protagoras whether virtue is one (329c-d). To clarify the question, Socrates explains the difference between the parts of a face and gold. He asks whether the various virtues are like the parts of a face (mouth, nose, eyes and ears), which taken together compose one whole face; or, rather, is virtue like gold, the parts of which do not differ from each
other or from the whole? There is a way in which any piece of gold is always whole and complete, and so also beautiful. The same cannot be said for stone which would be one part of the statue. This is why stone (as opposed to gold) requires the proviso that, in order for stone to be beautiful, it must be “fitting”; that is, a proper part of some greater whole. Whereas the previous section suggested that beautiful objects are complete wholes, the current section develops this suggestion by considering the relation of the parts to the whole and the way in which a fitting part is a kind of cause of the beauty of the whole, insofar as it completes the whole and is thereby completed in return.

These considerations help to explain the ambiguity between understanding the fitting thing as itself a beautiful thing or the cause of beauty in something else. Gold and ivory are beautiful objects on their own, and they cause other objects appear to be beautiful by adorning them; they cover that to which they are added with their own beauty. The beautiful thing and the cause of beauty are one and the same. Stone, on the other hand, in not beautiful considered on its own, nor is the statue prior to the addition of stone. Both are incomplete. When the stone is added to the statue, however, it completes the statue and causes it to appear beautiful, and as a part of this greater whole, the stone is itself completed and beautified in return. Each is ugly, but both together are beautiful. The stone is the cause of beauty in something else and is itself beautiful as a result. In this case, the cause of beauty and the beautiful thing are also one and the same – but in a very different way than gold. Gold is able to be the cause of beauty in something else insofar as it is a beautiful thing, whereas stone is a
beautiful thing insofar as it is able to be the cause of beauty in something else.

Accordingly, in the case of gold, there is no consideration of parts and wholes or the relation of the gold to the object beautified. This is why Hippias resists simply agreeing with Socrates that gold and ivory make things appear ugly when they are not fitting; since he considers gold and ivory beautiful on their own, they are always in some sense “fitting,” and so never cause anything to appear ugly. But, again, “fitting” means something very different in the case of gold than in that of stone.

To clarify, the difference between the fittingness of gold and the fittingness of stone is reflected in the different meanings of the Greek word “fitting,” πρεπών. This word primarily denotes something that makes a strong impression on the senses, something that is clearly seen or conspicuous. Gold is always “fitting” in this sense and always makes something fitting by adorning it. The word also, however, comes to denote something that is conspicuously similar to something else as well as something conspicuously appropriate, and so “seemly.” This sense of fitting denotes a relation between two things. One thing is “fitting to” another. It is in this sense that the stone is fitting to the statue; it is a proper part of a greater whole.

These different senses of fitting suggest one way to understand the difference between appearing beautiful and being beautiful. The earlier section suggested that beautiful objects are complete wholes. When an object that is whole and beautiful considered on its own, something “fitting” in the manner of gold, adorns something else but is not a proper part of it, the thing so adorned appears beautiful, but is not actually beautiful. It is merely covered with something beautiful. In order to be beautiful, the
parts (which may not be beautiful or whole on their own) must come together to form a complete whole. The parts must be “fitting to” the whole. Socrates provides a helpful example of the something that merely appears beautiful in his subsequent description of Hippias. After the Refuter asks again about a lowly pot, Hippias responds that he would not converse with someone who asks such things. Socrates agrees that it would not be fitting for Hippias to be filled up with such words, since Hippias is “dressed up so beautifully and wears such beautiful shoes and [is] so highly reputed for wisdom among all the Greeks” (291a). Hippias has covered himself in fitting and beautiful possessions, his clothes and reputation for wisdom, and he believes that he is thereby made beautiful. But, in truth, he only appears so. He is merely gold-plated. His own ugliness is hidden underneath his beautiful possessions, hidden even (or especially) from himself. His unreflective self-love compels him to avoid thoughts and speeches that clash with his attire. Socrates, on the other hand, has no problem mixing with the unrefined Refuter and using lowly speeches. It is at least possible that these speeches, appearing ugly and not fitting on their own, are nevertheless fitting to Socrates, completing him and making him truly beautiful.

The question about Phidias’ use of stone induced Hippias to assert that whatever is fitting to each thing makes each thing beautiful. In response, Socrates claims that the Refuter will ask which is fitting whenever someone boils the aforementioned beautiful pot, full of beautiful pea soup, a golden ladle or one of figwood. Socrates argues that the figwood ladle would be more fitting, since it would make the soup more fragrant, whereas the golden ladle would shatter the pot, pour out the soup, and extinguish the
fire, depriving those about to feast of an entirely well-bred meal. Hippias is forced to agree that, in this situation, the figwood ladle is more fitting than the gold ladle, and so the figwood ladle is more beautiful, since it was agreed that the more fitting is more beautiful. And so, Socrates concludes, if one claims that the beautiful is gold, gold will not appear as being more beautiful than figwood.

Hippias resists the Refuter’s argument for several reasons. In the previous section, Hippias’ sense of propriety rebelled at the reference to a beautiful pot. Socrates here goes out of his way to be even cruder and more ridiculous, referencing not only a “beautiful pot” but one boiled “full of beautiful pea-soup” [ἐτνους καλοῦ μεστήν]. Hippias is so offended at this that he once again demands to know who would say such things. And once the conclusion of the argument is unavoidable, Hippias nevertheless attempts to avoid actually stating the conclusion, which would require him to use a lowly word like “figwood” in an elevated discussion of beauty. In addition to his sense of propriety, Hippias resists this argument because its conclusion is so paradoxical. In ancient Greece “figwood” [σύκινος] was proverbially cheap and worthless, whereas gold is a byword for value. Hippias’ choice of gold as a paradigm for beauty suggested that he considers the beautiful to be valuable or beneficial. The Refuter’s argument turns on isolating one situation in which figwood is more useful, and so (in this limited sense) more valuable, than gold, which in turn leads to the heterodox conclusion that figwood is more beautiful than gold. Although heterodoxy is not in itself a philosophic objection, it does give one pause. Is the only reason to resist the conclusion of this argument an un-philosophic attachment to propriety and common
opinion? Does it really make sense to speak of “beautiful pea soup,” or might the apparent absurdity of this phrase point to a legitimate problem with the argument itself?

Certain preliminary reflections should make one immediately suspicious of the conclusion that a figwood ladle is more beautiful than one of gold. To begin, the examination of Hippias’ first answer in Section V suggested that mere utensils or instruments are not beautiful in themselves – or, at the very least, they are capable of much less beauty than other kinds of objects. But a ladle is the epitome of a mere utensil. It does not seem like any ladle is fitting or beautiful in itself, as gold seems to be. Moreover, the primary effect of the figwood ladle is to make the pea soup more fragrant. Later in the *Hippias Major*, however, Hippias and Socrates agree that the pleasures of eating and smell are not beautiful (299a). And so the figwood ladle does not seem to be the cause of beauty in the pot or pea soup either; it is not fitting or beautiful in the second sense, on the model of the stone in the statue. Is the figwood ladle beautiful in any sense? Or might the claim that the figwood ladle is more beautiful than one of gold be a spurious conclusion, which throws into relief an important aspect of the beautiful?

The Refuter’s basic argument is that the figwood ladle is more fitting to the pot and pea soup, and so in this context more beautiful than the gold ladle, because Hippias and Socrates agreed that the fitting is more beautiful than the not fitting (291b). This, however, is not actually what Hippias and Socrates agreed. Although Hippias did agree that the stone is beautiful when it is fitting and not beautiful when it is not fitting (291c),
he then stated the more general principle that whatever is fitting to each thing makes each thing beautiful (291d). The ambiguity of these two statements was examined above. Again, the salient difference is that, in the first statement, what is fitting is itself beautiful, whereas in the second statement what is fitting is the cause of beauty in something else. Gold and the stone were each shown to combine these characteristics, although in different ways. Gold, beautiful in itself, adorns other things and causes them to be, or at least to appear, beautiful. Stone, not beautiful in itself, when it is a fitting part of something else (such as a statue), completes it and causes it to be whole and beautiful, thereby being completed and beautified as part of the whole. The spuriousness of the Refuter’s argument about the ladles comes to light by contrasting it with these earlier examples.

To begin, the gold ladle, in so far as it is gold, could be said to be fitting or beautiful in itself. It shines forth and catches the eye. But it is not the cause of beauty in the pot and pea soup. It does not cover nor adorn the pot and pea soup (as gold plating on the pot might do), nor is it fitting to the pot and pea soup, as the stone is to the statue. That is to say, the gold ladle does not complete the pot and pea soup and make a unified whole. In fact, Socrates emphasizes that the gold ladle will do the exact opposite; it will shatter the pot, breaking it into many pieces and spilling the soup. It is emphatically not fitting to the pot and pea soup in the sense of making it whole. The figwood ladle, on the other hand, is clearly not fitting or beautiful considered in itself. But is it fitting to the pot and pea soup? Does it, like the stone, complete the pot and
soup and make a beautiful whole, and is the figwood ladle beautified in turn as part of this whole?

The answer comes to light by considering the difference between the statue of Athena, on the one hand, and a pot of boiling pea soup, on the other. Not only is the statue an image of an immortal and unchanging goddess, but the statue is a whole composed of distinct but unified parts (eyes, face, feet, hands, etc...). A pot of boiling pea soup, on the other hand, has no such distinct parts and it is in constant motion; boiling pea soup is an appropriate image for something like indistinct flux. The stone is fitting to the statue because it is part of a greater whole, completing it and being completed in return. The figwood ladle is not fitting in this sense; it is not a part of a greater whole. Without the stone, the statue is incomplete. Without the figwood ladle, the pot of pea soup is less fragrant. Although the figwood ladle is useful and beneficial in a limited sense – and so, perhaps in this sense, one could call it “fitting” – it is not fitting in the relevant sense; that is, it is not a part of some greater whole, completing and being completed in return. Although it makes the pea soup more pleasant smelling, it does not cause the pot of boiling pea soup to be a beautiful whole, and so it is not beautified as a part, despite Socrates’ claim to the contrary. There are many reasons that gold is not the beautiful, but the Refuter’s argument is not one of them.

The Refuter’s reformulation of his question at the beginning of this section emphasized that the beautiful should be understood as the cause of beauty in other beautiful things. The contrast between the example of the stone in the statue of Athena and the figwood ladle in the pot of boiling pea soup serves to highlight certain
considerations regarding what it means to be a cause of beauty. First off, the cause of beauty need not be itself a beautiful thing, let alone the superlative example of beauty. It can be incomplete and ugly, like a stone. But if the incomplete and ugly thing is a proper part of some greater whole (like the stone in the statue and unlike the figwood ladle in the pot of boiling pea soup), it is in a certain sense the cause of beauty of that greater whole, insofar as it is the cause of its completeness, and it is thereby complete and beautiful as a part. The beauty is in neither the piece of stone nor the incomplete statue, but the relation between them; neither the one nor the other, but both taken together.

These considerations about the way in which a stone is itself beautified by being the cause of beauty in something else helps to explain an otherwise anomalous detail in Socrates' discussion of the gold and figwood ladles. The two times that Socrates speaks of the ladles in his own voice, as opposed to the voice of the Refuter, he uses the dual case (290e5; 291c2). This suggests that the two ladles should be, in some sense, one; they are a pair. The Refuter, by demanding that Socrates choose the one or the other, ignores their duality. But, in what sense might the gold and the figwood ladles be a pair? The stone in the statue provides the proper paradigm for this duality. The stone is not beautiful considered on its own, separate from the statue. In this way, it is akin to figwood, which is also not beautiful. But, as a proper part of a greater whole, it is perfected and beautified. Being perfect and beautiful, it is akin to gold. The stone is worthless and imperfect considered on its own, but valuable and perfect considered as part of a beautiful whole. Very generally, a thing that is fitting to something else has
this duality of imperfection and ugliness (in isolation) and perfection and beauty (as a part). Socrates alludes to this by referring to the ladles in the dual. If the figwood ladle were fitting to the pot and pea soup as the stone is to the statue, it would complete the pot and pea soup and be completed in return. It would become golden. The fact that this duality is not possible in the case of the pot and pea soup indicates the relevant difference between it and the statue of Athena. The pot and pea soup do not form a whole composed of parts, like the statue, and so the figwood ladle cannot be a proper part, and so cannot be made golden (that is, completed and beautified) as a part. The ladle is either figwood (merely useful to something else) or golden (valuable in itself); it cannot be both. But that which is fitting to something, in the relevant sense, is both. It combines what is useful to something else with what is valuable in itself.

These considerations already help shed light on the concluding lines of the *Hippias Major*. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates claims that he has been helped by his association with both the Refuter and Hippias, since he seems to himself to know what is meant by the proverb, “Beautiful things are difficult” [χαλεπά τά καλά] (304e). In the current section, when asked why Phidias made parts of his statue from ivory instead of gold, Hippias asserts that this is “nothing difficult” [οὐδὲν χαλεπόν] (290c), since ivory too is beautiful. When Socrates asks why Phidias made certain parts from stone, however, Hippias agrees that stone is also beautiful, but he is compelled to add the proviso “whenever it is fitting.” The example of a beautiful stone is “difficult” in a way that ivory was not, since stone is not beautiful on its own, but nevertheless can be beautiful as a part of some beautiful whole. Again, the stone has a certain duality to it –
incomplete and ugly in isolation, but complete and beautiful as a part. The difficulty of beautiful things, then, appears to be connected to this dual characteristic of the fitting, illustrated by the example of stone as opposed to gold and ivory. The significance of this observation comes to the fore when one considers the political, as opposed to merely aesthetic, dimensions of the images of the statue of Athena Parthenos and the pot of boiling pea soup.

The reference to Phidias’ statue Athena Parthenos recalls the earlier discussion of Hippias’ pro bono activities in Sparta, his recitation of the ancient accounts of the founding of cities (285d). Phidias’ giant statue depicts Athena, the patron goddess and defender of Athens, fully outfitted in war gear. In her outstretched right hand, she holds the goddess Victory (Nike), while on her left side rests a spear and a shield emblazoned with scenes of Theseus, the mythological founder king of Athens, conquering the Amazons. And at her feet lies the serpent Erichthonios, an autochthonous early ruler of Athens who was raised by Athena herself. The earlier examination of Hippias’ recitation of founding myths in Sparta suggested that such accounts instill in the citizens the belief that the city itself is a divine and lasting whole. The statue of Athena Parthenos, replete with scenes from these founding myths, is a concrete image of the city as depicted by these ancient accounts, the city as a divine and lasting whole.

With this in mind, the relation of the stone to the statue comes to light as an analogy for the relation of the citizen to the city imagined as a divine whole. Although I believe this analogy is clear enough based on the *Hippias Major* alone, it is confirmed by a very relevant passage in Book IV of the *Republic* (419a – 421c). After Adeimantus
complains that the guardians will not be happy, Socrates claims that they are not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group but rather to that of the city as a whole. He likens this to painting the different parts of a statue and, in particular, to painting the eye. Just as in this Republic passage, the statue represents the city as a whole and the eye represents one group of citizens, so too in the Hippias Major the statue of Athena Parthenos represents the city as depicted by founding myths (that is, as a divine whole) and the stone of the eye represents a citizen or group of citizens. In accordance with this image, just as the stone is not complete or beautiful in itself but can become complete and beautiful by being part of a greater whole, so too the human being is not complete or beautiful considered in isolation, but as part of the greater whole that is the city (that is, as a citizen) he can be completed and beautified. The previous section suggested that, for a human being, such completion and beautification would entail above all transcending mortality. The city presents itself as a means to such individual apotheosis. The city is imagined to be a permanent and divine whole, and the citizen can partake in this permanence by sublimating his individual identity to that of the city, by being a beautiful citizen. The connection between Hippias’ first answer that a beautiful virgin is a beautiful thing and the image of the city as a beautiful virgin goddess may suggest two things: first, that such attempts at personal apotheosis arise primarily in erotic relationships, in the desire to sacrifice oneself for one’s beloved; and second, that city is able to usurp these natural impulses through the creation of a poetic image of itself as an divine whole.
The aesthetic interpretation of the stone in the statue, on the one hand, and the political interpretation, on the other, reflect the different but related senses of the Greek term under investigation, τὸ καλὸν. As explained in the Introduction, these different senses make translating the term into English unusually problematic. The aesthetic sense is best expressed by the phrase “the beautiful,” while the political sense is best expressed by the phrase “the noble.” The current section suggests the aesthetic sense is in some way broader and more primary, perhaps relating to the erotic part of human nature. Nevertheless, the political sense can be (and, in this section, should be) understood on the model of the aesthetic. A stone is incomplete and ugly considered on its own, but it can be complete and beautiful by playing a proper part in a greater whole; that is to say, when the stone is fitting to the statue. So too a human being, who is incomplete and ignoble on his own, can nevertheless be complete and noble by playing a proper part, as a citizen, in the greater whole that is the city. The duality of the stone in the aesthetic realm, which is both incomplete (in isolation) and complete (as a part of the statue), is reflected in the political realm by the relation of the citizen to the city. Considered as an individual human being, a man is incomplete and mortal — but, as a citizen, a part of the permanent whole that is the city, completed and immortalized; man is perfected by the city.

In this statement, however, one can begin to see a fundamental paradox of beauty — or, in other words, the difficulty of noble things. In a beautiful or noble action, one sacrifices one’s own private good for the sake of some greater good, such as the common good of the city; one is useful to the city. But at the heart of this sacrifice of
one’s private good is the belief or hope – however latent – that one will be perfected thereby, that ultimately one’s private sacrifice will be good for oneself. And the goodness achieved, individual perfection, is far greater than any good attainable by mere prudential calculation. Stated concisely, the difficulty of noble things is that their goodness in some way depends on their not being good. Nobility is the pursuit of individual salvation by means of self-sacrifice to the common good.

At this point, it is a question whether or not the pursuit of individual salvation by means of self-sacrifice is intelligible when articulated precisely. It is possible that such a pursuit ultimately rests on a fundamental and unarticulated confusion or religious faith. This, however, is a general question, which underlies the rest of dialogue. The current section of the dialogue answers a more particular question: what are the conditions on which the city could serve as a means to such individual salvation?

The image of the statue of Athena Parthenos suggests that, if the city is to be the means by which such individual perfection is achieved, it must be a divine and permanent whole. That is to say, the founding myths recited by Hippias in Sparta, which trace the origin of the city back to divine laws vouchsafed by gods, must be true. This is why Hippias is encouraged to tell such tales in Sparta; he is unknowingly instilling the basic beliefs that dispose citizens to sacrifice their private good for the common good of the city. Once again, Athena Parthenos is the image of the city as depicted by the founding myths, and the stone in her eye is the beautiful citizen. With this in mind, one might wonder what the city would look like without the influence of these founding myths. Plato suggests an answer: a boiling pot of pea soup.
The statue of Athena came to light as an image of the city as depicted by founding myths. One might suspect from this that the pot of boiling pea soup is likewise intended to be understood as a political image. This suspicion is confirmed by a connection between the discussion of the pot of pea soup and a passage from the *Republic*. While explaining why the figwood ladle is more fitting to the pot, Socrates notes that it will not shatter the pot “and make those intending to feast go without a very well-bred delicacy” [καὶ τοὺς μέλλοντας ἐστιᾶσθαι ἀνευ ὀψου ἀν πάνυ γενναῖου ποιήσειν]. The well-bred delicacy or ὀψον here described – a pea or bean soup – is the reminiscent of the ὀψον eaten in the healthy city described by Socrates in Book 2 of the *Republic*, which Glaucon calls a city of pigs (372c-d). Socrates calls this the “true” or “truthful city,” which does not need the noble lies that will be later introduced in Kallipolis, “The Beautiful City.” Glaucon interrupts Socrates’ description of the manner of life of people in the truthful city, objecting that Socrates seems “to make these men go without a delicacy” [ἀνευ ὀψου... ποιεῖς τοὺς ἀνδρὰς ἐστιωμένους]. Socrates retorts that they will have delicacies, such as figs, pulse and beans. The origin of the truthful city is need and, as Socrates begins by noting, “the first and greatest of needs is the provision of food for existing and living” (369d). Whereas the statue of Athena represents the city as depicted by founding myths (the beautiful city), the pot of soup represents the city as imagined without these myths. The city so conceived is not a divine and lasting whole. It is merely a means to satisfy our basic bodily needs, above all the need to eat. The city is a pot of boiling pea soup. The figwood ladle, then, represents a citizen in this truthful city. Understood aesthetically, the figwood ladle
could not be a proper part of the pot and pea soup, and so could not be completed and beautified as a part; understood politically, the citizen cannot be a proper part of the city, and so he cannot be completed and ennobled as a part. The duality of a noble citizen, in which one sacrifices one’s private good for the common and is perfected thereby, is not possible if the city is not a divine and permanent whole. In this case, the citizen is not the eye of Athena, but rather a figwood ladle in a pot of pea soup; that is to say, the end of his political service is ultimately the mere satisfaction the bodily needs in the most pleasant way possible. At best, it is the relief of man’s estate, but not its transcendence. In this way, the image of the pot of pea soup illustrates why Glaucon was so dissatisfied with Socrates’ true and healthy city in the *Republic*. He cannot be ennobled in such a city. Far from a divine and lasting whole by which humans can transcend their mortality, such a city is merely the means to satisfy those bodily needs necessitated by our mortality.

As noted earlier, Socrates refers to the figwood and gold ladles in the dual. Understood politically, the figwood ladle represents a citizen who is not good in or for himself, but rather good for the community. He is “worthless” for himself, but nevertheless a useful citizen. The gold ladle represents the human being who is good in or for himself. Socrates refers to the ladles in the dual because, in the city conceived as a divine whole, these are combined; the noble citizen sacrifices his private good for the common, and thereby ultimately benefits himself. The common and the private good are harmonized by a city so conceived. The fact that the figwood ladle cannot be beautified in the pot of soup illustrates that, if the founding myths are not true and the
city is not a divine whole, a citizen can be useful to others, but he cannot benefit himself thereby. His sacrifice does not perfect him; he is merely a utensil for the city. And so there is no harmony between the common good and the private. In the city conceived as a pot of pea soup, one is forced to choose between the figwood and gold ladles, between the common and the private good. Indeed, the fact that Socrates emphasizes that the gold ladle would shatter the pot, spill the soup, and extinguish the fire suggests that the man who is good in and for himself is actually a threat to the city. This can be illustrated by the dichotomy within Hippias’ own activities. On the one hand, Hippias recites founding myths in Sparta. In so doing, he seems to be a figwood ladle, contributing to the common good of the city by making more useful “well-bred” citizens. On the other hand, he teaches cosmopolitan and apolitical liberal arts. In so doing, he may very well be making individual human beings better, in and for themselves, but not for the city; in fact, their studies may lead them to destroy the very foundations of the city, by introducing nature as a standard of truth higher than the ancestral or customary. In the earlier analysis of Hippias’ character, however, he appeared to be a domesticated wise man. His kind of sophistry is not nearly as threatening to the city as it might at first appear, since it is motivated above all by the desire for honor; as a result, Hippias’ wisdom is little more than knowledge of the opinions already honored by the many. Socratic philosophy, on the other hand, appeared to have a much different motivation, and it appeared to proceed by means of the precise analysis of the very opinions Hippias memorizes and repeats. Socrates, then,
is perhaps a better example of a golden ladle, whose own goodness threatens to destroy the city.

These considerations both confirm and clarify the earlier interpretation of the extended preliminary conversation between Socrates and Hippias, before the question of the beautiful is explicitly stated. This preliminary conversation focused on Hippias’ own political service to Elis and his claim that the art of wisdom has progressed, specifically in its ability to combine the pursuit of the common good with that of the private. This is a fitting introduction to the question of the beautiful because the difficulty with beautiful things lies in the belief that the common and the private can, in some vague way, be combined. Hippias’ opening lines in the dialogue exemplify this. He begins by claiming that he has “no leisure” due to his public service to Elis; that is, he has sacrificed his private good for the public. Hippias boasts that “whenever Elis has to conduct some business with any of the cities, she always comes to me first among her citizens when she chooses an envoy; she considers me the most able judge and reporter of whatever speeches are made by each of the cities” (281a). In describing his sacrifice to the city, Hippias repeatedly personifies the city as woman who comes to him for help, suggesting that he imagines the city to be a whole in the very sense entailed by image of the statue of Athena Parthenos. Only by conceiving of the city in such a way might his political service make sense. Although Hippias appears to have contempt for the ancient accounts he is forced to recite in Sparta, his beliefs about the city, man and beauty are nevertheless defined in accordance with such accounts. Contemporary wise men like Hippias reject the extraneous details of these mythological accounts while
nevertheless imbibing the basic beliefs that such mythology fosters and so are unknowingly believers in something like a secular religion. Although Hippias acknowledges that the many do not know and do not speak precisely, his desire for praise leads him to speak and think in accordance with them.

Socrates highlights Hippias’ confused beliefs about the city in one of the more perplexing, and humorous, lines of the *Hippias Major*. In response to Hippias’ third answer, in which Hippias once again misunderstands the question he is being asked, Socrates claims that the Refuter will exclaim, “I am asking, human being, what beauty itself is, and I have no more power to make myself heard by you than if you were a stone sitting beside me, and a millstone at that, having neither ears nor a brain” (292d). Although Socrates has interposed himself between the Refuter and Hippias, the insult is clearly directed at Hippias. Referring to Hippias as a stone is a somewhat unusual insult, but adding the extra detail that he is a millstone seems particularly anomalous – that is, until one considers the discussion of the statue of Athena Parthenos and the pot of pea soup. A millstone is a giant, round stone with a hole in the middle, used for grinding grain. It is the exact shape of the iris, and so the millstone appears to be the same stone used in the middle of the eye of Athena. Calling Hippias a stone, and in particular a millstone, alludes to the fact that Hippias is political servant, and (whether he knows it or not) he believes the city is a divine and permanent whole, which he betrays by personifying Elis in his opening boasts. He believes he is the stone in the eye of Athena, a fitting part of some divine and permanent whole, achieving a kind of personal completion and beauty thereby. In calling Hippias a millstone, having neither ears nor a
brain, the Refuter mocks this belief. He implies that, in truth, Hippias is not part of any
divine whole; at best, he is merely a part of mill — that is, part of an instrument to
provide food, much like the figwood ladle in the pot of soup. He is not completed or
beautified thereby. In fact, he is radically incomplete and ugly as a result of his public
service, “lacking ears and a brain.” The Refuter’s insult implies that the true city cannot
provide the kind of completion that Hippias seeks, mutilating him instead.

The fact that Hippias is unaware of the way in which his whole way of life is
determined by unexamined beliefs about the city suggests that there has not been a
progress in wisdom from the ancients to the moderns, as he claims, but rather a
regression. Ironically, Hippias may be correct that the ancient wise men held
themselves back from political service because they were “unable by prudence to
succeed at both the common and the private” (281d). It seems that ancient wise men
may have been more acutely aware of the tension between the common good and the
private, more aware of the difficulty of beautiful things. Hippias’ understanding of the
city and of himself, on the other hand, has been defined for him by common opinions
and the ancient accounts on which they rest, without his even being aware of it.

In his description of the statue of Athena Parthenos, Socrates alludes to the lack
of progress of wisdom and the way in which Hippias has been unknowingly influenced
by ancient accounts. When Socrates asks Hippias whether the art of the sophists has
progressed, he likens the situation to that of the sculptors. Modern sculptors claim that
their art has progressed, such that if the ancient Daedalus were born now and made his
celebrated works, he would be ridiculous compared to the moderns. So too, if an
ancient wise man like Bias came back to life, he would be laughable compared to Hippias and other contemporary wise men (281d – 282a). The current section recalls this claim, since Phidias and his statue of Athena Parthenos are the perfect example of the progress of the art of sculpting and the proof that modern sculptors are superior to the ancients. With this in mind, an otherwise anomalous detail in Socrates’ description of the statue of Athena takes on an important significance. After Hippias asserts that Phidias was correct to make the eyes of Athena out of ivory, since ivory too is beautiful, Socrates asks why Phidias did not also make the middle parts of the eyes of ivory, but rather of stone, “finding stone that was as similar as possible to ivory” (290c). Why would Phidias make the whites of the eyes out of ivory, while making the iris out of stone as similar as possible to ivory? And why would Socrates go out of his way to include this unusual detail? The effect of making the eyes of Athena out of ivory and stone as similar as possible to ivory would be to make eyes that are completely off-white. But why would one want the eyes of Athena to be completely off-white? The reason becomes clear when one remembers that the Homeric epithet for Athena is γλαυκῶπις, meaning “with grey eyes” or “with gleaming eyes.” This detail suggests that Phidias had the Homeric description of Athena in mind while creating his Athena Parthenos. Phidias appears to have made his whole statue as similar as possible to the image created by Homer, the ancient poet and lawmaker. Phidias’ knowledge of the gods is derivative from the ancient poet, and since the gods came to light as images of beautiful humans, Phidias’ knowledge of beauty is likewise derivative. Moreover, Phidias’ statues helped to cement how Greeks already conceived the ancient gods, their
images of beauty. The point then seems to be that the common beliefs about beauty, as represented by gods, can be traced back to the ancient poets and lawgivers. Homer defined for the Greeks how they think about and experience the world, in particular as regards beauty. The advances in the art of sculpting are limited to advances in understanding something like material causation, how to bring particular beautiful images into being. But, as regards understanding what beauty is, there has been no progress beyond ancients such as Homer. Likewise, Hippias and the modern wise men have certain beliefs about the city and correspondingly about beauty and nobility. They are unaware, however, of the way in which these beliefs have been defined for them by ancient lawgivers, who have instilled in the many the belief that the city is a divine and permanent whole, worthy of devotion and sacrifice.

Although Hippias’ claim to represent a progress in wisdom seems undercut by the current section, it is worth remembering that, in various places, Socrates himself claims to be a descendant of Daedalus (e.g. Euthyphro 11b-e). The contrast between Socrates and Hippias is a constant theme throughout the Hippias Major, and in this case the contrast suggests a specific way in which Socrates may be new or progressive: he does not accept the opinions about beauty handed down by the ancient lawgivers (even half-consciously, as Hippias does), but rather he subjects these opinions to critical examination through a precise articulation of their conditions and consequences. Socrates exposes, among other things, the problems and paradoxes that founding myths seem intended to obscure. He continues this practice in the next section, where
Hippias’ latent hope for the eternal preservation of his private good is confirmed and
the miracle that such salvation would require is examined.
Section VII (291c9 – 293c7): Hippias’ Third Answer, To Be Honored with Funeral Rites

The previous section suggested that a particular thing that is not beautiful considered in itself can become beautiful by playing a proper part in a greater whole. More specifically, an individual can become beautiful (or, in other words, can be ennobled) by being a proper part of the city; that is, by being a good citizen. This suggestion, coupled with those of earlier sections, entailed that the city is a way for individuals to transcend their limitations as human beings, above all their mortality – provided the city is in fact an permanent whole, as characterized by ancient founding myths, as opposed to a mere condition for satisfying bodily needs. Having said that, many questions remained, above all the question of the relation of the good of the individual considered in himself (as a human being) and his good considered as a part (as a citizen). Is there a way for these to be harmonized, and if so, how? In this section, Socrates addresses this question by pointing to the ways in which Hippias’ opinions about beauty and corresponding political activities are connected to religious beliefs and hopes for apotheosis, however latent they might be.

After having compelled Hippias to say that figwood is more beautiful than gold, Socrates asks Hippias for a third and final time what the beautiful is. Hippias infers from the refutations of his previous answers that Socrates seeks an answer that is “some sort of thing that will never appear ugly to anyone anywhere” (291d), and he boldly asserts that if anyone is able to contradict his next answer, Socrates ought to declare that
Hippias has "no expertise in anything at all" (291d). This prompts Socrates to pray that Hippias speak as quickly as possible. Hippias then presents his third answer:

I say, then, that always and for everyone and everywhere, the most beautiful thing is for a man (being wealthy, healthy, and honored by the Greeks) arriving at old age, burying beautifully his own parents who have completed life, by his own children beautifully and magnificently to be honored with funeral rites. (291d9-e2)\(^1\)

Hippias once again provides a paradigm of beauty, which he explicitly identifies as the superlative example of beauty. He is so confident in this answer that he is willing to stake his prized reputation for expert knowledge on it. Hippias’ confidence suggests that he believes there is no one who would deny that what he has said is the most beautiful thing. Why then would everyone agree that this is the most beautiful thing, and what more does his final answer reveal about the beautiful?

Hippias’ third answer is significantly more complex than his previous two, containing a number of important qualifications. The heart of Hippias’ third answer, however, is “to be honored with funeral rites” [ταφῆναι]. According to Hippias, the superlative example of beauty is not a material being, such as a virgin or gold. The most beautiful thing is an event; more specifically, it is something that happens to someone, to be honored with funeral rites.\(^2\) The clearest implication of this particular event is that the beautiful has some essential connection to death and the human awareness of mortality. What then is the connection between the beautiful and mortality? A consideration of the particular qualifications included by Hippias helps to clarify this connection.\(^3\)
Whereas Socrates had agreed to an emphatically negative characterization of the beautiful (that, literally, it “never appears ugly, nowhere, to no-one”), Hippias reinterprets this positively. He begins by boldly proclaiming that the most beautiful thing is “always and for everyone and everywhere,” meaning that it is permanent and unchanging, in respect to time, person and place. This distinguishes his third answer from his previous two, which were particular things that were revealed to appear ugly in certain circumstances. This characterization also suggests that the most beautiful thing is not merely beautiful by conventional belief, for conventional beliefs are not the same at different times, for different people, and in different places. Hippias thus implies that he will speak of the beautiful by nature, that which is beautiful in truth.

Despite this opening, Hippias’ third answer appears to be quite conventional from the start. He begins by claiming that the most beautiful thing is “for a man, being wealthy, healthy and honored by the Greeks....” The most beautiful thing happens to a “man” [ἀνήρ], someone heroic and courageous, as opposed to a mere human being. And it happens to a man who is wealthy, healthy and honored by the Greeks. This appears to be a list of what Hippias holds to be the greatest private goods. In this, he once again reveals his fundamental agreement with the conventional beliefs of the many (and disagreement, it seems, with Socrates, which is most evident in the case of wealth). Of the three private goods listed, only the middle one, health, is arguably a good “by nature.” The conventionality of Hippias’ beliefs is highlighted above all by his specification that the man be honored “by the Greeks” in particular, as opposed to the barbarians.
Hippias then adds another provision, that the most beautiful thing is for a man who is healthy, wealthy and honored by the Greeks, “reaching old age....” One swallow does not make a Spring. The most beautiful thing is not to have these private goods for a short time, but to have them throughout a long and complete life.

The last two clauses of Hippias’ answer are perhaps the most revealing. Always, for everyone and everywhere, the most beautiful thing is for a man, being wealthy, healthy and honored by the Greeks, arriving at old age, and “burying beautifully his own parents, who have completed life, by his own children beautifully and magnificently to be honored with funeral rites” [τούς αὐτοῦ γονέας τελευτήσαντας καλῶς περιστεῖλαντι, ύπο τῶν αὐτοῦ ἐκγονών καλῶς καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῶς ταφῆναι]. The final conditions of the most beautiful thing focus on two related issues, family and generation. Hippias emphasizes that a man buries “his own parents” who have died, and he is honored with funeral rites by “his own children.” This suggests that the beautiful involves some respect for the ancestral and attachment to the familial – or, more generally, the love of one’s own as such. Moreover, Hippias uses words for “parents” [γονέας] and “children” [ἐκγονῶν] that are markedly related to the noun “generation” [γένεσις] and the verb “to come into being” [γίνεσθαι]. A man buries his progenitors and is honored by his progeny in return. In these way, Hippias’ answer seems to highlight the natural “cycle of life”; although each individual is mortal, coming to be and passing away, the family or human race more generally persists by each generating and leaving behind another who in turn generates and leaves behind another (Symposium 207d – 208b). One’s own parents complete their life and are beautifully buried, and in turn one is honored with
funeral rites by one’s own children. Although no individual remains, the family and the human race more generally is preserved.

The cycle of life alluded to in Hipparus’ third answer may at first seem somewhat selfless, since only the family or race, as opposed to the individual, is preserved. This initial impression of selflessness is contradicted, however, by other aspects of Hipparus’ answer. As already noted, there is a clear emphasis on “one’s own” in what Hipparus says. One buries one’s own parents and is honored by one’s own children, which suggests that a certain love of one’s own, a form of self-love, fuels the cycle of life. This suspicion is further confirmed by a humorous difficulty with Hipparus’ answer. When Hipparus lists the private goods that are conditions of the most beautiful thing (i.e. being wealthy, healthy, and honored by the Greeks), he uses present progressive participles; in the rest of his answer, however, and in particular when he speaks of receiving funeral rites, he uses the aorist tense. Hipparus’ claim, taken precisely and literally, is that the most beautiful thing is for a man who is wealthy, healthy and honored by the Greeks to be honored with funeral rites. A healthy man... honored with funeral rites. According to Hipparus, then, the most beautiful thing is for a man to be buried, or perhaps burned, alive! The patent absurdity of a healthy man being honored with funeral rites may explain why Socrates says that the Refuter, hearing this answer, will laugh at them most of all (291e).

Although Hipparus’ intended meaning is clear (namely, that it is most beautiful to be honored with funeral rites once one has died, after having lived a life in which one was wealthy, healthy and honored by the Greeks), the absurd literal meaning may
reveal the true appeal of being beautifully and magnificently honored with funeral rites. As Socrates describes in the *Menexenus*, funeral orations give the impression that even audience members, to say nothing of the deceased, are not of this earth but rather “live on the Isles of the Blessed” (235c4). That is to say, magnificent funeral rites give the impression that the deceased is in some way preserved, continuing to possess the private goods he enjoyed in life indefinitely. The absurd literal claim that the most beautiful thing is for a healthy man to be honored with funeral rites betrays this impression. The man who is so honored appears in some way to have transcended his mortality; he is deified, living on the Isles of the Blessed.\(^5\) He and his private goods are saved, which Hippias later claims is the greatest of all prizes (304b3).\(^6\)

It appears from this that Hippias is not satisfied with the natural and seemingly selfless way to achieve a kind of immortality, by the preservation of his family or the human race through generation. Rather, Hippias demands personal immortality, personal perfection, such as the gods possess. The implication of Hippias’ final answer then is that the most beautiful thing is that which makes (or appears to make) one immortal and eternally happy, that which preserves oneself and one’s own good things forever.\(^7\) A beautiful and magnificent funeral gives the impression that that which has come into being does not perish, but is rather preserved for all time. The beautiful takes away or conceals from us our own mortality.\(^8\) This accords with Diotima’s claims about the beautiful itself in the *Symposium*: eros is a desire to make the good one’s own always and as such entails a desire for immortality; only by beholding the beautiful itself might one give birth to true virtue and thereby “become dear to god and, if it is possible
for any human being, to become immortal as well” (212a). But how does being honored with funeral rites in particular achieve this?

Most obviously, a funeral literally conceals the natural decay of the deceased through burial or incineration. But Hippias had claimed that the most beautiful thing is to be honored with funeral rites “beautifully and magnificently.” Socrates explains the particular beauty of a “beautiful and magnificent funeral” in a relevant passage from the *Menexenus*:

Indeed, Menexenus, dying in war seems in many ways to be beautiful. For even if the one who has died was poor, he receives a beautiful and magnificent funeral, and even if he was worthless, he receives praise from wise men who do not praise at random but prepare speeches long beforehand. These men praise so beautifully that by giving each man qualities he actually possessed and even some he didn’t, going to every length to most beautifully embellish with their words, they bewitch our souls. (234c)

Being honored with funeral rites entails elaborate praise. According to Socrates, the effect of a magnificent funeral is to create the impression that the deceased, as well as those in attendance, are far more majestic than is actually the case. “Magnificent” translates μεγαλοπρεπής, “fitting for a great man.” It appears then that beautiful and magnificent funeral rites give the impression that the deceased was a great man, for whom great things are fitting or deserved, perhaps the greatest things.

These considerations suggest a particular way to understand Hippias’ own overwhelming concern with praise and ridicule. As explained earlier, Hippias is motivated above all by an irrational self-love, which resists acknowledging anything bad about himself. As a result, he believes that he is perfect and complete or, in other words, beautiful. Being praised by others affirms the image he has of himself as
beautiful. He appears magnificent, and as such he believes that great things are fitting for him. Socrates highlights this in his response to Hippias’ third answer by exclaiming “Hurrah, hurrah, Hippias! How wonderfully and grandly and worthily of yourself you have spoken!” (291e). “Hurrah” [ ioctl] is an exclamation common in tragedies. The style of Hippias’ third answer was grand and tragic; he believes such language is fitting for a man such as himself. This is also why Hippias earlier claimed that he would not speak with someone who asked about lowly things such as pots and ladles; it would not be fitting for him. Based on these observations, it seems that the pleasure of being praised is not only that of believing oneself to be great, but also believing oneself to be worthy of great things; the pleasure of praise involves the hope or anticipation of the good things that are fitting for a great person. On the other hand, the pain of ridicule and blame is not only that of believing oneself to be ugly and defective, but also the fear and anticipation of the bad things that are fitting for such a person. Through the power of praise, beautiful and magnificent funeral rites bewitch the soul and breed delusions of grandeur, engendering the hope or expectation that the deceased will receive good things that are fitting for him. These considerations help to explain why Hippias’ answer is followed by an apparent digression on beatings and the punishment of unjust men.

In response to Hippias’ third answer, Socrates claims to admire Hippias for helping as much as he is able, but he notes that the Refuter will now laugh at them most of all. Hippias is unmoved by this, content that the Refuter is wicked and that, having nothing to say in response, he will be laughing at himself and himself be laughed at by those present. Socrates, however, provokes Hippias further by prophesizing that the
Refuter will not only laugh at him but that, if he has a staff and Socrates does not escape by fleeing, the Refuter will actually attempt to strike Socrates. This prompts Hippias to ask whether the Refuter is Socrates’ master and whether he wouldn’t be arrested and made to pay a penalty. Hippias continues by asking whether Socrates’ city is just and whether it allows the citizens to beat each other unjustly. Socrates answers that the city does not allow this, from which Hippias concludes that the Refuter will have to pay a penalty, if he beats Socrates unjustly. Socrates, however, claims that the beating would be just if he were to give the answer that Hippias just gave. At this point, Hippias’ mounting frustration with Socrates and lack of interest in the conversation is evident; he passively-aggressively notes that, if Socrates supposes he deserves a beating, it seems so to Hippias as well, and he leaves it at that. But Socrates once again provokes Hippias, this time by calling Hippias’ own justice into question. He asks whether he should tell Hippias why he supposes himself to deserve a beating for this answer, and he wonders whether Hippias will also beat Socrates without a trial or whether he will he accept an account. Hippias finds the thought of himself acting unjustly to be terrible, and so he is compelled to ask Socrates what he means.

In response to Hippias’ answer, Socrates could have simply explained that the answer is insufficient, and he does eventually do just this. Before that, however, Socrates emphasizes that the Refuter will ridicule him and perhaps even beat him, which leads to considerations regarding justice and the city. What is the significance of this apparent digression, and what do we learn about Hippias from his reaction to Socrates’ comments?
In Attic comedy, being beaten with a stick is a common trope. Socrates’ comment that the Refuter will not only ridicule him but also attempt to beat him with a stick suggests what is at stake in appearing ridiculous to others. The ridiculous man is powerless and unable to defend himself. Whereas Hippias’ answer suggested that the most beautiful thing entails the preservation of oneself and one’s good things always, Socrates’ prophesy presents himself as slavish and shameful, unable to preserve himself and his own, not merely after death but even here and now.

Hippias’ reaction to Socrates’ prophesy highlights his concern with retributive justice. He believes in returning evil for evil. More importantly, he seems to believe the city, which he once again personifies, is the proper enforcer of such justice. If Socrates is beaten unjustly, the city ought to protect him and make the Refuter pay a proper penalty. The city will protect and preserve Socrates. In this way, Hippias’ reaction to Socrates’ prophesy is connected to the more fundamental beliefs about the city underlying his political activities; namely, that the city is some divine and permanent whole, by which he can be personally completed. In some way, Hippias feels that being a good citizen makes him a good person and worthy of good things. Through his political activities, he is the eye of Athena, and as such he is perfected. This is why Hippias reacts so strongly to Socrates’ question of whether he will beat Socrates without trial or accept an account. Hippias prides himself on his ability to judge accounts. Were he to beat Socrates without a trial and refuse to accept an account, he would no longer be a good citizen. He would no longer be the eye of Athena. He would be incomplete, unjust and worthy of punishment, a thought that Hippias calls terrible.
Hippias’ concern with retributive justice suggests that he feels, on account of his political activities, that he is worthy of and deserves great things from the city.

Socrates prefaces his explanation of the justice of his beating by noting that he will continue to imitate the Refuter, so that Socrates does not have to direct the sorts of expressions at Hippias that the Refuter will at Socrates, which Socrates calls “difficult and unwelcome” [χαλεπά τε και ἄλλοκτον] (292c). Here, again, the most basic reason for the elaborate dramatic device of the Refuter is highlighted. The same self-love that drives Hippias to seek praise from the many and motivates his political activities makes Hippias intolerant of personal criticism. Socrates cannot criticize Hippias directly without provoking his indignation; rather, he must hide behind the image of the Refuter and take the criticism on himself.

As mentioned in Section VI, the Refuter here alludes to the way in which Hippias’ political attachments make him unable to understand Socrates’ question by employing a very unusual insult. As Socrates explains, the Refuter would ask whether it would be unjust to beat someone who sang a dithyramb unmusically and very far from the question. The Refuter then reminds Socrates that he was asking about the beautiful itself, that “which inheres in everything in which it becomes present such that that thing is beautiful – stone and wood and human and god and every activity and all learning” (292c-d). Once again, the Refuter emphasizes that the beautiful itself is a kind of cause of the beauty of all beautiful things. But Hippias does not understand what he is being asked, as the Refuter highlights by exclaiming: “...I am asking, human being, what beauty itself is, and I have no more power to make myself heard by you than if you were
a stone sitting beside me, and a millstone at that, having neither ears nor a brain” (293d). As explained earlier, a millstone is a giant, round stone with a hole in the middle, used for grinding grain. It is the same shape as the iris, the middle of the eye of Athena. Calling Hippias a stone, and in particular a millstone, alludes to the fact that he is a political servant, and whether he knows it or not he believes the city is a divine and lasting whole. He believes that, as a part of this divine and lasting whole, he thereby achieves a kind of completion and beauty. He is the stone in the eye of Athena. In calling Hippias a millstone, having neither ears nor a brain, the Refuter mocks this belief, implying that in truth Hippias is merely a part of mill – that is, part of an instrument to provide food, much like the figwood ladle in the pot of soup. He is not completed nor beautified thereby. In fact, he is radically incomplete as a result of his public service, lacking ears and a brain. This particular insult implies that Hippias’ political activities and attachments prevent him from hearing and understanding, let alone answering, Socrates’ question. The incongruity between political life and Socratic philosophy is so great that being a good citizen makes one deaf to Socratic questions.

The Refuter likens Hippias’ attempt to answer the question about the beautiful to someone singing a dithyramb unmusically. The implication is that it would be just to beat such a person, for in this case the beating would be instructional. Whereas Hippias immediately assumes that the painful beating would be a bad thing and warrant some kind of retribution, Socrates suggests that the beating would be educational. But what exactly does Hippias need to learn? In what way is Hippias’ answer about the beautiful equivalent to singing a dithyramb unmusically?
Aristotle identifies the dithyramb as the origin of tragedy (Poetics 1449a). Most basically, a dithyramb is a hymn sung in praise of the god Dionysus. It features bombastic language and is characterized above all by an ecstatic sort of madness, inducing a lack of self-awareness and freedom from care, seemingly akin to the drunken frenzy inspired by the god of wine himself. Dionysus was depicted as a foreigner, bringing a freedom from conventional beliefs and restraints. The subject matter of the dithyramb was the life of Dionysus, in particular his unusual birth. In the most prominent account of his birth, Dionysus is the son of Zeus and the mortal Semele. He is the only one of the twelve Olympians to have a mortal mother. Hera, jealous of Zeus’ affair, convinces Semele (while pregnant with Dionysus) to demand that Zeus reveal himself to her in his true form, which proves fatal to Semele. Zeus, however, rescues the fetal Dionysus and sews him into his thigh, where Dionysus matures and from which he is eventually born anew. As a result, Dionysus gets the epithet “twice born.” He thus comes to symbolize death and consequent rebirth.

What then would it mean to sing a dithyramb unmusically? A dithyramb sung unmusically would fail to effect the characteristic ecstatic state in the listeners; it would fail to inspire the Dionysian madness, drunken oblivion and self-forgetting. Failing in this respect, it would not be a fitting the hymn to Dionysus. But how is Hippias’ answer to the question about the beautiful akin to singing a dithyramb unmusically? On the most superficial level, as we saw earlier, Socrates’ response to Hippias’ third and final answer seemed to indicate that the answer was in some way “tragic,” presumably in its highly wrought words and phrases, and so the style of his answer may have some
connection to a dithyramb. The fact that Dionysus is symbolic of death and consequent rebirth also supports the suggestion that implicit in Hippias’ answer about the beautiful is some belief in the transcendence of mortality. More importantly, however, much like the god Dionysus himself, beautiful objects have the power to inspire a sort of divine madness, an oblivious and shameless state, in which one loses concern with both conventional beliefs and restraints; in a certain way, one even loses concern with oneself. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates refers to the state effected by the beautiful as “erotic madness” (249d-e). Hippias’ answers about the beautiful, however, are sober and un-erotic, as evinced by the fact that the word ἐρως does not occur once in the *Hippias Major*. Hippias is not a lover of the beautiful.

In what way are Hippias’ answers about the beautiful un-erotic? As we saw, his third answer, while seeming to promise to explain the beautiful by nature, is thoroughly conventional. Hippias’ desire for praise prevents him from unfettering himself from conventional beliefs. Perhaps more importantly, Hippias’ answer is that the most beautiful thing is to be honored with funeral rites, which gives the impression of preserving both oneself and one’s private goods. Hippias never loses concern with himself or his own in light of the beautiful. He is selfish. He believes he is beautiful, whole and complete, and he sees beautiful objects as possessions with which he can adorn himself and be praised. This un-erotic character of his relation to beautiful objects is betrayed above all by his silence regarding suffering or sacrifice for the sake of the beautiful. For Hippias, the most beautiful thing is being honored with funeral rites after possessing private goods through a long and complete life; when Socrates speaks
of a beautiful and magnificent funeral in the *Menexenus*, however, it is for those who have died in battle, those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their city. In his refutation of Hippias’ answer, the Refuter draws attention to, among other things, the element of sacrifice missing from Hippias’ answers.

After imitating the Refuter’s insulting reaction to Hippias’ answer, Socrates asks Hippias whether he would be irritated if Socrates, being afraid, told the Refuter that this is what Hippias had affirmed the beautiful to be for everyone and always. Hippias remains confident, asserting that he knows that what he said is beautiful for everyone and will seem so, too. Socrates continues imitating the Refuter, asking whether it will be so in the future, which Hippias affirms, and then whether it was so in the past, which Hippias also affirms. The Refuter then asks whether it was beautiful for Achilles to be honored with funeral rites after his ancestors, and for his grandfather Aeacus, and for as many others as have been born from gods, and for the gods themselves. Hippias is appalled and outraged at this suggestion, noting that these questions are not even respectful to religion, presumably because they deny the divinity of the gods by implying that the gods are mortal, that they can die and so receive funeral rites. Socrates asks whether it is also disrespectful to affirm these things are so when asked, which Hippias acknowledges. This leads the Refuter to assert that it is Socrates who affirmed that for everyone and always it is beautiful to be honored with funeral rites by one’s children and to honor one’s parents with funeral rites, emphasizing that Heracles too is included among everyone, as were the others just mentioned. Hippias exclaims that he did not mean that this is so for gods. He and Socrates agree further that it is not so for heroes.
who were born from gods, but it is so for heroes who were not. The Refuter points out that, accordingly, what Hippias said is terrible, impious and ugly for Tantalus, Dardanus and Zethus (all children of Zeus), but it is beautiful for Pelops and others who were born as he was (that is, from mortals). It follows that being honored with funeral rites by one’s children after having honored one’s parents with funeral rites is ugly sometimes and for some, and so it is impossible that this become and be beautiful for all. The Refuter then chastises Socrates, concluding that he is still unable to say what the beautiful is.

As was the case with Hippias’ first answer, the gods once again play a key role in the refutation of Hippias’ third answer. In this case, however, Hippias finds the reference to the gods impious. The examination of Hippias’ third answer, that the most beautiful thing is for a man to be honored with funeral rites, is marked by a digression on the retributive justice of the city and considerations of piety. The Refuter presumably could have chosen any number of ways to refute Hippias’ third answer; he could have asked, for instance, whether the condition of “being honored by the Greeks” would apply among the barbarians. Why then does he choose this refutation, which brings to the fore Hippias’ concern with religious propriety? And what does this reveal about Hippias’ opinions regarding beauty?

The Refuter focuses on the condition that one be honored with funeral rites by his own children after having honored his own parents in a similar manner. As noted earlier, this condition reveals a certain respect for the ancestral implicit in Hippias’ answer, as well as a connection between this respect for the ancestral and piety more
generally. The respect for the ancestral first came to light in the earlier discussion of Spartan law; it was shown to be at the heart of the family and of the city, giving authority to fathers and to law more generally. It is the reason Hippos is prohibited from peddling his progressive and foreign education in Sparta, whereas he is applauded for recounting founding myths, which trace the origin of the city to ancient heroes accorded divine laws. As with Hippos’ comments regarding the city as the enforcer of retributive justice, this respect for the ancestral and religious propriety indicate Hippos’ thoroughly political character. Despite the fact that Hippos seemed to have contempt for the ancient founding myths, his own opinions about nobility are nevertheless defined in accordance with them (which makes sense considering they are merely the opinions of the many). His desire for praise from the many leads him not only to speak, but also to think, in accordance with the many, as suggested by his objection that the Refuter’s questions are not εὖφημα or, literally, “well said.” In these ways, the particular refutation draws attention to Hippos’ own respect for the ancestral and related religious propriety, which is at the heart of his indignation at questions regarding the divinity of Zeus, father of gods and men. Once again, Hippos comes to light as an embodiment of the beliefs and impulses of the city.

The refutation of Hippos’ third answer also confirms the earlier suggestion that the beauty of being honored with funeral rites is essentially connected to the way in which funeral rites give the impression that the deceased and his goods are preserved forever. The refutation hinges on the fact that gods are immortal and as such it is not fitting for them to be honored with funeral rites; they need no such preservation. The
Refuter’s questions are disrespectful because they imply that gods, such as Thetis and Zeus himself, might die. The suggestion that the immortal can somehow become mortal is “terrible, impious and ugly” (293). This makes a certain sense if the most beautiful thing entails the opposite of this; namely, that the mortal somehow become immortal. That which has come into being can be, simply and without perishing. As Hippias admits, he did not mean his answer to apply to gods or to children of gods. He meant it to apply to men generated from men, to mortals. Whereas gods are immortal simply, men must find some way to partake in immortality. Unfortunately, reproduction appears to preserve the family or species over the individual self. Individual preservation requires some other way, which appears provided by beautiful and magnificent funeral rites.

Hippias’ indignant reaction to the Refuter’s question further highlights this same point. Seemingly appalled that the Refuter would dare to imply that the immortal gods might somehow perish, Hippias exclaims: “What’s this? Throw him to the Blessed!” [Τί τούτο; Βάλλα ές μακαρίαν]. This is a unique curse, which Hippias seems to have coined here. The phrase Βάλλα ές κόρακας is a curse, common in Aristophanes’ comedies, meaning “Throw (him) to the crows”; that is, leave the deceased unburied and exposed, to rot and be eaten by crows, without the very sort of funeral rites that Hippias has just identified as beautiful. The allusion to this curse suggests once again what is achieved by being honored with funeral rites. Being honored with funeral rites hides the natural decay of the body, giving the illusion that what has come into being does not perish, but rather is preserved. Maintaining this appearance is so important to Hippias that it
seems he cannot even bring himself to say the whole curse “Throw him to the crows.”

Hippias is unwilling to face, even in speech, the natural decay of the body. His self-love compels him to hide his mortality, among his other shortcomings, from himself. Being honored with funeral rites does just this. Transcending death and the natural decay of the body, however, would seem to require something supernatural; it would appear to require the favor of the blessed gods. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Hippias combines the curse “throw him to the crows” with another curse, found only once in Aristophanes, the euphemism ἄπαγ’ ἐς μακαρίαν, meaning “away to blessedness.”

“Blessedness” here appears to be a byword for the gods, whose epithet is “blessed”; “away to blessedness,” appears to mean “lead him to the gods”, presumably to be punished. So, in response to the Refuter’s seemingly impious questions, which imply the perishing of the immortal, Hippias coins his own minced oath, in which he replaces the reference to crows, which feast on exposed and rott ing corpses, with the image of blessed, happy and immortal gods, who have the power both to punish as well as reward the deceased in the afterlife.

These observations help to confirm the basic suggestion that the beauty of being honored with funeral rites magnificently and beautifully is due to the impression that the deceased and his goods are preserved for all time; in death, one can be perfected. It appears that, although he is not fully aware of it, Hippias’ political activities and the consequent praise make him feel he is worthy of such a reward, that the greatest things are fitting for him. It also appears, however, that he is blind to any element of sacrifice that such desert entails. Further, he does not seem to have considered what would be
required for this kind of perfection. It would require gods, who are concerned with the
city and who have the power to punish and reward. That is to say, it would require
something like the founding myths for which Hippias has contempt to be true. In the
course of his refutation, the Refuter mentions seven specific mythological heroes by
name. A consideration of these heroes further highlights the various presuppositions
and requirements entailed by Hippias’ opinions regarding beauty, to which he is blind.

The first hero that the Refuter mentions is godlike Achilles, the greatest hero of
the Trojan War, son of immortal Thetis and the mortal Peleus. Hippias’ paradigm of
beauty included, among other things, reaching old age wealthy, healthy and honored by
the Greeks; he seems to be envisioning someone like Nestor (whom he mentions earlier
and with whom he seems to identify), a hero who lived a long life filled with private
goods (286b). Achilles, however, famously claimed that he had the choice between two
fates: a short life, in which he dies in battle but wins undying glory, or a long, inglorious
life at home in Phythia. The example of Achilles brings to the fore the problem of
human mortality and the attempt to overcome it through winning praise and glory. In
the end, Achilles chooses to sacrifice his life and gain eternal fame, fueled in large part
by his love for his fallen comrade Patroclus and his sense of righteous indignation.
Achilles seems to be a paradigm for the beauty of self-sacrifice and the glory such
sacrifice garners. This is exemplified most clearly when a young man dies in battle, as
opposed to living the long life described by Hippias. The example of Achilles then
connects the desire for praise and glory to self-sacrifice. Furthermore, according to
some accounts, Achilles was rewarded for sacrificing his life for his lover Patroclus by
being sent to the Isles of Blessed (Symposium 179e – 180a). Hippias’ emphasis on a long life in his description of the most beautiful thing, as well as his early claim to be exceptionally prudent, suggests that he is blind to the element of self-sacrifice inherent in beautiful actions. Hippias, consumed by self-love, is insensitive to erotic love and devotion. Hippias’ blindness to the erotic vision of the beautiful and the loss of self-concern that such love entails was alluded to earlier, when the Refuter said that Hippias’ answer was akin to singing a dithyramb unmusically. He is so extraordinarily vain that he is blind to the personal sacrifices he must make to earn praise.

After Achilles, the Refuter mentions Aeacus, Achilles’ grandfather and the son of Zeus and Aegina. Aeacus was said to have been, with the help of Zeus, the founder and first king of the island of Aegina. He was known for his outstanding justice and piety, settling disputes among both men and gods. As a result, after his death, Aeacus became one of the three judges of souls entering Hades (along with Rhadymanthus and Minos), and so he is often depicted bearing a scepter and the keys to Hades. In the Gorgias, Socrates himself states that there is an ancient law stating that when a just and pious man dies, he goes to the Isles of the Blessed to live in complete happiness, out of the reach of evils, but when an unjust and godless man dies, he is sent to the prison known as Tartarus for payment and retribution; Aeacus, he claims, is the judge presiding over the souls of Europeans, deciding who among the dead is sent to the Isles of the Blessed and who is sent to Tartarus (523a – 524a). Hippias boasted at the beginning of the dialogue that he is believed to be a most capable judge of speeches given by various cities (281b). The example of Aeacus appears to connect Hippias’ political activities and
his concern with justice and piety, highlighted in this section of the dialogue, with the attempt to become dear to the gods and rewarded with eternal happiness in the afterlife.

The next mentioned, Heracles, the greatest of the Greek heroes, stands alone. The son of Zeus and Alcmene, Heracles was hated and tormented by Zeus’ wife Hera. Much like Achilles, it is said that when Heracles entered adulthood, he had to choose between two lives, either an easy life of simple pleasures or a difficult life of virtue, by which he would win praise and eternal glory; Heracles chose the latter. In this context, the most relevant aspect of the story of Heracles is that, when he died, he was said to be have been deified by Zeus. He is unique among the heroes for being regarded as both a mortal hero and an Olympian god. He is an example of someone who lived a difficult life of virtue and as a result found favor with the gods, so much so that he transcended his mortality, achieving apotheosis. When the Refuter asks whether what Hippias had said was beautiful for Heracles, Hippias responds that he did not mean it was so for gods, suggesting that Hippias at least has the tradition of Heracles’ apotheosis in mind (293a). Heracles is the epitome of what was implied by the previous examples. Heracles, who lived a life of toil and sacrifice, is rewarded by Zeus with ultimate fulfillment, the transcendence of mortality and eternal happiness. The example of Heracles highlights what seemed so beautiful in Hippias’ final answer, namely that being honored with funeral rites hides human mortality, giving the impression of that the deceased and his goods are preserved forever. It also highlights what Hippias does not see, that the kind of completion and self-sufficiency he believes
he has achieved appears to require both personal sacrifice as well as the intervention of the gods; that is to say, supernatural power.\textsuperscript{18} 

After Heracles is Tantalus, the son of Zeus and the nymph Plouto. Tantalus is the middle in the list of the seven heroes named in this section, and he is unique in that he is the only one who challenges the gods and is consequently punished for his impiety. When Tantalus was invited by his father Zeus to a feast on Olympus, he stole ambrosia to bring back to his people, as well as divulging the secrets of the gods. Worst of all, he killed his own son, Pelops, cutting him into pieces and boiling him, making a stew that he then served to the Olympian gods. All the gods noticed what Tantalus had done, except for Demeter, who was distracted by the recent loss of her daughter and so absentmindedly ate the shoulder of Pelops. Zeus subsequently commanded that Pelops be resurrected; the parts of his body were collected together and made whole, the missing part of his shoulder replaced with ivory carved by Hephaestus. Zeus then condemned Tantalus to an eternity in Tartarus, where he was punished by being forced to stand in a pool of water next to a tree with low hanging fruit; whenever Tantalus reached out for the fruit, the branches raised the fruit out of his reach, and whenever he bent down to drink water, the pool evaporated. Tantalus disrespected the gods, most of all his father Zeus, and he attempted to break the most ancient laws, in particular that forbidding cannibalism. In these ways, he disrespected the ancestral, and consequently he was punished, condemned to an eternity with desires whose satisfaction is forever just out of reach. The previous examples of heroes suggested that justice and piety (or, respect for the ancestral) makes one dear to the gods and can
result in the possession of good things forever (that is, the satisfaction of erotic desire as described by Diotima); the example of Tantalus, on the other hand, suggests the inverse, that disrespecting the ancestral makes one hateful to the gods and can result in the lack of the good things forever, eternal longing and suffering. As Cephalus describes in the *Republic*, the just have sweet hope regarding the afterlife, whereas the unjust are filled with fear and anticipation of divine punishment (330d – 331b).

The next heroes mentioned are Dardanus, the son of Zeus and Electra, and Zethus, the son of Zeus and Antiope. Both Dardanus and Zethus are important figures in ancient Greek founding myths. Dardanus founded Dardania, and his descendants founded Troy. Zethus, along with his brother Amphion, constructed the walls of Thebes. Furthermore, in Euripides’ lost play *Antiope*, Zethus debates his brother Amphion regarding the best way of life; Zethus argues in favor of an active political life, whereas Amphion argues for a peaceful life of contemplation. In the *Gorgias*, Plato specifically references this argument, having Callicles liken himself to Zethus in arguing for an active political life against Socrates, whom he likens to Amphion. The heroes mentioned previously seem to allude to the human desire to transcend one’s mortality and the need to win the favor of the gods. Dardanus and Zethus allude to the fact that, according to what is commonly said, the gods are heavily invested in the fate of the city. The political life championed by Zethus comes to light as a way to win the favor of the gods. The founding myths suggest the connection between the common good of the city and the ultimate private good of the individual, in that the individual can become
dear to the gods through political activities and so, perhaps, satisfy the desire to transcend mortality.

The final hero mentioned is Pelops, who was cut to pieces by his father Tantalus and resurrected and made whole again through the power of the gods. He was honored at Olympia, and the cult of Pelops developed into the founding myth of the Olympic Games, an expression of the unity of all the Greeks. The reference to Pelops seems then to combine much of what has come before. Pelops is an example of the power of the gods to resurrect a human being and (both literally and figuratively) make him whole and complete (which, ultimately, would entail immortality); it also connects this private sense of wholeness to the public importance of political unity and stability. Once again, throughout the *Hippias Major*, Hippias’ actions betray the belief that, by contributing to the common good of the city and winning praise, somehow he himself is made complete and whole. But this seems to presuppose that founding myths, like those referenced above, are true.

The Refuter concludes his argument by noting that sometimes and for some people it is ugly to be honored with funeral rites by their children after having likewise honored their parents, and so it is still more impossible for this “to become and be” beautiful for all (293c). One would expect the Refuter to conclude that it is impossible that this “be” beautiful for all, but instead he claims that it is impossible “to become and be” beautiful for all. In so doing, the Refuter seems once again to be alluding to what is implicit in Hippias third and final answer; namely, that being honored with funeral rites
appears to make that which has come in to being be simply; one is born and one is, always without perishing.

The refutation of Hippias’ third answer is the culmination of the first half of the *Hippias Major*. The first half of the dialogue begins by laying bare the character of Hippias. He is motivated above all by vanity, the result of his overly developed self-love. This compels Hippias to seek praise from the many to confirm his self-worth and prevents him from acknowledging any of his own shortcomings, even to himself. In order to be praised by the many, he must engage in practical politics for the sake of the city. He must also know and repeat whatever the many hold to be true; his wisdom is above all knowledge the conventional opinions. He is the perfect sophist, as described in the *Republic* (493a – 494a). For this reason, he is also an image of the city itself. His own claim to omniscience reflects the city’s claim to omniscience, embodied in its laws and customs. Moreover, his spirited reaction to Socrates’ arguments, which threaten to expose his own ignorance, mirrors the city’s spirited reaction to Socratic philosophy, which threatens to undermine its laws by calling into question the ancestral accounts. Because he teaches cosmopolitan and progressive arts and sciences, Hippias at first appears to be in tension with the city, but his desire for praise leads him to refrain from teaching these subjects in cities that do not honor them, such as Sparta. There he teaches what they honor, founding myths, which instill in the young certain opinions about the city that help to make them useful citizens. In order to be praised, Hippias must be a political servant. His wisdom is circumscribed by the city.
Hippias’ attempts to answer, as well as failure to understand, the question “What is the beautiful?” reveal that his thought is limited to the opinions of the many, who cannot accept that there is some beautiful itself other than the many particular and lawfully accepted beautiful things. Hippias not only speaks, but also thinks, as the many do, which is to say imprecisely. His desire to appear beautiful to the many compels him to embrace their understanding of beauty. Very generally, a beautiful thing is whole and complete, and for a human being this would mean being immortal. One can become beautiful by means of devotion to the city, which makes one dear to the gods and worthy of the greatest rewards, eternal preservation and happiness. This, however, is a political understanding of beauty, which presupposes that the founding myths be true; that is to say, it presupposes punitive gods, invested in the city with the power to dispense eternal punishments and rewards.

Hippias himself, however, is only dimly aware of any of this. He is praised, which makes himself feel like a great man, worthy of the greatest things. But he does not understand that his self-satisfaction only makes sense on the presumption that the founding myths are true. The apparently secular Hippias, who earlier spoke of religious founding myths with contempt, is shown to hold a view of beauty that defines how he lives his life and that is inseparable from the city and its religious founding myths, and from piety more generally. Praise is a private good that is acquired by helping others, and so it harmonizes the private and public goods. But the goodness of praise is connected to certain political beliefs and religious hopes. Hippias’ morality is not as secular as he thinks. It is one thing to claim to be an atheist; it is another to live
accordingly. Hippias knows not what he does. For all his knowledge and intelligence, which is ample, he completely fettered by conventional morality, as evinced by his propriety and concern with appearing ridiculous. For this reason, he risks being extraordinarily imprudent, despite his early boasts to the contrary (281d). Because his vanity prevents him from acknowledging that he is lacking, he is un-erotic; as such, he is prevented from reflecting on what he wants and what that would require.

The connection between the conventional understanding of beauty and latent religious beliefs has the further consequence that Socrates' investigation of beauty is in a way an investigation of our opinions about the gods. Hippias' condemnation of Socrates' at the end of the dialogue foreshadows the city's own condemnation of Socrates for impiety and corrupting the youth. But such an investigation of the gods, on whom the hopes of transcending mortality rest, is intertwined with the investigation of nature and natural causation more generally. Can anything that comes into being be preserved eternally? What causes any one thing to come to be, exist and to perish? This is the focus of the second half of the dialogue, which begins with the first reference to nature (293e).
Part Two: Autopsy of the Beautiful

Section VIII (293c7 – 294e10): The Refuter’s Suggestion, the Fitting and the Nature of the Fitting Itself

The previous section marked the end of the first half on the *Hippias Major*, which consists of an exposition of Hippias’ character and the conventional opinions regarding beauty that he both embodies and espouses. The second half of the dialogue begins with an attempt to move beyond these conventional opinions to an examination of nature. Hippias, however, is impeded by his inability to properly distinguish the form of the beautiful from particular beautiful things. The current section focuses on this impediment and its consequences.

Socrates claims that the Refuter will reproach him justly for his previous answer. He then adds that, although for the most part the Refuter converses with him in this way (that is, refuting him), on occasion the Refuter himself will make a suggestion, asking Socrates whether the beautiful (or whatever he happens to be inquiring about and which the argument concerns) is some such thing. He does this, Socrates notes, as though pitying Socrates for his inexperience and lack of education. Hippias asks what Socrates means by this, and Socrates explains that the Refuter would tell him to stop giving such answers in such a way, since they are extremely naive and easily refuted (presumably because they are particular things); rather, he should consider whether beauty seems to him to be that which they grasped in Hippias’ previous answer.
(referring to the examination of Hippias’ second answer, that the beautiful is gold).

According to the Refuter, they had agreed that gold is beautiful for those things for which it is fitting, and not beautiful for those things for which it is not fitting. The Refuter then asks Socrates to consider whether “this very thing, the fitting and the nature of the fitting itself,” happens to be the beautiful. Socrates claims he is accustomed to assent to such suggestions every time, since he does not have anything else to say. He then asks Hippias whether it seems to him that “the fitting is a beautiful thing,” and Hippias emphatically agrees.

The question the Refuter proposed was whether “this very thing, the fitting and the nature of the fitting itself” \([\textit{α\'υτο \ δή το\'το το \pi\rho\'\piον και τ\'ην \phi\'υσιν α\'υτού τού πρ\'εποντος}]\) happens to be “the beautiful” \([\tau\'ο κα\'λον]\). When Socrates poses this question to Hippias, however, he rephrases it, asking Hippias simply whether it seems to him that “the fitting is a beautiful thing” \([\tau\'ο πρ\'επον κα\'λον \epsilon\'ιναι]\). What is the difference between the Refuter’s original suggestion, which emphasizes “the nature” of the fitting, and the way in which Socrates chooses to rephrase it? And why does Socrates choose to rephrase the Refuter’s question in this way?

A clue to understanding the difference between the two suggestions comes to light when one contrasts what the Refuter claims was said earlier with what was actually said. The Refuter refers to the examination of Hippias’ second answer, that the beautiful is gold, which was a response to the Refuter’s insistence that the beautiful be “that by which all other things are adorned and appear beautiful whenever this form becomes present” (289d). That is to say, gold was Hippias’ attempt to identify the
beautiful as the cause of the beauty of other things, which Socrates elsewhere refers to as the “form” of beauty” (*Phaedo* 99d – 102b). The Refuter claims that they had said that gold is beautiful for those things for which it is fitting and it is not beautiful for those things for which it is not fitting (293e). This, however, is not quite accurate.

Socrates did ask Hippias whether ivory and gold, like stone, make things appear beautiful whenever they are fitting but make things appear ugly whenever they are not. But Hippias hesitated to agree to this, asserting instead that whatever is fitting to each thing makes each thing beautiful (290d1-6). It seemed that Hippias’ hesitation to simply agree was due to the fact that gold and ivory, unlike stone, are beautiful considered on their own, and so in Hippias’ view they always make everything to which they are added appear beautiful and never make anything appear ugly. The examination of Hippias’ answer, however, revealed that Hippias had not considered the significance of parts and wholes with respect to beauty, which the example of the stone in the statue of Athena highlights. Hippias imagines the cause of beauty in other things must itself be a beautiful thing, like gold, but he has not considered how a stone, which is not beautiful considered in itself, can cause a statue to be beautiful by being a proper part of the statue. Relatedly, Hippias believes that covering something with a beautiful adornment makes the thing so adorned beautiful. He has not considered the way in which the thing so adorned merely appears beautiful, but is not so, since the adornment is not a proper part of that thing.¹ In these ways, the difference between what the Refuter claims was said and what Hippias was actually willing to say alludes to the confusions implicit in Hippias’ second answer (and, in particular, his inability to distinguish the form of the
beautiful from a particular beautiful thing), confusions which prevent Hippias from understanding the Refuter’s suggestion.

After Hippias emphatically agrees that the fitting is beautiful, Socrates suggests that they should consider the answer, lest they be deceived. At this point in the dialogue, Socrates himself, as opposed to the Refuter, takes on the role of examining and eventually refuting this suggestion. Commanding Hippias to look, Socrates asks whether the fitting, when it becomes present, makes each of those things in which it is present “appear” beautiful, or makes them “be” beautiful, or neither (293e – 294a). Hippias does not choose any of the options offered by Socrates but instead simply replies, “It seems to me, at least” [Ἔμοιγε δοκεί]. Hippias’ response here makes no sense, highlighting that he does not understand what he is being asked. But why is Hippias unable to understand Socrates’ basic question?

Socrates’ question is premised on the distinction between appearing beautiful and being beautiful. In the earlier examination of Hippias’ second answer, no such distinction was made (289d-e). It seems that, for Hippias, appearing beautiful and being beautiful are the same, and so he expects one thing to cause both. What Hippias wants to say, and what he will say in what follows, is that the fitting makes things both appear beautiful and be beautiful. Socrates, however, does not offer this possibility when posing his question to Hippias, which explains Hippias’ initial confusion. As even Socrates himself notes elsewhere, beauty does have a unique connection to perception, to sight in particular, and so Hippias’ initial resistance to the distinction between appearing beautiful and being beautiful is in a way unsurprising (Phaedrus 250b-e). But,
additionally, Hippias’ resistance to distinguishing between what appears beautiful and what is beautiful seems to arise in large part from his attachment to the opinions of the many. A distinction between what appears to be beautiful and what is beautiful (which amounts to a distinction between opinion and truth) would call into question the validity of the conventional opinions regarding beauty to which Hippias is attached. More importantly, it would call into question Hippias’ own self-worth, insofar as it is determined by the praise he receives from appearing beautiful to the many.

Despite Hippias’ confusion, Socrates presses the question, forcing Hippias to decide whether the fitting is that which makes things appear beautiful or that which makes them be beautiful. When pressed, Hippias sides with appearances, explaining his choice by means of an illuminating example: the fitting is that which makes things appear beautiful, just as whenever someone possesses suitable clothes and sandals, even if he is laughable, he appears more beautiful (294a). Socrates concludes from this that, if what Hippias claims is true and the fitting makes things appear more beautiful than they are, the fitting would be a certain deception about the beautiful. And this would not be what they are seeking, for they are seeking that by which all beautiful things are beautiful.

Hippias’ example clarifies how he understands Socrates’ reformulation of the Refuter’s suggestion, that the fitting is a beautiful thing. Apparently, Hippias imagines “the fitting” to be a particular thing, like a cloak or sandals, that one can possess and that is “suitable” [ἁρμόττοντα]. But in what way are particular clothes suitable? The fact that they might be worn by a laughable man suggests that their suitability or
appropriateness is not determined in relation to the man who wears them; after all, laughable clothes would be suitable or appropriate for a laughable man, insofar as they would reflect his true character. It seems that the clothes are suitable or fitting considered in themselves (or, perhaps more accurately, suitable to a respectable man).

The mistakes suggested in Hippias’ earlier discussion of gold are here confirmed. Just as gold is beautiful considered on its own and can make something appear beautiful by covering it, so too can “suitable” clothes. Hippias believes that possessing such beautiful objects makes him beautiful. He does not distinguish between himself and his own things. Hippias’ example, a laughable man who would nevertheless appear more beautiful by wearing suitable clothes and sandals, may have been intended as disparaging piece of fashion advice for the apparently laughable Socrates, who is likely unshod and wearing a dirty cloak. The conclusion, however, is certainly a slight toward Hippias. For all Hippias’ beautiful possessions, he himself is not beautiful; he merely appears to be, to himself and others.

Socrates notes that the fitting, as just interpreted by Hippias, would not be what they are seeking, for they are seeking that by which all beautiful things are beautiful. He then illustrates what they were seeking by means of his own example. He claims that “it is just like that by which all large things are large, by the exceeding; for by this all large things are so, and even if they do not appear so but they exceed, it is necessary for them to be large” [ὡσπερ ὃ πάντα τὰ μεγάλα ἐστὶ μεγάλα, τῷ ὑπερέχοντι· τοῦτῳ γὰρ πάντα μεγάλα ἐστι, καὶ ἐὰν μὴ φαίνηται, ὑπερέχῃ δὲ, ἀνάγκη αὐτοῖς μεγάλοις εἶναι]. So too
they are seeking the beautiful by which all beautiful things are so, whether they appear so or not.

As other interpreters have noted, Socrates’ explanation of what he and Hippias are seeking is reminiscent of his comments in the Phaedo regarding the form of the cause with which he has busied himself; that is, the forms (100b – 103a). In the Phaedo, Socrates emphasizes the distinction between the material, which he identifies as that without which a cause could not be a cause, and the genuine cause itself. He claims that he no longer understands what he calls “those wise causes” (100c10), explaining that if someone should say that something is beautiful because of its blossoming color or shape, he bids farewell to all that; instead, he asserts his safe answer, that it is by the beautiful that all beautiful things are beautiful. Likewise, “all big things are big, and bigger things bigger, by bigness” [μεγέθει ἅρα τὰ μεγάλα μεγάλα καὶ τὰ μείζω μείζω] (100e5). He explains further that it would not be permitted for someone to claim that one man is bigger than another by a head and that the smaller man is smaller by this same thing; instead, one ought to insist that every bigger thing is bigger by nothing other than bigness (100d -101a). Similarly, Socrates explains that Simmias does not exceed Socrates by being Simmias, but rather by the bigness that Simmias has (102b-c).

Although Socrates’ comments in the Phaedo are similar to his explanation of what he and Hippias are seeking, there is an important difference. Whereas in the Phaedo Socrates claims that big things are big “by bigness” [μεγέθει], in the Hippias Major he claims that all big things are big “by the exceeding” [τῷ ὑπερέχοντι]. The
beautiful they are seeking is analogous to “the exceeding” and not to “bigness”. What then is the difference between “the exceeding” and “bigness”? And what is entailed by Socrates’ claim that their search for the beautiful is akin to searching for “the exceeding”? In the *Phaedo*, Socrates warns against asserting that “ten things are more than eight by two and exceed them because of this cause” (101b). After all, two, considered in itself, does not exceed eight; two is less than eight. So how could two, which is less than eight, be the cause of ten exceeding eight? The claim that two is the cause of ten exceeding eight confuses the piece of ten that exceeds eight with the cause of ten exceeding eight. It confuses a part of the material of ten with its form. Likewise, the claim that all big things are big “by the exceeding” confuses a piece of material, the piece which exceeds, with the property of exceeding. Analogously, when Hippias imagines the cause of beauty, he imagines a material thing that is beautiful, like gold. He does not distinguish the form from a particular and material beautiful thing.

These observations explain the difference between the Refuter’s original suggestion and Socrates’ reformulation, while clarifying why Socrates reformulates the suggestion as he does. When the Refuter suggests that “the fitting and the nature of the fitting itself” might be the beautiful, he is asking about the form understood as distinct from any particular fitting thing. When Socrates rephrases this suggestion, he does so in such a way as to reflect Hippias’ own limited understanding, which was highlighted at the very beginning of their investigation, when Hippias claimed that there is no difference between “the beautiful” and “a beautiful thing” (287d). In the current
section, Socrates reflects Hippias’ misunderstanding in his reformulation of the Refuter’s suggestion, asking whether “the fitting is a beautiful thing,” excluding any mention of “the nature of the fitting itself” and “the beautiful.” When Socrates claims that their search for the beautiful is like searching for “the exceeding,” he means that they are searching for a cause of beauty that is itself a beautiful thing, just like someone searching for the cause of bigness in the piece of material that exceeds. In this way, Socrates’ reformulation indicates how his search with Hippias for the beautiful is circumscribed by Hippias’ limited understanding. Once again, the earlier sections suggested that Hippias’ inability to distinguish the form of the beautiful from a particular beautiful thing stems primarily from his attachment to common opinion and law, which establish what particular things are beautiful, but not what the beautiful itself is. Acknowledging a form of beauty separate from particular beautiful things requires first admitting one’s own ignorance of what this is, which Hippias is loath to do, and it opens the possibility that what appears to be beautiful might not be beautiful in truth, a possibility that Hippias will not seriously entertain, as his next suggestion reveals.

Socrates concludes that the fitting is not the beautiful they are seeking, since the fitting – according to Hippias’ argument – makes things appear more beautiful than they are, but it does not allow things to appear such as they are. He then restates the question, claiming that it is necessary to try to say what it is that makes things be beautiful, whether or not they appear so, for this is what they are seeking, if they are seeking the beautiful. Socrates here emphatically distances himself from the argument
that the fitting makes things appear more beautiful than they are (294b7); this is what follows from Hippias’ argument, not an argument Socrates himself necessarily endorses. In Hippias’ argument, the fitting was imagined to be a particular thing that could be added to something else. Socrates’ qualified rejection of the fitting so understood suggests that there may be a different and more promising way to understand what is meant by “the fitting.” The earlier argument about the stone and the statue of Athena suggested that the fitting should be conceived in terms of parts and wholes. Instead of a particular thing, perhaps the fitting should be understood as the relation of parts to a greater whole.

In response to Socrates’ claim that the beautiful they seek makes things be beautiful, whether they appear so or not, Hippias counters that the fitting makes things both be and appear beautiful when it is present. This is the option that Socrates conspicuously did not mention when first posing his question to Hippias, which is why Hippias was initially perplexed (293e – 294a). Given a moment to reflect, Hippias is able to formulate this missing possibility on his own. He seems to genuinely believe this claim, that the fitting (as he understands it) makes things both be and appear beautiful. Thus, his acquisition of fitting objects, like clothes and money, which make him appear beautiful to others, make him at the same time, as he believes, be beautiful.

Socrates, however, forces Hippias to distinguish the appearance of beauty from its being. He begins by asking Hippias whether it is impossible for things that are in fact beautiful not to appear to be beautiful, if that which makes them appear beautiful is present. Hippias answers that it is impossible. Socrates then asks whether they will
agree that all things that are in fact beautiful, including lawful things and pursuits, are both believed to be beautiful and appear beautiful always to everyone. Or, quite to the contrary, are they often unrecognized, and isn’t strife and battle about these things most of all, both in private for individuals and in public for cities? Hippias acknowledges that they are unrecognized, and Socrates points out that they would not be unrecognized if appearing were present with them – and it would be present, if the fitting were a beautiful thing and not only made things be beautiful but also appear so (294c-d).

Socrates’ refutation of Hippias’ suggestion (that the presence of the fitting makes things both be and appear beautiful) centers on beautiful “lawful things and pursuits” [νόμιμα και ἐπιτηδεύματα], in particular. In the second half of the Hippias Major, lawful things and pursuits recur as uniquely problematic examples of beautiful things. In this exchange, Socrates does not call into question whether Hippias himself knows which lawful things and pursuits are in fact beautiful; he is willing to tacitly grant for the sake of argument that Hippias does know, as he will explicitly grant at the end of the dialogue, as well (304b). Socrates merely draws attention to the fact that the lawful things and practices that Hippias knows to be beautiful were not believed to be beautiful and did not appear beautiful at all times nor among all peoples. The religious laws and practices believed to be beautiful, for example, change over time and from city to city (Minos 315b – d). Even the gods disagree about such things, if what is said is true and they fight with each other (Euthyphro 7a-e). Earlier in the Hippias Major, Socrates examined how the private education that Hippias conveys regarding the liberal arts,
which he knows to be a lawful and beneficial pursuit, is not believed by the Spartans to be such and so is outlawed (283b – 284b). As a result of these kinds of disagreements, Socrates reminds Hippias, there is battle and strife in both private and public. Hippias must concede that the self-evident truths he perceives are not known by everyone always.

As Socrates notes, the lawful things and pursuits that are beautiful in truth are not “reputed” or “believed” [δοξάζεσθαι] to be beautiful nor “appear” [φαίνεσθαι] so to everyone always; they are unrecognized [ἀγνοεῖσθαι]. Socrates here pairs “believing” with “appearing,” thereby suggesting a connection between the perception of sight, or how things “appear” to one, and what one “believes,” and so with one’s “opinions” [δόξαι] and “convictions” [δόγματα]. As Hippias acknowledges, people do not always believe that the truly beautiful things are beautiful, and people do not always perceive them to be such. This observation alludes to the connection between false opinions and false appearances and deceptions. Hippias himself provides a helpful paradigm for this. If one believes, as the many do, that wealth is beautiful and that the one who possesses wealth is beautiful, Hippias appears beautiful. The belief that wealth and the wealthy man are beautiful may be false, however, and so Hippias’ beautiful appearance, to himself and others, may be a deception. One does not perceive the world simply, but rather as it appears through the lens of our opinions. Similarly, Socrates asks whether the truly beautiful lawful things and pursuits are “unrecognized” or “unknown.” The “knowing” or “recognizing” that Socrates asks about [γνώναι] here denotes a knowledge acquired through observation or perception. There is an
important relation between perception and knowledge, a fact reflected in the expression, “Do you see what I’m saying?” Socrates draws attention to the importance of the connections between perception, deception, opinion and knowledge by utilizing such expressions at the beginning of this section. After Hippias agrees that the fitting is a beautiful thing, Socrates suggests that they “look” or “contemplate” [σκοπώμεθα], lest they be deceived; Hippias agrees that it is necessary to “look,” and then Socrates commands him to “see” [ὁρᾶν], before posing his question.

The earlier allusion to the *Phaedo* helps bring together many of these observations. The allusion calls to mind Socrates’ account of his own method, his “second sailing” and search for the cause of the beings (95e – 102a). Socrates first describes the insufficiency of natural science, which tries to account for the coming into being, perishing and existence of beings by means of material in motion. Socrates claims not to know how, according to this kind of account, any one thing comes to be, perishes or exists. He then recounts his hopes for a cosmic teleology, an account wherein the good is the ordering principle and cause of the universe; but he laments that he was never able to discover such an account. He then describes his own search for a cause, which he prefaces with a cautionary analogy. Socrates describes how people who watch an eclipse of the sun ruin their eyes and go blind if they stare at the eclipse directly; in order to avoid this, they must look at the reflection of the eclipse in water or some such material. Similarly, Socrates feared that he would blind his soul if he looked at things with his eyes and tried to grasp them by means of his senses; he thought he should rather take refuge in speeches, which are a kind of reflection or
image of being, and look there for the truth of beings. Socrates then, however, feels the need to correct a misleading implication of his analogy, if it is taken to mean that speeches are more images than deeds. Socrates denies this; deeds, too, are images. He explains further how his examination through speeches proceeds: he begins by laying down the hypothesis that seems strongest and then examining what agrees with this and what does not. In particular, he lays down the hypothesis of the existence of the forms as the cause of the being of particular things.

This passage from the *Phaedo* is itself quite complicated and opaque, but even a superficial consideration of it is helpful for explaining the current section of the *Hippias Major*. The Refuter suggested that the beautiful may be the fitting and “the nature of the fitting itself.” In this way, the second half of the *Hippias Major* begins with an attempt to move from Hippias’ conventional opinions to some understanding of nature. But in order to understand nature, one cannot simply look with one’s eyes; conventional opinions themselves obfuscate nature. What one believes determines what appears to be, and one is thereby deceived. In attempting to move from conventional opinions to knowledge and perception of nature, one must examine in speeches a certain kind of cause of being: the form. Accordingly, Socrates begins this section by warning of deception and commanding Hippias to look, specifically to look at what “we say” (293e).  

Hippias, however, misunderstands what is meant by a form. He is unwilling and unable to accept the existence of a form separate from particular things he opines and which appear to him to be. His misunderstanding of what is meant by form prevents him from truly joining Socrates in the search for knowledge of the beautiful.
Socrates’ repeated emphasis on what they are “searching” for alludes to Hippias’ misunderstanding and the way in which this influences their effort to grasp the beautiful.⁶

Socrates draws attention to Hippias’ misunderstanding of the form as a cause in his concluding summary of the argument as well. After Hippias agrees that truly beautiful lawful things and pursuits are in certain times and places unrecognized, Socrates notes that they would not be unrecognized if appearing, in addition to being, were present. And it would be present, if the fitting were a beautiful thing and not only made things be beautiful but also appear so. So, one of two things is the case. Either the fitting is that which makes things be beautiful, in which case it is the beautiful that they are seeking. Or, the fitting makes things appear beautiful, in which case it would not be the beautiful that they are seeking; for, as Socrates explains, the fitting that they seek makes things be beautiful, “but the same thing would never have the power to appear beautiful and to make things be beautiful” [φαίνεσθαι δὲ καὶ ποιεῖν εἶναι οὐ μόνον καλὰ οὐκ ἂν ποτὲ δύναιο τὸ αὐτὸ] (294e).

Socrates’ concluding statement contains an apparent non-sequitur. In setting up his conclusion, Socrates emphasizes that the fitting is either that which makes things appear beautiful, or it is that which makes things be beautiful; that is, the fitting is the cause of either the appearance of the beauty of things, or of the being of the beauty of things. And so one expects Socrates to conclude by saying that the same thing would never have the power to make things both appear beautiful and be beautiful. But this is not quite what he says. Instead, Socrates says that the same thing would never have
the power “to appear (as beautiful)” and “to make things be beautiful”; that is, the same thing could never itself appear beautiful and be the cause of the being of beauty of things. This conclusion strikes most commentators as such a non-sequitur that they conclude the text must be corrupt, and so they amend the text to say what they expect. A more careful consideration, however, suggests that there is a good reason Socrates states the conclusion as he does.

First, the conclusion Socrates draws is not completely unexpected. Socrates introduced this concluding statement by pointing out to Hippos that beautiful lawful things and pursuits would appear beautiful if “the fitting were a beautiful thing” (294d) and not only made things be beautiful but also appear so. Socrates’ conclusion alludes to how Hippos imagines the form of the beautiful, namely on the model of gold or his own suitable clothes; he imagines that the form of the beautiful is a particular thing, which itself is and appears beautiful, and which can adorn something else, thereby making it be and appear beautiful. When Socrates concludes that the same thing could not appear as beautiful and make others things be beautiful, he is drawing attention to Hippos’ mistaken understanding of the form as a particular thing that itself is and appears beautiful. Such a thing could make other things appear beautiful by adorning them, as the examples of gold and clothes illustrate, but it could not be the cause of their being beautiful. In other words, there is a way in which a thing that itself appears beautiful can make other things appear beautiful, as Hippos’ previous attempts to understand the forms suggested. By replacing the expected clause “make things appear beautiful” with the clause “appear as beautiful,” Socrates highlights this fact, and so too
Hippias’ mistake of imagining the form of the beautiful as a particular thing that is and appears beautiful. The importance of Socrates’ apparent non-sequitur is that it highlights Hippias’ mistake about the cause of being, about the forms. The cause of the being of beauty, or the being of any particular thing, cannot be understood as itself a particular thing of that kind.

Having stated the options in this way, Socrates says that they must decide whether the fitting seems to them to be that which makes things appear to be beautiful or that which makes them be beautiful. In accordance with his earlier example of clothes, Hippias once again says that it is that which makes them appear so, as it seems to him at least. Socrates exclaims “Oh no!” [Βαιβάϊ], an exclamation occurring frequently in comedies, and laments to Hippias: “It has left us, having fled – the knowledge regarding beauty, whatever it is – now that the fitting has appeared as being something other than a beautiful thing” [οἴχεται ἄρ’ ἡμᾶς διαπεφυγός… τὸ καλὸν γνώναι ὅτι ποτὲ ἐστίν, ἐπειδὴ γε τὸ πρέπον ἀλλο τι ἑφάνη ὃν ἢ καλὸν].

In these concluding comments, Socrates personifies the knowledge or recognition of beauty [τὸ καλὸν γνώναι], claiming that it has fled. This claim is reminiscent of Socrates’ comments in the Meno regarding the difference between correct opinion [ἡ ὁρθὴ δόξα] and knowledge [ἡ ἐπιστήμη] (97c – 98b). There Socrates notes that correct or true opinions are like the moving statues of Daedalus, which are not worth much when they are not tied down, for they run away like fugitive slaves. Similarly, correct or true opinions run away from the soul of a human being such that they are not worth much “until someone ties them down by means of calculation of
cause” [ἕως ἂν τις αύτὰς δήση αἰτίας λογισμῷ], at which point the opinion becomes knowledge and permanent. Hippias has many conventional opinions that determine which objects appear beautiful to him, but he has not tied these opinions down by means of a calculation of cause; that is to say, he has not discovered the form of the beautiful. In fact, he does not even understand what is meant by the form as a cause; rather, he imagines the form to be one of the many particular things that appear beautiful to him. Earlier in the *Hippias Major*, there was an allusion to the fact that Socrates claims to be a descendant of Daedalus, and a suggestion that Socrates, not Hippias, represents a kind of progress in wisdom, of such a sort to be truly threatening to the city and its fundamental beliefs (282a). The search for the form of the beautiful that Socrates is conducting has led to the conventional opinions becoming unshackled and fleeing, at least in the way that Hippias has interpreted them. Socrates is an advance over Daedalus, since he can make not only his own things move but those of others, as well (*Euthyphro* 11b – d).

Hippias believes that he is beautiful and wise, beautiful in part because he is wise. He believes he knows what is beautiful because he is intimately familiar with the many particular and conventional opinions about beautiful things. These conventional opinions define how Hippias sees the world. They determine what appears beautiful to him; in particular, they determine how he appears to himself. In the first half of the *Hippias Major*, Hippias attempts to answer Socrates’ question about the beautiful by citing three particular things opined to be beautiful; when the Refuter suggests “the fitting” as the answer, Hippias can only understand this suggestion on the model of the
particular things he believes to be beautiful. The examination of this understanding “the fitting” reveals that it can, in a certain way, make something else appear to be beautiful by adorning it; but it cannot be the cause of something being beautiful in truth. The cause of the being of beauty, or the being of anything, must be understood differently. This different understanding, however, would constitute a challenge to Hippias’ “wisdom,” threatening the particular things he opines to be beautiful.

Admittedly, beautiful things strike our perceptions so strongly that it is difficult to imagine that something that appears beautiful might not be so in truth. The example of beautiful laws and pursuits, however, contradicts this impression, insofar as people disagree, often violently, over which laws and pursuits are beautiful in truth. This example also suggests that the importance of conventional beliefs and opinions in determining what appears beautiful, since different laws and pursuits appear beautiful in different cities. Socrates helped bring to light the being of the fitting through his examination of what is said. Moving from the simple appearance to the appearance of what is in truth requires a precise examination of what is said and a proper understanding of the form as a cause of being. Socrates’ closing comment (to the effect that knowledge of the beautiful has fled since the fitting has appeared as being other than a beautiful thing) leaves open the possibility that the fitting understood as a form, as opposed to a beautiful thing, may nevertheless be the beautiful. But understanding this suggestion would require differentiating the form from a particular thing and clarifying the way which the form is a cause. It is not surprising then that causation
becomes a main theme in the next section, which culminates in the suggestion that the beautiful is the cause of the good.
Section IX (295a1 – 297d9): Socrates’ First Answer, the Useful, the Powerful, and the Beneficial

In the previous section, the Refuter suggested that the beautiful might be “the fitting and the nature of the fitting itself” (293e). Although Hippias agreed with this suggestion, he imagined “the fitting” to be a particular fitting thing, as opposed to a relation between two objects, evinced by his example of a laughable man wearing “fitting” (meaning non-laughable) clothes. But the fitting so understood seemed to make things appear more beautiful than they are in truth. That is to say, the fitting so understood makes things appear, but not be, beautiful, and so it cannot be the cause of the being of the beauty of beautiful things. Alluding to the most salient aspect of Hippias’ misinterpretation of the Refuter’s suggestion, Socrates concludes that the same thing could never have the power to appear as a beautiful thing and to make things be beautiful. In this way, the previous section concludes by drawing attention to Hippias’ misunderstanding of what Socrates is searching for, the cause of the being of beauty, which Socrates elsewhere calls the “form” (289d). The current section fleshes out the consequences of Hippias’ misunderstanding of the form as a cause.

Socrates asks Hippias to consider another suggestion, that the beautiful is whatever is useful (295c). This suggestion is prefaced, however, by an exchange in which Socrates encourages Hippias to continue the search for the beautiful with him (294e – 295c). When Hippias decides that the fitting is that which makes things appear
beautiful but not be so, Socrates exclaims that knowledge of what the beautiful is has fled them, since the fitting has appeared as being other than beautiful. Hippias agrees, swearing by Zeus, adding how very strange this seems to him. For a moment, Hippias admits his ignorance. His admission is somewhat qualified, but nevertheless he here acknowledges something like perplexity. The suggestion that has just been refuted was not his own, and so he likely feels less threatened and is consequently somewhat more willing to admit his ignorance. But this self-awareness does not last long.

Socrates rallies Hippias, calling him a comrade and exhorting him not to give up, for Socrates still has some hope that whatever the beautiful is will be made manifest. At the mere suggestion of discouragement, Hippias regains his usual self-confidence, replying that he will of course continue, since it is not difficult to find. Hippias claims that he knows well that if he were to go into seclusion for a little while and examine the question by himself, he would be able to answer it for Socrates more precisely than total precision. Socrates initially tells Hippias not to make such large pronouncements, asking in addition whether he sees how many troubles the fitting has already caused them and warning that it may become angry with them and run away still more. Socrates quickly recants, however, admitting that he is speaking nonsense, for Hippias will find it easily whenever he is alone. But Socrates begs Hippias by invoking the gods to find it in front of him or, if he wishes, to seek it together with him as they were just now doing. For, Socrates explains, if they find it together, that would be most beautiful. If they do not find it, however, Socrates will be content with his fate, and Hippias will go away and find it easily. Socrates then motivates Hippias further by reminding him that,
if they find it now, Socrates will not annoy Hippias later by asking what Hippias
discovered by himself.

Socrates’ comment that, if they do not find the beautiful, he believes he will be
content with his fate [στέρχω οἶμαι ἐγὼ τῇ ἐμῇ τύχῃ] foreshadows his final comments in
the dialogue, in which he also references his particular fate. After he and Hippias fail to
find the beautiful, Socrates remarks that, whereas Hippias is blessed because he knows
what a human being ought to pursue and has done so ably, “a certain daemonic fate”
[δαιμονία τῇ τύχῃ] has taken hold of Socrates so that he vacillates and is always in
perplexity (304b). Socrates then describes how he is abused by wise men like Hippias
when he displays his perplexity to them; but when he is persuaded by them and says
what they say regarding beautiful pursuits, he is abused by others, above all by the
Refuter, who is a close relative and lives in the same house as Socrates. In the end,
Socrates suggests that it would not be strange if he were benefitted by his association
with both Hippias and the Refuter, for he seems to himself to know what is meant by
the proverb “the beautiful things are difficult” (304d-e).

This prefatory exchange between Socrates and Hippias (and, in particular, its
allusion to Socrates’ closing comments) draws attention to the opposition between the
two of them. Whereas Hippias believes that the beautiful is “nothing difficult to find”
[οὐδὲ γὰρ χαλεπὸν ἐστὶν εὑρεῖν], Socrates suggests he only understands a proverb
asserting that “the beautiful things are difficult” [χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ]. Moreover, Hippias
believes that he would discover the beautiful if he were to go away for a little while and
consider it by himself; when Socrates goes away, by contrast, he will not be by himself,
but rather consistently abused and put into perplexity by the Refuter, even in his own home. Most importantly, Hippias believes that he will be able to say what the beautiful is “more precisely than total precision” \( \text{ἀκριβέστερον ἂν αὐτὸ σοι εἴπωμι τῆς ἀπάσης ἀκριβείας} \). But, as his answers have displayed, what Hippias means by precision is different than what Socrates means. Hippias is confident that he will be able to identify a beautiful thing that is the beautiful itself, perhaps the most beautiful thing (or, at least, what everyone would testify to be such). This is what Hippias means by “precision.” His confidence in his ability arises from his intimate familiarity with the opinions of the many regarding beautiful objects. As Socrates induced Hippias to acknowledge earlier, however, the many are not accustomed to use words precisely (284e).\(^1\) What Socrates seems to mean by precision is an articulation of the form of the beautiful, that which all beautiful objects have in common on account of which they are called beautiful. In the face of such precision, the opinions of the many flee.

In this way, the prefatory exchange highlights the differences between Socrates and Hippias, but in particular it highlights their different understandings of what a “precise” answer to the question about the beautiful entails. Socrates further alludes to Hippias’ mistaken belief that the beautiful itself is a beautiful thing by personifying the beautiful, suggesting that it has fled and warning that it may become angry. The examination of Hippias’ first answer suggested that the most beautiful thing (and so “precise” in the sense of the epitome) would be a god or the class of gods. Socrates’ personification of the beautiful itself as possibly becoming angry appears to allude to this earlier suggestion; the beautiful itself is a beautiful and angry being, reminiscent of
Zeus himself. This impression is made more forceful by the fact that the current section begins with an oath to Zeus (294e10) and concludes with a remarkable four oaths to Zeus almost back to back (297c3, 5, 9, 10).

Very generally, then, the prefatory exchange, which sets the stage for Socrates’ suggestion that the beautiful is the useful, raises a few related questions. First, how does Hippias’ mistaken belief that the beautiful itself is a beautiful thing, highlighted in this exchange, affect the examination of Socrates’ suggestion that the beautiful is the useful? And, second, is there some connection between Hippias’ misunderstanding of the beautiful and the Greek gods such as Zeus, to whom Socrates seems to allude and who are invoked repeatedly at the conclusion of this section?

After this prefatory exchange, Socrates tells Hippias to “contemplate” [θεασαι] what the beautiful seems to him to be. Socrates is about to announce what he says the beautiful is when he interrupts himself to command Hippias to “observe him” [ἐπισκόπει μοι] and “apply his mind entirely” [πάνυ προσέχων τὸν νοῦν] lest Socrates babble. Socrates then suggests that this be a beautiful thing for them: “whatever is useful” [ὅ ἂν χρήσιμον ᾧ]. He then explains that he suggested this “thinking of” [έννοιμενος] what “we say” [φαμέν], namely that eyes are beautiful which have power and are useful “for seeing” [ὁρᾶν], not those which seem to be able but do not have the power “to look” [ἴδειν].

Socrates’ use of words related to sight as metaphors for contemplation calls to mind a suggestion from the previous section, that our phenomenological experience of the world, how things seem to us, is determined to a large degree by our opinions, or (in
another sense) how things seem to us. The “visible world” and the “intelligible world” are not as divided as one might otherwise think. In connection with this point, Socrates uses two different verbs for seeing in his description of the usefulness of beautiful eyes, switching from ὁρᾶν to ἰδεῖν, the latter of which is related to the word for “form” [ἐἶδος] or the “look” that reveals what it is to be a certain thing. In this way, Socrates begins with an allusion to the fact that what he is seeking, the form of the beautiful, is in a certain sense seen, a consideration that will influence how one understands the conclusion of this section, that “the beautiful is in the form of some sort of father of the good” (297b). Relatedly, Socrates emphasizes that his first suggestion arose due to his thinking about what is said. Socratic philosophy involves a “turn to speeches”; it is an attempt to contemplate what is by means of what is said, by a critical reflection on common opinion, which explains Socrates’ particular interest in speaking with Hippias, who is the repository of such opinions. What then is said which would imply that whatever is useful is a beautiful thing?

As Socrates explains, we say that eyes are beautiful that have the power and are useful for looking, not those which merely seem able but do not have the power to see. Moreover, we also say that the whole body is beautiful in this way, one for running and another for wrestling. And again, all living things, a beautiful horse, rooster and quail. And all vessels and vehicles, both those on land and those in the sea, both boats and triremes. And all instruments, both those in music and those in the other arts. And, if you wish, pursuits and laws. Just about all these we call beautiful in the same way. Looking at each of them – how it has grown by nature, how it has been made, and how
it is established – we say that the useful one is beautiful – how it is useful and for what it is useful and when it is useful. But the one that is useless in each of these ways is ugly. Hippias agrees that this seems so to him, and so he and Socrates agree that they are now correct in saying that the useful, above all, happens to be a beautiful thing (295c-e).

Socrates’ suggestion that whatever is useful is beautiful recalls the earlier refutation of Hippias’ second answer, in which it was argued that a figwood ladle is more beautiful than one of gold because it was “more fitting” to a pot of pea soup (290d – 291c). As Socrates noted, the ladle of figwood is more fitting because it would not break the pot and spill the soup, unlike the ladle of gold; rather, it would make the soup more fragrant. That is to say, the figwood ladle is more beautiful because it is more useful in this particular situation. At least, that was Socrates’ argument. But a consideration of this section implied that, contrary to Socrates’ argument, the figwood ladle would not be more beautiful than one of gold. Usefulness alone did not appear to make something beautiful; rather, the comparison of the figwood ladle in the pot of pea soup with the stone in the eye of the statue of Athena suggested that, in order for something to make something else beautiful and be beautified in return, it must be a proper part of a permanent whole, completing that to which it is added and being completed in return. Socrates alludes to their earlier discussion of the eyes of Athena by beginning with the example of beautiful eyes, in particular. Socrates’ claim, that we say beautiful eyes are those that are powerful and useful for seeing, is contradicted (or, at the very least, complicated) by this earlier discussion of the eyes of the statue of Athena (290b-c). The whole statue, along with its eyes, is said to be beautiful, and yet
the eyes only appear to be able to see but do not actually have the power, contrary to Socrates’ claim about what makes eyes beautiful. This example suggests that mere appearance, as opposed to utility, is more essential to beauty than Socrates’ argument presumes. Hippias said that the stone in the eyes of the statue of Athena was beautiful because it is fitting, by which he seemed to mean it plays a proper part in the whole of the statue. This earlier example suggests that there is some appreciation of beautiful eyes other than (or perhaps in addition to) their usefulness. Beautiful eyes appear to be a proper part of greater whole; they are fitting, in this sense. The appreciation of beautiful eyes over and above considerations of their usefulness for seeing is mirrored in the appreciation of the activity of seeing itself, over and above its usefulness. For, as Socrates agrees in the Republic, seeing (along with thinking and being healthy) is a kind of good we like for its own sake and also for the sake of what comes from it or, in other words, its usefulness (357b). Simply put, aesthetic appreciation of a beautiful objects (such as the eyes of Athena) does not seem to be utilitarian. Moreover, the erotic experience prompted by the vision of a beautiful body (as described by Socrates in the Phaedrus, for instance) is not utilitarian in any simple sense. Hippias’ easy acceptance of Socrates’ utilitarian suggestion appears to betray his deeply un-erotic character.

Directly after speaking of beautiful eyes, Socrates claims that we say “the whole body” [tò ὅλον σώμα] is a beautiful thing for the same reason as eyes – that is, on account of its usefulness; one body is useful for running, another is useful for wrestling. These examples suggest a particular way to understand what Socrates means by “useful.” In the Republic, Socrates argues that the “activity” [ἔργον] of a thing is that
which one can do only, or best, with that thing (352d – 353b). In this context, he claims that the activity of eyes is seeing, and that eyes (and every other thing) perform their activity well when accompanied by their proper virtue. In the *Hippias Major*, when Socrates claims that beautiful eyes are those that are “useful” for seeing, he seems to mean by useful those that perform their activity well; they are good, or virtuous, eyes. Likewise, Socrates suggests that different bodies are wholes composed of parts for the sake of different activities, such as running or wrestling. One can imagine that the whole body useful for running would have longer limbs, whereas the whole body useful for wrestling would be stockier. In each case, though, the body is a whole organized for the sake of a certain activity, and the useful body is the one that is organized such as to perform that activity well – the good or virtuous body for running, as opposed to the good or virtuous body for wrestling.

These considerations suggest a connection between what Socrates is seeking (the form of the beautiful understood as an articulation of the defining characteristic all beautiful things have in common insofar as they are beautiful) and what Hippias was earlier inclined to cite (the form of the beautiful understood as an exemplar, the highest or most beautiful thing). Just about any human body is capable of running, and most human beings are in this most general sense, technically, runners. But the whole body that is “useful” for running (meaning virtuous and good at running) will have necessary characteristics organized in a particular way; there will be a necessary arrangement of parts such as to compose a whole that is able to run fastest. The useful or virtuous runner more thoroughly embodies what it is to be a runner, with fewer superfluities and
characteristics detrimental to running. For this reason, one can see what it is to be a runner more clearly in the exemplar runner than in human bodies that are less able to run, whose characteristics obscure the form necessary for running. Based on Socrates’ examples of beautiful eyes (which alludes to the significance of parts of a whole) and of whole bodies (which suggests some further significance of proper activities), the claim that whatever is useful is beautiful seems to imply that virtuous things (that is, “highest types” or “exemplars”) are beautiful. Further, in exemplars, the form (or, what it is to be the thing) is most manifest, through the necessary arrangement of the parts that compose a whole.

These implications about the visible beauty of virtuous things, however, are obscured by the more general force of Socrates’ suggestion. At first blush, Socrates’ claim that useful things are beautiful appears to reduce beauty and the human concern with beautiful objects to relatively crude considerations of utility. Beautiful eyes are useful for seeing, and so one wants beautiful eyes in order to see well. Beautiful bodies are useful for various activities, and so one wants a beautiful body in order to perform certain actions well. Beautiful objects are all merely means to some activity; Socrates’ suggestion appears to ignore aesthetic appreciation, the pleasures of simply beholding of the form of a thing, seemingly divorced from considerations of how it might be used. While this oversight is accounted for in the next section, in which Socrates suggests that the beautiful is the pleasure of hearing and sight, the current section isolates just one aspect of beautiful things, their utility or goodness. Socrates’ opening comments on this score raise a few important questions.
Socrates begins by listing various things that we say are beautiful due to their usefulness: eyes, whole bodies, all living things, vessels and vehicles, all instruments, and “if you wish, pursuits and laws” [ἐι δὲ βούλει, τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα καὶ τοὺς νόμους] (295d). He then asserts that “we call just about all these things beautiful in the same way” [σχεδὸν τι πάντα ταῦτα καλὰ προσαγορεύομεν τῷ αὐτῷ τρόπῳ;] that is, in reference to their usefulness. Socrates is careful not to claim that we call all the things listed beautiful in the same way; rather, he asserts that we call “just about” or “almost” all of them beautiful in the same way. Do we call some one of the things listed beautiful in a somewhat different way than the rest? And might this be the reason that Socrates felt compelled to add the caveat “if you wish” when he mentioned pursuits and laws?

Almost all the beautiful things Socrates lists are useful or beneficial for the one who possesses and uses them. Whoever has beautiful eyes can see well, and whoever has a beautiful body can run well. Whoever has beautiful horses can win at the horse races, and whoever has beautiful vehicles or instruments can use them for their own ends. People have a utilitarian interest in beautiful objects, since possession of beautiful objects contributes to one’s private good. But beautiful pursuits and laws, on the other hand, are laid down for the sake of helping the city, as Socrates and Hippias agreed earlier (284d); that is to say, they are laid down for the sake of the common good, and so often appear to be at odds with one’s private interest. Hippias’ own lack of leisure due to his public service, of which he boasts in his opening speech, highlights this fact. Whereas the other objects mentioned could be called beautiful on account of being useful for the individual who uses them, we call pursuits and laws beautiful (or
noble) for a somewhat different reason. If they are beautiful, it is despite the fact that they are often not useful to the individual who practices them; rather, they are useful to the city as a whole. In fact, when pursuits and laws are useless to the individual (when, that is, they require some sacrifice of one’s private good for the sake of the common, such as being a soldier and risking one’s life in war) they are, paradoxically, said to be most beautiful, contrary to Socrates’ claim. In this way, Socrates begins his examination of the suggestion that whatever is useful is beautiful by alluding to the problematic usefulness or benefit of beautiful pursuits and laws.

Based on Socrates’ examples, he and Hippias agree that they are correct in saying that the useful more than anything else is beautiful. They agree further that what is powerful to complete or produce each thing, insofar as it is powerful, is useful, and the powerless is useless. Socrates concludes that power is a beautiful thing, and lack of power ugly. Hippias emphatically agrees with this conclusion, claiming that many things testify that this is so, but especially politics; for in politics and in one’s own city the powerful is most beautiful of all, and the powerless most ugly of all. After claiming that Hippias speaks well, Socrates invokes the gods and asks Hippias whether this is why wisdom is most beautiful of all, but lack of learning most ugly of all. Hippias affirms this, asking rhetorically what Socrates believes (295e – 296a). What is revealed by Hippias’ agreeing so vehemently with Socrates’ comments about the beauty of power, as well as appealing to political activities to confirm this suggestion, whereas Socrates appeals to wisdom?
Hippias’ rhetorical affirmation of Socrates’ question about the beauty of wisdom, “what do you think, Socrates” ἀλλὰ τί οἶει, ὦ Σωκράτες, is strikingly similar to his rhetorical response to Socrates’ question at the beginning of the dialogue regarding why ancient wise men held themselves back from political activities (281c). There too he responded, “What do you think, Socrates” τί δ’ οἶει, ὦ Σωκράτες, explaining further that the ancient wise men “were powerless and not able to accomplish by prudence both things, the common and the private” ἀδύνατοι ἦσαν καὶ οὐχ ἰκανοὶ ἐξικνεῖοθαι φρονήσει ἐπ᾽ ἀμφότερα, τὰ τε κοινὰ καὶ τὰ ἵδια. Hippias boasts of his power, through prudence, to benefit both the city publicly and himself privately. Hippias’ political activities are those by which he benefits his city, and he is highly reputed by the many as a result. But this reputation, being beautiful in the eyes of the many, appeared to come at the cost of his private goods, his leisure and his money, as indicated by his pro-bono activities in Sparta (283c). Socrates notes that the wise man ought to be wise for himself above all, meaning that the wise man ought to benefit himself first and foremost (283b). The earlier discussion with Hippias, who desires most of all to be beautiful, revealed that he embodies the basic question to be analyzed in this section: how can a man who is wise and prudent (which is to say, concerned with his own good) justify engaging in political activities, which appear to benefit the city at his own expense? Or, how can contributing to the common good be harmonized with one’s private interest? In the current passage, the problem comes to light in the consideration of the usefulness of beautiful things. Many beautiful things are useful and good for the one who possesses them; wisdom above all. But some beautiful things,
certain pursuits and laws, appear to be useful and good for others, rather than for the one who possess or practices them; above all, the political activities that appear to be primary for Hippias. The beautiful appears to combine the common good and the private. But what exactly is the nature of this combination of the common good with the private, seemingly promised by the beautiful, and how could it be effected? How are beautiful laws and practices good for the one who practices them?

Hippias agrees with the suggestion that the powerful is beautiful based on the example of politics. Socrates further confirms the suggestion based on the example of wisdom. But then Socrates hesitates, telling Hippias to keep still, for he is once again afraid of whatever they are saying (296a8). In this context, Socrates refers to Hippias as “dear comrade” [ὦ φίλε ἐταξίρε], combining the designation for a private friend and political associate, thereby alluding to the problematic combination of private and common good coming to light in the current examination of the usefulness of beautiful things. Hippias does not see this problem, however, and asks why Socrates is afraid, since the argument is now progressing entirely beautifully for him. Socrates claims he wishes it were but asks Hippias to examine something with him. He begins by posing the question of whether someone could make something that he did not know how to make nor entirely have the power to make. Hippias denies that anyone could, if they did not have the power. Socrates then notes that those who err, doing and making bad things unwillingly, would never make these things if they did not have the power to make them. And he supposed further that the powerful are powerful by power, for it is not by lack of power, which Hippias affirms. It follows then that all who make the things
they make have the power to make them. But all human beings make many more bad things than good, beginning from childhood, and they err unwillingly. And so Socrates asks whether he and Hippias should say that this power and these useful things, which are useful for doing something bad, are beautiful. Hippias denies this, and so Socrates concludes that the powerful and the useful, as it seems, is not the beautiful (296b-d).

Hippias responds to Socrates’ opening question, whether “someone could make something that he did not know how to make nor entirely have the power to make” [Ἀρ’ ἂν τίς τι ποιήσειν ὁ μήτ’ ἐπίστατο μήτε τὸ παράπαν δύνατο], by rhetorically asking how someone could make something which he lacked the power to make; he drops the question of whether someone could make something he did not know how to make. Must one have knowledge of what one does in order to do it? Given the way the argument unfolds, the relevant question seems to be whether one who does bad things must, or even can, know that what he is doing is bad.

This possibility is tacitly denied by Socrates in the following exchanges. Socrates asks about people who err, those who do bad things and make bad things unwillingly; the fact that they err and do these bad things unwillingly implies that they do not know what it is they are doing. As Socrates argues in the Gorgias, all people do what they do for the sake of the good, and so anyone who does bad things makes a mistake and does not do what he wishes (467b – 469a). And yet, as Socrates points out, these people must in some sense have the power to do whatever bad things they do. Power without knowledge of what is good is not beneficial. In this simple sense, virtue is (or, at least, requires) knowledge of what is good. But, as Socrates’ argument with Polus in the
Gorgias further confirms, the claim that everyone who does bad things err and does them unwilling may seem plausible when the bad things are bad for the one doing them, for everyone wants the good for himself; but the claim seems significantly less plausible in cases in which one does things that are bad for others or for the community at large, though seemingly good for oneself. In these cases, in which someone does shameful and unlawful things, it appears that the person knows that what they are doing is bad, and yet does such things anyway in order to benefit himself. But Socrates’ argument implies that, even in these cases, the one doing bad things to others is doing them unwillingly, because following the law is good. But this ambiguous claim, that following beautiful laws and practices is good, once again highlights the problematic relationship of the private and common good inherent to laws and practices. Or, in other words, Socrates’ argument suggests that people do bad things unwillingly, out of ignorance of the good, raising the question of how exactly beautiful laws and pursuits are good.\(^5\)

Socrates’ argument concludes with the claim that, because power and useful things are often useful for doing something bad, the powerful and the useful are not the beautiful.\(^6\) In response, Hippias suggests that they still might be, provided they are powerful and useful for good things. Noting that what they said earlier has gone away, namely that the powerful and useful simply is beautiful, Socrates asks Hippias whether this was that “which our soul wanted to say” [ὅ ἐβούλεστο ἡμῶν ἢ ψυχή εἴπεῖν], that the beautiful is “the useful and the powerful for making something good” [τὸ χρὴσιμὸν τε καὶ τὸ δυνατὸν ἐπὶ τὸ ἁγαθὸν τι ποιῆσαι]. When Hippias agrees, Socrates suggests
further that this is the “beneficial” \(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\mu\omicron\nu\); beautiful bodies, beautiful lawful things, wisdom, and all the things they just now mentioned are beautiful because they are beneficial. Hippias agrees, and Socrates concludes the beneficial seems to them then to be the beautiful.

Socrates’ examples of things that are beautiful because they are beneficial once again draws attention to the same ambiguity among beautiful objects alluded to in the earlier discussion of the beautiful as the useful. Supposing that the beautiful is the beneficial, the question remains: beneficial for whom, oneself or others? Socrates cites beautiful bodies, beautiful lawful things, and wisdom as examples of things that are beautiful because they are beneficial. A beautiful body is primarily beneficial for the one who has it. And, as Socrates suggests earlier, wisdom is beneficial for the wise man (283b). But the middle example, beautiful lawful things, is notably different. Beautiful lawful things contribute to the common good, not necessarily to the private good of the individual who practices them. This ambiguity in the beneficial ran throughout the earlier discussion of the precise meaning of “law” (283c – 285b). Hippias had claimed that he could make the Spartan children better in regard to virtue, and nevertheless the Spartan law forbade his foreign education. Socrates countered that law, in the precise sense, is beneficial, and so the Spartans are actually lawbreakers in forbidding his education, since it is beneficial. Implicit in this discussion was the suggestion that Hippias’ education in the liberal arts might make the Spartan youth better in some private sense, perhaps more powerful or better human beings, but it would make them worse citizens, less conventionally moral and less dedicated to Sparta, and so would not
be beneficial to the city or the common good. But, couldn’t one simply claim that the beautiful is the beneficial, and this could mean either beneficial to oneself (as in the case of wisdom) or beneficial to others (as in the case of beautiful laws)? The next step in the argument highlights the insufficiency of this separation of what is beneficial for oneself and what is beneficial for others.

Socrates now examines this revised suggestion, that the beneficial is the beautiful. He and Hippias agree that the beneficial is “the thing making a good thing” (296e), and further that “the thing making is nothing other than the cause” (296e). They conclude from this that “the beautiful is a cause of the good” (296e – 297a). Socrates then notes that “the cause is other than that of which the cause is a cause” (297a). Hippias is silent, presumably because he is confused by Socrates’ claim, and so Socrates clarifies by asking Hippias to examine the following questions. First, Socrates asks whether “the cause did not appear to be making” (297a), which Hippias affirms, and then whether “that which is made by the thing making is nothing other than the thing being produced, but not the thing making” (297a). Socrates and Hippias conclude from this that “the thing being produced is one thing, and the thing making is another” (297a). Having clarified his meaning, Socrates now restates the claim that originally confused Hippias, noting that “the cause is therefore not a cause of a cause, but of the thing being produced from itself” (297a – 297b). Hippias now agrees, and Socrates concludes:

…if the beautiful is a cause of a good thing, the good would come to be from the beautiful. And on account of these things, as it seems, we are serious about prudence and all the other beautiful things, because the work of them and the offspring is serious – the good. And it may be, from the things that we are
discovering, that the beautiful is in a form of some sort of father of the good. (297b – 297b)

Hippias emphatically agrees with this conclusion, noting that Socrates is speaking beautifully. Socrates, however, then draws out the further implications of this conclusion, asking whether this too is spoken beautifully, that “the father is not a son, nor is the son a father” (297b-c). Hippias agrees that this too is said beautifully.

Socrates adds that “the cause is not being produced, nor is the thing being produced a cause” (297c), and Hippias asserts that Socrates is saying true things. Socrates then swears by Zeus, addressing Hippias as “best one,” and states what follows from these agreements, namely that “the beautiful is not a good thing, nor is the good a beautiful thing” (297c). Socrates then asks Hippias whether it seems possible from the things said. Hippias, also swearing by Zeus, admits that it does not appear so to him. Socrates then asks whether this is satisfying to them and whether they would be willing to say that the beautiful is not a good thing nor the good a beautiful thing. Hippias, once again swearing by Zeus, declares that this is not at all satisfying to him. Socrates agrees, also again swearing by Zeus, and adds that for him this is the least satisfying of all the speeches spoken, which Hippias too affirms. Socrates then concludes the section by noting that it is probably the case for them that, contrary to how it appeared at first, this suggestion (namely, that the most beautiful of the speeches is that the beneficial and the useful and the powerful to make something good is beautiful) is possibly more laughable than those things before, in which they supposed that the virgin is the beautiful, and each one of those things said earlier.
Socrates’ argument that the beneficial is the beautiful is ultimately unsatisfying because, in conceiving of the beautiful as that which produces something good, beautiful things are separated from good things. And so, to be beautiful is to produce something else that is good, not to be good in or for yourself. Hippias’ extreme dissatisfaction seems to arise from the implication that, in his beautiful and noble political activities, he is merely an instrument or tool, producing good things for others, but not good himself. On the contrary, Hippias believes himself to be not only good but the best, which Socrates’ highlights by addressing him as such while stating this unsatisfying implication (297c).

Socrates’ argument had culminated in the claim that “the beautiful is in a form of some sort of father of the good” \(\varepsilon\nu\ \pi\alpha\tau\rho\οs\ \tau\i\nu\οs\ \i\delta\epsilon\\iota\ \epsilon\i\i\nu\\i\ \tau\o\k\a\l\o\n\ \tau\o\i\ \acute{\alpha}\g\a\theta\o\u\i\]. Socrates then began to draw out the unsatisfying implications of this conclusion by eliciting Hippias’ agreement that “the father is not a son, nor is the son a father” \(\omicron\upsilon\tau\varepsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\ \pi\alpha\tau\varepsilon\ \upsilon\os\ \omicron\upsilon\tau\varepsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\os\ \pi\alpha\tau\varepsilon\). There is a way in which Hippias is obviously correct to agree with this claim. A particular father, who fathers or makes a particular son, is different than the son he makes. That father is not that son. Likewise, a particular son, who is fathered or made by a particular father, is different than the father who made him. That son is not that father. But, there is also obviously a way in which Hippias is wrong to agree, without qualification, that “the father is not a son, nor is the son a father.” For, in fact, every father is someone’s son, and likewise many sons are themselves fathers of others. What is the importance of this ambiguity, and how might accounting for it change our understanding of Socrates’ claim that “the beautiful is in a
form of some sort of father of the good”? Might this acknowledgement point to a different, more satisfying way to understand the suggestion that the beautiful is the beneficial?

One way to begin clarifying the importance of this ambiguity is to note a simple flaw in the argument leading up to it. Hippias agrees with Socrates that “the beneficial is the thing making a good thing” [τὸ γε ὣφελμον τὸ ποιοῦν ἄγαθόν ἐστιν]. Socrates then argues that “the thing making is nothing other than the cause” [τὸ ποιοῦν δὲ γ᾽ ἐστὶν οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ αἴτιον], and so “the beautiful is a cause of the good” [τοῦ ἄγαθοῦ ἄρα αἴτιον ἐστὶν τὸ καλὸν], before asking Hippias whether the cause is other than that of which the cause is cause, since presumably the cause would not be a cause of a cause. Hippias hesitates here, and so Socrates begins again, reminding Hippias of what came before, asking him whether “the cause did not appear to be making” [οὐ τὸ αἴτιον ποιοῦν ἐφάνη]. Hippias agrees that it did – but he is mistaken. Earlier Hippias agreed that “the thing making is a cause,” not that the “the cause is making.” The claim that “the cause is making” is not equivalent nor does it follow from the agreement that “the thing making is a cause,” for although anything which makes something else may be a kind of cause of the thing made, there may nevertheless be other kinds of causes, which are not productive or generative in this way. In other words, the thing making, the cause of production or generation, may be one type of cause among many. But, at this point in Socrates’ argument, he limits all causation to production or generation, the cause of coming into being.
Although the explicit focus on causation begins in the middle of this section (296e), the ambiguity of what is meant by a cause can be felt from the very beginning. Socrates’ original suggestion, that the useful is the beautiful, had a certain duality to it. The primary sense was that the useful thing produced or made something good; so, eyes that can see are useful, because they allow one to do many good things, like protect oneself from harm. In this way, the opening suggestion of the useful anticipates the understanding of causation as making and the separation of the cause from the thing caused (which is to say the separation of the beautiful from the good). Useful eyes produce something else that is good. But, implicit in Socrates’ example was the suggestion that useful eyes, and useful things more generally, are those things that perform their proper activity well, and so are virtuous. Virtuous eyes are able to see well, and there is a simple pleasure in the mere activity of seeing, separate from the goods that virtuous eyes might produce (Republic 357c). This is the ambiguity in the way Socrates uses the term “useful.” On the one hand, it seems to mean good for something beyond itself; but, on the other hand, it seems to mean good in itself. Socrates maintains this ambiguity in his first reformulation of the useful as “the powerful to cause (or complete) each thing” [τὸ δυνατὸν ἑκαστὸν ἀπεργάζασθαι] (295e). The verb Socrates uses here for cause contains the word ἔργον, meaning “work” or “activity,” at least leaving open the possibility of “the powerful” being understood not simply as the ability to bring some other thing into being (that is, to make), but rather the capacity for an activity, including the proper activity that could be said to complete or perfect a thing. Likewise, in his examination of the suggestion that the
powerful is the beautiful, Socrates asks whether those erring and “making and doing bad things unwillingly” [κακὰ ἔργαζόμενοι τε καὶ ποιοῦντες ἂκοντες] have the power to make these things (296b); this again leaves open the possibility of understanding at least some of the bad things as activities engaged in, as opposed to things made. When, however, Hippias suggests that the beautiful is the powerful and useful for good things, Socrates rephrases this as the beneficial and then (through the flawed argument examined earlier) restricts what is meant by beneficial to that which makes or produces something else that is good, and so eliminates the possible meaning of performing a certain activity well.

Socrates alludes to this unjustified restriction in his conclusion by claiming that “we are serious about prudence and all the other beautiful things, because the work of them and the offspring is serious – the good” [σπουδάζομεν καὶ τὴν φρόνησιν καὶ τὰλλα πάντα τὰ καλά, ὅτι τὸ ἔργον αὐτῶν καὶ τὸ ἔκγονον σπουδαστὸν ἔστι, τὸ ἄγαθον]. According to this claim, prudence or thoughtfulness is only a means to other good things; the activity is not good in itself. But, thoughtfulness, like the original example of sight, is an activity that is both useful for other things and good in itself (Republic 357c). Socrates again alludes to his unjustified restriction by claiming that “the work” [τὸ ἔργον] and “the offspring” [τὸ ἔκγονον] of beautiful things are good. Here Socrates restricts the meaning of “work” to “offspring” or “product.” But, again, work can also mean an activity, as opposed to the product of an activity; in particular, work can refer to the particular activity of a thing, such as seeing is the activity of eyes, the activity that a virtuous thing does well (Republic 352d – 354a).
To summarize these observations, in the concluding step of his examination of the suggestion that the beautiful is the beneficial, Socrates understands the beneficial to be the cause of something good, but he limits what is meant by cause to the cause of generation or coming-into-being; in other words, he limits cause to the cause of production. For this reason, the cause is necessarily different than and separated from the thing that comes into being, the effect; accordingly, the beautiful is not good, nor is the good beautiful. While restricting the meaning of cause in this way, however, Socrates alludes to how this limited understanding of cause may be insufficient, in particular in explaining what makes any one thing excellent or virtuous. Can the cause of the virtue of a thing, what “makes” it good, be understood as productive in this sense? Is what “makes” eyes useful for seeing different than and separate from the eyes themselves? Is what “makes” one body useful for running and another body useful for wrestling different than and separate from the bodies themselves, in the way that a particular father may be said to be different than and separate from his own son? More generally, can the cause of the being of a thing, what “makes” it what it is, be understood as a productive cause? Or, in Aristotelian terminology, can formal cause and final cause be properly understood on the model of efficient cause?

In restricting all cause to the cause of coming-into-being, Socrates is reflecting Hippias’ own limited understanding of what is being sought; namely, the form of the beautiful. For reasons discussed earlier, Hippias is unwilling and unable to acknowledge that a form is something other than a particular, lawfully accepted thing, and so he necessarily misunderstands what is meant by the form as a cause of being. The closest
Hippias comes to understanding the form as a cause of being is when he suggests that the beautiful is gold, because gold, when it adorns something, in some sense makes the thing so adorned beautiful. In this instance, Hippias identified a particular thing that is believed to be beautiful, which can (in a sense) make other things beautiful. The examination of that answer, however, suggested that gold merely makes things appear beautiful, but not be so, because gold covers the adorned thing; it is not (or, at least, not usually) a fitting or proper part of a greater whole. Hippias, however, seems blind to the importance of relations, such as “fitting,” especially as they bear on questions of cause. This came to light most clearly in Hippias’ misunderstanding of the suggestion that the beautiful is “the fitting,” which Hippias understood as a particular fitting thing, as opposed to a relation existing between two or more things. Hippias’ misunderstanding of what is meant by the form of the beautiful, and the connection between this misunderstanding and Hippias’ apparent blindness to the importance of relations among things, is highlighted by Socrates’ ambiguous claim that the father is not a son and the son is not a father.

Understood strictly in terms of production causation, it is true that the father is not a son. That is to say, the father is not the son that he produces. In this way, cause and effect are separated, which leads to Socrates’ conclusion that the beautiful is not good and the good is not beautiful. Stated slightly differently, what it is to be a father is different than what it is to be a son; a father, by definition, is the efficient cause of a son, and so the father is not a son. What Hippias overlooks, however, is that any particular person who is a father is also a son, since he had to have been generated
himself. One could state this in (admittedly vague) Platonic terminology by saying that the same man can be a father and a son, if he partakes in both the form of father and the form of son. Stated somewhat more clearly, the same man is a father in relation to one person (his son) and is a son in relation to another person (his father). Just as the same man can be tall and short in relation to different people, so too the same man can be a father and a son in relation to different people. Just as Hippias did not understand “the fitting” as a relation among things, so too he does not understand the terms “father” and “son” as relations among things.

These considerations suggest that the form as a cause of being cannot be understood on the model of a cause of generation, in which the cause and effect are separate things, the cause bringing the effect into being; rather, the form as a cause of being should be understood as a certain relation, such as the relation adhering among the parts of a thing, which thereby causes the thing to be what it is. Hippias’ confusion on this point was reflected in the ambiguity of the argument from the beginning of this section. Socrates began by claiming that the beautiful is the useful, and in support of this he cited the fact that we claim one whole body is beautiful for running and another is beautiful for wrestling. In these cases, the beautiful body is “useful” in so far as it is capable of performing a certain activity well and is, in this sense, excellent or virtuous. But it is not necessary that the usefulness of the body produce anything beyond the activity itself; it is good in itself, but not necessarily generative. In other words, in this case it seems that the body is beautiful because it is arranged such that it is good at doing something, not because it produces something else that is good. Hippias’
misunderstanding of the form as a cause of being obscures this meaning of “useful,” leading to its being understood solely as what is capable of generating something else that is good. Two senses of useful (one meaning the capacity to perform a certain activity well and the other meaning the capacity to generate something else that is good) are thereby conflated.

Hippias’ own misunderstanding of what is meant by form explains why he is particularly liable to making this specific sort of error. But, more generally, the prominence of the confusion regarding causation raises the question of why this confusion is featured in this investigation, in particular. Is there something about the beautiful that might lead one to conflate the form as the cause of being with the cause of generation? Socrates provides a clue to answering this question when he claims that “we are serious about prudence [τὴν φρόνησιν] and about all the other beautiful things, because the product [τὸ ἔργον] and the offspring [τὸ ἔκγονον] of them – namely, the good – is worthy of seriousness” (297b).

As mentioned earlier, in the Republic, Socrates agrees that there are three kinds of good things: those we delight in for their own sake, such as harmless pleasures; those we would not choose for their own sake but only for what they produce, such as medicine; and those we like both for their own sake and for the sake of what they produce, such as being prudent or thinking [τὸ φρονεῖν], as well as sight and being healthy. Socrates calls this kind of good, which we like for its own sake and for what comes out of it, “the most beautiful” kind of good (Republic 357a – 358a). With this in mind, it seems that in the current section of the Hippias Major Socrates isolates one half
of the goodness of prudence, what it produces. He ignores the way in which we delight in prudence for its own sake, as a virtuous activity. This is reflected in how he uses ἔργον to mean simply a product, as opposed to an activity. Not coincidently, in the next section, Socrates will suggest that the beautiful is pleasure and, in particular, harmless pleasure, which appears to be what he here ignores. The unsatisfying conclusion of the current argument, along with Socrates’ comments in the Republic, suggest the possibility that the beautiful cannot be understood as either that which produces something good or that which is good in itself; rather, it may be some kind of combination of the two, both together but not each individually.¹²

Socrates’ reference to prudence in the current section calls to mind an earlier section of the Hippias Major, in which Hippias implies that he is extraordinarily prudent, as well as powerful. Near the beginning of their discussion, Socrates asked Hippias why ancient wise men appear to have refrained from the kind of political activities of which Hippias boasts. Hippias responds: “What else do you suppose, Socrates, other than that they lacked the power and were unable by prudence to succeed at both the common and the private?” (281c-d). Hippias believes that he is especially powerful and prudent because he can both benefit himself and also benefit others. His own beauty and nobility consists in his combination of wisdom and political service; he is good in and for himself, while at the same time he is the cause of good things for others. The connection between this earlier passage and the current section further supports the suggestion that the beautiful is some combination of what is good in itself with what is productive of something else that is good.
The suggestion that the beautiful may be some combination of what is good in and for itself with what benefits another helps explain an earlier observation about Socrates’ list of useful things, which contained a certain problematic ambiguity. Almost all the useful things Socrates lists are akin to wisdom, in that they seem to be useful and good for the one who possesses them. Socrates’ comments implied, however, that beautiful lawful things may be different, and in fact they came to light as different in so far as they are not always (or even usually) useful and good for the one practices them; rather, they are useful for others or for the city more generally. The list of useful things did not clearly distinguish what is useful and good for oneself from what is useful and good for others. This conflation makes a certain sense, however, if the beautiful is some kind of combination of what is good for oneself with what is good for others. This would also explain why a confusion regarding the cause of being (the formal cause) and the cause of coming-into-being (the efficient cause) would arise in an investigation of the beautiful, since the beautiful combines the formal cause of the good with the efficient cause of the good.

The pinnacle of the current section was Socrates’ claim that “probably, from what we are finding, the beautiful is in the form of some sort of father of the good” (297b). Due to Hippias’ misunderstanding of form, this was taken to mean simply that the beautiful is the cause of the generation of a good thing, which led to the unsatisfying conclusion that the beautiful is not good nor is the good beautiful. But, if one corrects for Hippias’ misunderstanding and takes into account the implications of the various arguments Socrates presents in this section, a more satisfying interpretation of this
claim emerges. Socrates implied earlier that the form is something that one sees, and the ambiguity of the comment about fathers and sons implied that the form, what makes something what it is, has something to do with relations between things. Moreover, his examples of “whole bodies” that are beautiful for running and beautiful for wrestling implied that the form may be understood as a relation of parts that compose a whole, which makes the thing what it is. This is the cause of its being, not of its having come to be. And the conflation in the list of useful things of what is good in and for itself (or virtuous) with what is good for something else (productive of what is good) implied that the beautiful combines these two kinds of causes of what is good, these two kinds of “fathers” of the good. With all this in mind, Socrates’ claim that “the beautiful is in the form of some sort of father of the good” could be understood to mean that the beautiful is the appearance of thing that is both good in and for itself while at the same time productive of something good for others. Hippias believes he is beautiful because he appears to himself to be both benefitting himself while at the same time he is the cause of good things for others. In political terms, the apparent harmony of the private good and common good is beautiful. Hippias, the wise political servant, is beautiful.

The claim that Hippias is beautiful because he harmonizes the acquisition of the private good with that of the common again raises the question of how exactly he achieves this harmony. What is required for such a harmony to be achieved? Socrates alludes to the requirement when he first suggests that the beautiful is the useful. He suggests this, he claims, because he was thinking about eyes and how we say that eyes
are beautiful, not those which seem to be such but lack the power to see, but those that
do have the power and are useful for seeing (295c). As was explained earlier, Socrates’
claim appears contradicted by the fact that we say the eyes of a statue are beautiful,
even though they lack the power to see. The claim thus calls to mind the only other
reference to eyes in the *Hippias Major*, the eyes of the statue of Athena. The statue of
Athena came to light as an image for the city as depicted by founding myths, and the
eye was a citizen or group of citizens in this everlasting whole. The eye is a part of a
whole; as a part, if it performs its own activity well (that is to say, if it is virtuous), it
benefits the whole of which it is a part, and is thereby benefited in return. Hippias’
belief in his own beauty, that he is good in and for himself and also productive of good
things for others, stems in large part from his unexamined beliefs about the wholeness
and persistence of the city.

The apparent analogy between the eye of the statue of Athena and Hippias
himself implies that Hippias, and all citizens, are essentially parts of the whole that is the
city. The virtue of the citizen is analogous to the virtue of the eye, not the virtue of a
whole body. But this implication raises a number of questions about the nature of a
human being, above all: is a human being equivalent or reducible to a citizen? If not,
how might the virtues of a human relate to the virtues of a citizen? What is a good life
for the human being, considered as such? Perhaps the importance of these questions is
why it is in this section of the dialogue that Socrates first mentions the soul, asking what
it wants to say, after an argument highlighting the importance of knowledge of what is
good (296b-d). One is thereby led to wonder what is good for the human soul. What is
the virtue (or virtues) of the human soul, and how does this virtue relate to the good of others and the city more generally? The implication of Socrates’ opening conversation with Hippias was that certain kinds of wisdom, although good for the individual, were nevertheless in tension with the common good of the city. If the human being is essentially a part of the city, it seems that the apparently private goods such as wisdom should be subordinated to one’s primary activity in service of the city, which is what Hippias has done, as evinced by his pro-bono activities in Sparta. Even so, a large difficulties remain. As Hippias himself highlights in his opening address to Socrates, political service appears to require many private sacrifices. Often, it requires the most extreme sacrifices, when for instance a citizen dies in battle on behalf of the city. The opening of the Hippias Major alludes to the ongoing Peloponnesian War, and so the sacrifices required by war are in the background of the dialogue. It appeared that the harmony between the private good and the common depended on the citizen being conceived of as a part of the city, as the eye is part of the body. But the eye, in performing its own proper activity, does not destroy itself. The activity of the citizen, however, appears to require a variety of sacrifices, including the ultimate sacrifice of one’s life. Even if one grants that the citizen is a part of the city, which is whole and enduring, how could such a sacrifice be good for the citizen? This question helps to explain why Socrates and Hippias end this section of their discussion with four oaths to Zeus.

Socrates concludes this section of the argument by noting that, since the cause is not what comes into being nor is what comes into being a cause, the beautiful is not
good nor is the good beautiful (297c). In other words, the cause of something good is not itself good; in benefiting something else, it is not necessarily benefited itself. This would entail that Hippias, in benefiting the city with his political service, is not necessarily good himself or benefited in return. Socrates swears by Zeus as he begins drawing this conclusion. Hippias, in responding, also swears by Zeus and agrees with Socrates’ conclusion. When Socrates asks whether this is satisfactory to Hippias, he again swears by Zeus and asserts that it is not at all satisfactory. Socrates concurs, himself again swearing by Zeus and emphasizing that this is the least satisfactory of all the arguments (297c – d). Four oaths repeated almost back to back is very unusual. What then is suggested by this cluster of oaths at the conclusion of this argument? A clue is provided by the way in which Socrates and Hippias state their disappointment in the conclusion of the argument.

Socrates and Hippias both assert that the argument is not “satisfactory”; the verb “to be satisfactory” [ἀρέσκειν] primarily means “to make good” or “to make amends.” The choice of word alludes to the basic problem with the argument; namely, it entails one who sacrifices for the city and is the cause of good things for others is not recompensed for his sacrifices; amends are not made. But how could amends be made for such private sacrifices, which include among other things the sacrifice of one’s own life on the battlefield in defense of one’s city? Making amends for such sacrifices would require the existence of both an undying soul and retributive gods, who reward those who benefit the city for their sacrifices. Hippias, the modern sophist, is once again revealed to live a life that only make sense if something like the founding myths and
ancient religions are true. Something like providential gods are necessary in order to harmonize the common good and the private. Beautiful laws are beautiful because the one who practices them is the cause of good things for others, while at the same time earning for himself divine rewards. This observation suggests another way to understand the beauty of the gods themselves; they appear to be beautiful, in that they seem to be good in and for themselves, while at the same time they are the cause of good things for others. Providential gods are both the embodiment and the requirement of the beautiful, which is why the argument ends with a series of oaths to Zeus, who assures that being the cause of good things for others is also good for oneself.

Socrates began this section of the dialogue by suggesting that the beautiful is the useful. On its surface, this suggestion seems to ignore the aesthetic dimension of beauty, such as the non-utilitarian beauty of a sculpture. A consideration of the argument suggested that the aesthetic appreciation of a beautiful object was connected to an appreciation of its form. Abstracting from the non-utilitarian appreciation of beauty went hand in hand with abstracting from form, and so formal causation, in this section. Beauty was understood as simply utilitarian, the cause of something good, and cause was understood narrowly as the cause of something coming into being (as opposed to the formal cause, the cause of being). In the next section, Socrates turns to what he here ignored, suggesting that the beautiful might be the pleasure through sight and sound, citing in particular the aesthetic appreciation of a beautiful sculpture.
Accordingly, Socrates will point to the need for forms (as far as he is able, given Hippias’ limitations), in a lengthy digression on qualities that exist for “both but not each.”
Section X (297d10 – 304a3): Socrates’ Second Answer, the Pleasant through Hearing and Sight

In the previous section, Socrates considered whether the beautiful is the useful. This utilitarian account of beauty appeared to neglect considerations of form in two related ways. First, the account ignored the aesthetic appreciation of beautiful objects, such as the pleasure of beholding the eyes of the statue Athena Parthenos; a consideration of the argument suggested that this aesthetic appreciation of a beautiful object is connected to a recognition of its form. Second, in suggesting that the beautiful is the cause of the good, Socrates restricted the meaning of cause to the cause of coming into being, such that the beautiful was understood to generate a good thing. This limited understanding of cause ignored the apparent distinction between the cause of coming into being and the cause of being (or, in other words, form). In the current section, Socrates addresses these oversights, suggesting that the beautiful might be aesthetic pleasure (that is, the pleasure through hearing and sight), citing in particular the pleasure of beholding a beautiful sculpture. Accordingly, Socrates also leads Hippias as far as possible, given the constraints of Hippias’ character, in acknowledging the need for form as a cause of being.

Socrates’ second answer, which is his final suggestion, is that the beautiful is “the pleasant that comes through hearing and sight” (298a). Immediately after Hippias affirms this suggestion, however, Socrates raises a difficulty with it. Beautiful practices
and laws do not seem to fit the description of being pleasant through hearing or sight. Just as in the previous section, beautiful practices and laws stand out as uniquely problematic examples of beauty. Once Hippias acknowledges this difficulty, Socrates asks him to put it aside for the moment, while suggesting that beautiful laws and pursuits “might perhaps appear not to be outside the perception that comes to us through hearing and sight” (298c).¹ Socrates here intimates that there is a way to understand what is meant by the pleasant that comes through hearing and sight such that it would include beautiful laws and pursuits – but he does not explain what he has in mind. Instead, in the voice of the Refuter, Socrates raises a hypothetical question about his suggestion. Given that there are great pleasures in the other perceptions as well, why have Hippias and Socrates restricted the beautiful to the pleasant that comes through hearing and sight only? Socrates’ explanation appears confused, but a consideration of the apparent confusion reveals what Socrates had in mind regarding beautiful laws and pursuits, which in turn clarifies why the beautiful is the pleasure that comes through hearing and sight, as opposed to the other perceptions.

The Refuter asks Socrates why they have divided up the pleasant, claiming that the pleasant through hearing and sight is beautiful, but the pleasant through the other perceptions is not. Food, drink and sex are all pleasant, as Hippias and Socrates affirm, so why are they not deemed beautiful? Socrates explains that everyone would laugh at them if they affirmed that it is not pleasant to eat, but beautiful, and that it is not pleasant “to smell pleasant” (that is, to emit a pleasant odor), but beautiful. And everyone would assert that sex is most pleasant, but if one engages in it, he must do so
such that no-one sees, since it is most ugly to be seen having sex. The Refuter claims that he has known for some time that Hippias and Socrates have been ashamed to assert that these pleasures are beautiful since they do not seem so to human beings, but he reminds them that he is not asking what seems beautiful to the many, but what is beautiful. In response, Socrates and Hippias simply reaffirm that the beautiful is “that part of the pleasant which comes into being in relation to sight and hearing” (299b).

In Socrates’ explanation of why they do not include as beautiful the pleasant that comes through all the perceptions, he highlights the concern with how they would appear to the many if they asserted such a thing; they do not want to appear ugly and ridiculous. This concern with how they might appear to the many is reflected in the apparent confusion in Socrates’ explanation. The question posed by the Refuter is why what is pleasant through the perceptions such as taste, smell and touch is not deemed beautiful. A body that pleases us to see is beautiful; why then isn’t food that pleases us to taste beautiful? Socrates responds that they would be ridiculed if they asserted that it is not pleasant to eat, but beautiful. This, however, was not quite what the Refuter asked. In his response, Socrates replaces the thing that causes pleasure, food, with the activity of eating, asserting that they would be laughed at if they claimed it is beautiful to eat. Likewise, Socrates claims that they would be ridiculed if they claimed that it is not pleasant to smell pleasant, but beautiful. Not only does Socrates once again replace the pleasant thing with the activity, but the word he uses for “smell” [ὀζεῖν] means to emit an odor; it does not mean to smell something else. So instead of considering whether something that is pleasant to smell, such as a rose, is beautiful, Socrates
considers whether it is beautiful to emit a pleasant odor. In other words, he replaces a question about the nature of what one perceives with a question about how one is perceived by others. This same confusion is most evident in his final claim, that although sex is most pleasant, it is most ugly to be seen having sex. The question should be whether that which causes pleasure through touch is beautiful. In the case of sex, there is a way in which this might be true, insofar as having sex with a beautiful person enhances the physical pleasures of sex. But Socrates does not consider this question; instead, he considers how the one who engages in sex appears to others. Why then does Socrates change the question in this way?

Where one expects Socrates to consider the nature of the things perceived by the other senses, he instead considers how one is perceived by others, whether one appears beautiful or ugly. This reflects the concern with appearing ridiculous to the many voiced by Socrates (seemingly on behalf of Hippias) and the consequent shame felt, a concern that is criticized by the Refuter. By drawing attention to the concern with how one appears to others, Socrates alludes to the way in which beautiful laws and practices may not be outside the perception that happens to come to us through hearing and sight. Although beautiful laws and practices may not themselves be a pleasure through hearing or sight, they are those activities by which we benefit others and are praised as a result. The pleasure of being praised is, in a sense, a pleasure through both hearing and sight, insofar as pleasure in the praise one hears is inseparable from how one sees oneself. Being praised is a pleasure of appearing noble to others and, consequently, to oneself. It is an affirmation of one’s self-love. Socrates
describes the pleasure of being praised by orators and the effect such praise has on one’s opinion of oneself in the *Menexenus*:

> And they even praise us, the living, such that I for my part feel altogether elevated by their praises. Each time, as I listen and am charmed, I am altered, believing that I’ve become at that moment greater, more dignified, and more beautiful. Often some foreigners follow along and listen with me, and in their eyes too I become instantly more majestic. And indeed, it seems to me that they, having been seduced by the speaker, feel the same things towards the rest of the city as they feel towards me, believing her to be more wondrous than before. This sense of majesty stays with me for more than three days. The speech is so fresh and the speaker’s voice so rings in my ears that scarcely on the fourth or fifth day do I remember who I am and notice that I am of this earth — in the meantime I almost believe I live on the isles of the Blessed. (235a-c).

Such is the pleasure and power of praise, which can instill the belief that one is equal to the gods.

The importance of the issue of how one appears is suggested by the fact that Socrates begins this section by explicitly noting how he seems to himself: he asserts that he seems to himself unable to wait for Hippias, due to his desire to know [Ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ μοι δοκῶ ὑπὸ ἐπιθυμίας τοῦ εἰδέναι] (297e). The opposition between Socrates and Hippias on this point is highlighted by their opposite reactions to the initial difficulty posed by the example of beautiful laws and practices. When Socrates suggests that the beautiful is the pleasant that comes through hearing and sight, Hippias agrees that Socrates is saying well what the beautiful is. But when Socrates asks whether this applies to beautiful pursuits and laws, or whether these have a different form, Hippias attempts to avoid the question by suggesting that the Refuter might not notice this difficulty. Clearly, Hippias is not motivated by a desire to know, as Socrates has just declared himself to be. Hippias is motivated by a desire to appear to know, a desire to appear
beautiful and wise to himself and others; he is motivated by an indiscriminant desire for praise and the irrational self-love that is pleased by such praise. Hippias is satisfied by opinions. At his suggestion that the Refuter might not notice the difficulty posed by beautiful pursuits and laws, Socrates swears “by the Dog” and exclaims that this would not happen to the man before whom he would be ashamed to babble and pretend to say something while saying nothing. Hippias once again asks who this is, and Socrates finally states his name. He is, Socrates declares, the son of Sophroniscus, who would no more permit Socrates to say these things easily without their being examined than to say that he knows what he does not know. By declaring the Refuter is the son of Sophroniscus, the name of Socrates’ own father, Socrates reveals that the Refuter is in fact Socrates himself, or at least some part of himself (although Hippias appears unaware of this, perhaps unaware of Socrates’ patronym). Based on Socrates’ description, the Refuter appears to be an image of Socrates’ desire to know the truth, which cannot be satisfied by mere opinions. The fact that Socrates refers to his desire to know with a patronymic suggests some connection between Socrates’ desire for truth and his family (or “his own things” more generally). The implication seems to be that, for Socrates, the familial or love of his own has been reformed or replaced with love of the truth. The opposition between Socrates and Hippias highlighted in this passage indicates that Socrates’ desire to know is unshackled by the irrational self-love that motivates Hippias’ pursuit of praise from the indiscriminant many and encourages him to say he knows what he does not know.
In his conversation with Socrates, Hippias has repeatedly come to light as the embodiment of the opinions of the many, which he memorizes and calls his wisdom; he is the archetype of the sophist as described by Socrates in the Republic (493a). Socrates draws attention to Hippias’ concern with opinions, in particular his opinion of himself, by intimating how beautiful laws and practices might not be outside the perception that comes through both hearing and sight; they are those practices which make one appear beautiful, to others and to oneself, and by which one earns praise and is thereby pleased in one’s opinion of oneself. This understanding of beautiful laws and practices is supported by Hippias’ earlier description of the speech he recently gave in Sparta (286a-b). He claims that he acquired a great reputation in Sparta regarding beautiful pursuits, by presenting a speech that details what a young man ought to pursue. Hippias describes the beginning of the speech as follows: “When Troy was captured, the speech recounts how Neoptolomus asked Nestor what sorts of pursuits were beautiful [καλὰ ἔπιτηδεύματα], pursuits that would make a young man who practiced them most highly reputed [εὐδοκιμῶτας]” (286a-b). Nestor then describes many things that are “lawful and altogether beautiful” [νόμιμα καὶ πάγκαλα]. When beautiful pursuits and laws are first introduced, they are equated to those pursuits that make one highly reputed; that is, those activities that make one appear beautiful, to others and to oneself.

The emphasis on Hippias’ attachment to opinions and how he appears in the context of Socrates’ suggestion that the beautiful is the pleasant that comes through hearing and sight calls to mind another illuminating passage from the Republic. When
Socrates suggests that the philosopher is one who delights in learning. Glaucon objects that this seems to entail that the lovers of sight and the lovers of hearing are philosophers. Socrates, however, corrects him; the lovers of sight and the lovers of hearing are not philosophers, but they are like philosophers. For the true philosophers are the lovers of the sight of the truth. Socrates then explains that, although each form is itself one, “each appears as an apparitional many” [φανταζόμενα πολλ’ φαίνεσθαι ἑκαστον] (476a). The lovers of hearing and the lovers of sight, he notes, delight in beautiful sounds and shapes (that is, they delight in the many appearances of the form of the beautiful), but “their thought is unable to see and to delight in the nature of the beautiful itself” [αὐτοῦ δὲ τοῦ καλοῦ ἀδύνατος αὐτῶν ἡ διάνοια τὴν φύσιν ἴδεῖν τε καὶ ἀσπάσασθαι]. Such a person “customarily holds” [νομίζων] that there are many beautiful things, but does not hold that there is a beautiful itself, and is unable to follow when someone leads him to knowledge of it; he lives in a dream, since he takes a likeness of something to be the thing itself. Contrarily, the one who “believes” [ἡγούμενος] that there is a beautiful itself and is able to catch sight of it as well as what participates in it, and who does not believe that what participates is the thing itself, is awake. The former opines, whereas the latter knows. Socrates concludes that the lovers of hearing and the lovers of sight are in fact “lovers of opinion” [φιλοδόχους]; lovers of wisdom, on the other hand, delight in the contemplation of the thing itself (475b – 480a).

This passage from the Republic sheds light on the current section of the Hippias Major in a number of ways. First off, it suggests what might be unique about sight and
hearing, as opposed to the other perceptions. Sight and hearing are the perceptions by which the forms “appear as an apparitional many.” The pleasant through sight and the pleasant through hearing are pleasures caused by the appearance of the forms. They are the perceptions of opinions. In this way, the pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing are akin, but not identical, to a delight in knowing. One is reminded of this kinship by the repeated use “looking” and “listening” as metaphors for understanding; Socrates, for example, prefices his suggestion that the beautiful is the pleasant through sight and hearing by commanding Hippias to “look” (297e5). As in previous sections, these considerations imply that the appearance of a form (that is, the appearance of the unity and wholeness of a thing) is itself beautiful. Moreover, the passage suggests that Hippias himself is one such lover of sights and sounds, a lover of opinion as opposed to a philosopher. In the first half of the dialogue, Hippias exemplifies the tendency of the lover of opinion to confuse the form with examples of particular things that participate in the form, suggesting that the beautiful itself is a virgin, gold, and being honored with funeral rites. This impression is further confirmed by the upcoming stage of the argument, in which Socrates finally attempts to lead Hippias to knowledge of the form and Hippias violently rebels.

After Socrates and Hippias reaffirm that the part of the pleasant that comes into being in relation to sight and hearing is beautiful, Socrates recounts how the Refuter would examine them. The Refuter would ask a series of questions, leading Socrates and Hippias to agree that since the pleasant through sight and hearing is beautiful, whatever pleasant thing is not this would not be beautiful. And, further, that the pleasant
through sight is not pleasant through sight and hearing, nor the pleasant through hearing pleasant through hearing and sight; that is to say, that which is through either one is not through both. The pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing, each itself by itself, is beautiful; and both are beautiful. Since no pleasure differs from another pleasure insofar as it is pleasure, it is for some other reason than that they are pleasures that these two pleasures are beautiful. As the Refuter describes the situation, they see something in the case of these pleasures by which they differ from others and to which they look when they call them beautiful. This is something the same, something in common which exists for both pleasures together and for each in particular (299c – 300b).

Earlier in the dialogue, the Refuter compelled Hippias to agree that the particular things he cited as beautiful were (in certain circumstances) also ugly, and so they could not be the form of the beautiful itself. In the current section, the Refuter is most explicit about what he is searching for; namely, that which all beautiful things have in common, that sameness amongst difference, to which one looks when one calls something beautiful. The Refuter thereby attempts to distinguish between the many things conventionally believed to be beautiful and the beautiful itself, so that he can lead Hippias from opinions about beauty to knowledge of it. In this context, the question about the beautiful itself has been reframed as the question of what the pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing have in common, by which they are both beautiful. The Refuter emphasizes that he is looking for “the common thing” [τὸ κοινὸν τοῦτο] between the pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing (300a). A passage from the
Theaetetus clarifies the importance of this emphasis: as Socrates explains, “it’s possible neither through hearing nor through sight to grasp the common thing about them” (185b). That is to say, one cannot examine the things seen through the perception of hearing nor the things heard through the perception of sight; so, any examination of both in order to determine what is common between them cannot be conducted by either. Rather, as Theaetetus suggests and Socrates confirms, the soul itself through itself examines the common thing about them. The Refuter is thus prompting Socrates and Hippias to examine the appearances, to apply their minds and think about them in an attempt to discover the truth. For appearances can be false, a fact that is highlighted by the upcoming exchange, in which Hippias accuses Socrates of “seeing amiss,” while Socrates questions the many things “appearing before his soul” and speculates on whether or not Hippias is intentionally deceiving him (300c-d).

Hippias agrees that they are looking for that which makes the pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing beautiful, something in common, which exists for both together and for each in particular. He appears to be following the Refuter toward an examination of form up until this point. Then, however, Socrates notes that, if both pleasures are affected in some way but each pleasure is not, this affection would not be the cause of their being beautiful (since the cause of their being beautiful applies to both together as well as each in particular). Given the agreements thus far, this comment should simply be a side point for clarification, but it sparks a lengthy – and heated – digression. For Hippias asks how it could be that both pleasures are affected by that by which neither is affected. In other words, how could an affection apply to
both together but not each separately? When Socrates asks whether this seems impossible to Hippias, he responds that if it were possible he would be “very inexperienced both in the nature of these things and in the speaking of the present arguments” (300c). Socrates implores Hippias to hear more clearly what he wishes to say, namely that it is possible for both Socrates and Hippias to be affected in a way that Socrates by himself neither undergoes nor is and that Hippias by himself neither undergoes nor is. But Hippias remains aggressively incredulous. He attempts to refute this possibility by citing a series of affections (such as being healthy) that, if they apply to both Hippias and Socrates together, would also apply to each individually, and other affections (such as being weary) that, if they apply to Hippias and Socrates individually, would also apply to both together. When Socrates grants that Hippias is correct about these examples, Hippias unleashes a scathing attack on Socrates and Socratic philosophy more generally:

Yes, but you, Socrates, do not examine the wholes of things, and neither do those with whom you are accustomed to converse, but you test the beautiful by setting it apart and by cutting up in the arguments each of the things that are. Because of this you do not notice the naturally large and continuous bodies of being. And you have failed to notice this to such an extent that you suppose there is something, either being affected or being, which exists in relation to these “boths” together but not in relation to “each,” or again, that exists in relation to “each” but not in relation to “both.” So illogical is your condition, and so unreflective and naïve and unintelligent! (301b-c)

Hippias’ attack on Socrates and his method of investigation is as surprising as it is violent. Throughout their conversation, Socrates has made various comments that may have insulted Hippias and aroused his indignation, such as when he claimed that the Spartans use Hippias as children use an old woman to tell pleasant stories (286a). In
such instances, however, Hippias did not lash out at Socrates. In fact, he barely acknowledged the potential slights. And yet, here Socrates’ relatively abstruse ontological claim provokes a torrent of abuse and a blanket condemnation of Socratic philosophy. What is it about this claim in particular that so angers Hippias? And what is the connection between this claim and Socrates’ method of investigation, his attempt to understand nature and the things that are, which Hippias so roundly condemns?

A clue to answering these questions is provided by Socrates’ response to Hippias. Socrates, acknowledging his naivety, points out that according to Hippias’ claim, if both he and Hippias together are two, then each one individually would be two as well. Likewise, if each individually is one, then both together would be one as well. But, as Hippias is forced to admit, this is not the case. Each taken individually is one and odd, whereas both together are two and even. In other words, according to Hippias’ “continuous account of being,” one thing and another thing could never become two things. How does two, which is even, come to be from a one, which is odd, and another one, which is also odd? This is the very perplexity Socrates himself encountered when he attempted to acquire “the wisdom they call natural science,” as he reports in his intellectual autobiography in the *Phaedo* (96a – 102a). Socrates’ explanation of both the attraction and limitations of natural science help explain Hippias’ otherwise surprising condemnation of Socratic philosophy.

At this point in the *Phaedo*, Socrates has been challenged by Cebes to prove that the soul is not merely strong and long-lasting, being reincarnated a number of times, but that it will never perish. Socrates claims that a consideration of this question
requires that they busy themselves with the cause concerning generation and
destruction as a whole. Socrates then presents his intellectual autobiography, which
amounts to an explanation of causation and, in particular, the difference between what
the many believe to be a cause and what is truly a cause. Socrates begins by
acknowledging that as a young man, he was wondrously desirous of that wisdom called
natural science, since this wisdom seemed proud and magnificent, to know the causes
of each thing – why it comes to be, why it perishes, and why it is. Socrates used the
method of natural science in an attempt to understand how knowledge comes to be, as
well as the affections that pertain to heaven and earth. Based on his examples, it
appears that natural science attempts to explain each thing by observing material
bodies in motion. Socrates declares that, in the end, he seemed to himself naturally
unsuited for this kind of looking into things. Socrates then explains that before this
examination, he seemed to both himself and others to have knowledge of certain
things, such as how a human being grows. But he was so completely blinded by this
attempt to look into things that he unlearned what he knew before. For Socrates
thought it was obvious to everybody that a man grows by eating and drinking, for when
the small man eats, the flesh he eats attaches to the flesh he has and the bulk that’s
little becomes a lot. Now, however, Socrates does not believe he knows the cause of
this, for he does not even understand by this method how a one and another one come
to be two (which would be required, presumably, for understanding how flesh
“attaches” to flesh). For each on its own is not two, but when they are moved close to
one another, this moving close is the supposed cause of two coming to be. But if one
thing is separated into two, then the separation is the supposed cause of two coming to be. So, what is the cause of two coming into being according to the wisdom of natural science? Moving close and separating, which is to say moving close and not moving close! So, Socrates no longer persuades himself that he knows why a one comes to be nor why anything else comes to be, perishes, or is by this way of looking into things.

Somewhat later in his autobiography, Socrates adds that the material things in motion are not true causes, although admittedly they are in a certain sense necessary for causation. Socrates criticizes the many for failing to distinguish that it’s one thing to be genuinely the cause, and another to be that without which the cause wouldn’t be a cause; the many are groping around as though in the dark when they apply to the latter an improper name and address it as cause (99b).

It is the perplexity of how one and one come to be two that provokes Socrates to turn away from the wisdom of natural science, which attempts to grasp the truth through each of the senses, and instead to turn to speeches and look in them for the truth of the beings. And Socrates’ turn to speeches, his second sailing, entails his hypothesis of the forms as the cause of being. Socrates claims that he no longer recognizes “those wise causes” that he found so inadequate; instead, he simply and artlessly and perhaps naïvely holds that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence of or communion with the beautiful itself. Socrates concludes his explanation of the form as cause by criticizing debaters, as opposed to philosophers, who do not have one careful account or thought about these matters, but who nevertheless are “so
self-sufficient because of their wisdom that even though they confound all things together, they themselves are quite capable of being satisfied with themselves” (101e).\(^8\)

Hippias’ criticism that Socrates does not notice “the naturally large and continuous bodies of being” \([μεγάλα... καὶ διανεκῆ σώματα τῆς ὀυσίας πεφυκότα]\) suggests that he believes himself to possess the very wisdom that a young Socrates sought, natural science, which attempts to account for all things in terms of material bodies in motion. This is confirmed by the fact that, earlier in the *Hippias Major*, Socrates notes that Hippias knows most beautifully matters concerning the stars and events in the heavens (285c). Additionally, when Hippias appears in the *Protagoras*, he is reported to be instructing Phaedrus and the physician Eryximachus in astronomy (315b-c). The fact that Phaedrus and Eryximachus are mentioned as students of Hippias sheds light on the kind of wisdom that Hippias possesses. In the *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus appears intent on reducing mythological accounts to natural and physical explanations (229c). And in the *Symposium*, Eryximachus’ speech on love incorporates the doctrines of Empedocles, who attempted to explain the cosmos in terms of the coming together and separation of four material elements.\(^9\) Hippias’ understanding of nature, his “continuous account of being,” appears to be particularly indebted to the natural philosophy of Empedocles.\(^10\) It appears then that Hippias is one of the debaters mentioned by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, who is thoughtlessly satisfied with himself.

If one were to adhere strictly to a materialistic physics of natural science, it would be impossible for certain affections to apply to two things together but not each individually, which is why Hippias is incredulous at Socrates’ suggestion. But this alone
does not explain Hippias’ anger. Why is Hippias not merely perplexed or perhaps intrigued? Again, why does he feel the need to attack Socrates and his entire method of investigation after this abstruse ontological claim?

In recounting his own experiences with natural science, Socrates repeatedly notes how he appeared to himself and to others. After trying to understand the affections that pertain to heaven and earth, Socrates says “he seemed to himself” naturally unsuited to this method of looking into things (96c1). For proof, he points to what he used to know clearly “as it seemed to himself and to others” (96c4). And he concludes by claiming that he no longer even “persuades himself” that he knows how anything comes to be, perishes or is according to natural science, whereas the many confusedly believe that materialistic physics does explain the causes of all things (99a). Socrates’ recognition of the perplexities at the bottom of natural science required him to acknowledge to himself and to others that he did not know what he thought he knew clearly. This required him to turn away from appearances in two related ways. First, Socrates claims that, if one attempts to grasp the truth of the beings with the senses, one risks blinding one’s soul; this would seem to mean that one risks confusing the material bodies that one perceives with the true causes. The recognition of the need for forms requires that one acknowledge that the appearances do not simply reveal the truth of things. Socrates suggests that understanding the truth requires an examination of opinion, through the medium of speeches. At the same time, the turn to speeches required that Socrates acknowledge the falsehood of his own appearance as one who knows. He seemed to himself and to others to know, but he did not. This is why, just
before the allusion in the *Hippias Major* to Socrates’ turn away from natural science, Socrates emphasizes that he is most ashamed before the son of Sophroniscus, a part of himself, which does not permit him to say he knows what he does not know. Hippias, the lover of opinion, is most ashamed before the many, who believe that he is wise. In the midst of their disagreement over whether affections can apply to both but not each, Socrates highlights this fundamental difference between himself and Hippias by noting examples of such affections do not appear to Hippias, who has earned the most money for wisdom among their contemporaries, but to Socrates, who has never earned anything (300d). Hippias prizes money not for usefulness so much as for the honor it signifies, which is his primary motivation highlighted by Socrates’ comment.

For these reasons, Socrates’ suggestion that certain affections can apply to both but not each threatens to expose Hippias’ own ignorance, his own ugliness. As Hippias himself admits, if Socrates is correct, Hippias would be very inexperienced in the nature of these things and in the speaking of the present arguments (300c). Hippias is not simply making an intellectual mistake; he is thumotically defending himself and his opinion of himself. As Socrates tells Hippias, “you are angry since you seem to yourself to be saying something” [χαλεπαίνεις ἐπειδὰν τί δόξης σαυτῷ λέγειν] (302a). But Hippias and his wisdom are not he what persuades himself they are, as Socrates suggests when he responds to Hippias’ invective by noting: “Our own things, Hippias, are not such as someone wishes, as humans say on occasion speaking proverbially, but such as he is able” (301c).\(^\text{11}\) In other words, human wisdom is not divine. Socrates’ method, his attempt to understand nature by turning to speeches, looks ugly in
comparison to the grandiose wisdom Hippias appears to himself to possess. As Socrates admits in the *Phaedo*, his hypothesis of the forms is in a certain sense simple and naïve (100d). And, as Hippias complains, he cuts up in speeches that which appears to be a beautiful whole, such as Hippias’ earlier examples, revealing the ways in which what appears to be beautiful is ugly. The opposition between the wisdom Hippias seems to himself to possess and the wisdom Socrates does in fact possess is heightened by a certain irony in Hippias’ boasts and accusations. Whereas Hippias accuses Socrates of being blind to the beings, it is Hippias who is blind to the truth, due to his thumotic attachment to appearances and opinions. And whereas Hippias boasts of knowing “the condition of each person who is concerned with arguments” (301d), Socrates proves himself to have such knowledge by his exposing of Hippias’ fundamental resistance to philosophy.

Despite Hippias’ violent resistance, when Socrates points out that together they are two and even while each individually is one and odd, Hippias is forced to concede that there are certain affections that apply to both but not each. Socrates then returns to the suggestion that the pleasure through sight and hearing is beautiful. He again points out that if the pleasure through sight and the pleasure through hearing are both and each beautiful, that which makes them beautiful would have to accompany not only both but also each. And this could not be the fact that they are both and each pleasures, for then all other pleasures would be beautiful as well. It is because these pleasures are through sight and hearing that they are beautiful. But then Socrates asks Hippias to examine what was said earlier. The pleasant is beautiful, not all of it but that
which is through sight and hearing; but since each is not through both, if the beautiful is the pleasure through sight and hearing, it must be through both together, but not each individually. This leads Socrates to ask Hippias whether they should assert that the pleasure through both sight and hearing is beautiful, but each is not individually. At this point, Hippias appears disinterested, merely asking what would prevent them from doing so. Socrates reminds him that they agreed that certain things are such that, if they apply to both, they apply to each, and vice versa. Other things, however, are not. He then asks Hippias which sort the beautiful seems to him to be. If Socrates is beautiful on his own, and Hippias is beautiful on his own, are they both beautiful together? And if both beautiful together, are they each beautiful individually? Or, might the beautiful be like composite numbers that are even, but whose components could each be odd or each be even? Or, again, might it be like when the components are each irrational, the composites are perhaps rational or perhaps irrational? Socrates tells Hippias it appears to him very illogical that they would both be beautiful, but not each, or each but not both. Hippias agrees, and they conclude that it is impossible for the pleasure through sight and hearing, meaning the pleasure through both but not each, to be beautiful.

Socrates elicits Hippias’ agreement that the beautiful is not the pleasure of sight and hearing, both but not each, on the grounds that, if Socrates and Hippias are beautiful individually, they would be beautiful both together as well, and vice versa. But there are two problems with this argument. First, just because, in the case of beautiful people, beauty seems to apply to both and each, it does not follow that beauty applies
to both and each in every situation, as in the case of the pleasure of sight and the
pleasure of hearing. Second, Socrates’ suggestion that, if two people are each beautiful
individually then they are necessarily beautiful together, is not true. Socrates and
Hippias agreed earlier in this section that the ugliest and most shameful thing is to be
seen having sex, which suggests at least one way that people who are beautiful
individually could be ugly together. Conversely, it was shown that a stone that is not
beautiful on its own and a statue that is not beautiful on its own could be beautiful
when brought together. Hippias’ ready agreement that the beautiful cannot apply to
both but not each reveals that he is still unaware of what is meant by “the fitting,” a
relation that holds between two things such that they complete each other. Hippias is
still blinded by his materialistic physics and so does not see the relational aspects of
being.

This observation may help explain the significance of what appears to be a
mathematical mistake on Socrates’ part. While giving examples of affections that might
apply to both but not each, Socrates suggests that the composite of an irrational and
another irrational could be rational. But the sum of two irrationals is always necessarily
irrational. The fact that the polymath Hippias does not correct Socrates on this point
testifies to how disinterested he is in the conversation after his sweeping condemnation
of Socrates’ method. Assuming Socrates did not simply make a mathematical error, to
what might Socrates be alluding? The Greek word for “irrational” [ἄρρητος] also means
“unspoken.” Shortly after his apparent mistake, Socrates notes that both he and
Hippias have come to an agreement (303d). Similarly, at the end of the dialogue,
Socrates will claim that he has been benefited by his association with both Hippias and the Refuter (304e). Perhaps Socrates’ apparent mathematical mistake is intended as an allusion to his own practice of Socratic dialectic, his need for interlocutors and the interlocutors need for him. What is “unspeakable” for each individually is given voice in conversation together. Socratic dialogue may be the clearest example of a way in which two people together are beautiful while each individually is not.

It appears, then, that Socrates and Hippias dismiss rather than refute the possibility that the beautiful is the pleasure of sight and hearing, both but not each. In fact, there seem to be many examples of things that are beautiful, both but not each, such as the stone that is fitting to the statue. These observations suggest that there is something particularly important or promising about the pleasure of sight and hearing, both but not each. Having said that, what exactly Socrates has in mind by such a pleasure is not immediately clear. One can easily identify the pleasure through sight individually (for example, seeing a sculpture) and the pleasure through hearing individually (for example, listening to music). But it is much more difficult to identify a pleasure that is through both sight and hearing together, but not each individually. Perhaps, however, this is a reference to the earlier conclusion about beautiful pursuits and laws, a conclusion that is particularly important for understanding the character of Hippias. Namely, that there is a way in which the pleasure of praise is a pleasure that is through sight and hearing, both but not each. Beautiful pursuits and laws are those practices on account of which one is highly reputed by the many. The pleasure the many take in beholding Hippias is inseparable from what they have heard about him and
his activities; and Hippias has a related pleasure that arises from the vision of himself reflected in the eyes of the many, the pleasure of the affirmation of self-love and love of your own. Hippias is a kind of hedonist, driven by a desire for the pleasure of praise, which is in direct conflict with Socrates’ desire for the truth.

Having dismissed the possibility that the beautiful is the pleasure of sight and hearing, both but not each, Socrates claims that the Refuter will ask why they honor the pleasures of sight and hearing before the other pleasures and bestow on them the name of beautiful. Socrates suggests that these pleasures are the most harmless and best, both and each. Hippias agrees with Socrates that these are the best. Socrates then claims the Refuter will ask whether this is what they say the beautiful is, beneficial pleasure. When they agree to this, Socrates asserts that the Refuter will claim that the beneficial is that which makes the good, and (as they agreed in the previous argument) that which makes is different than that which is made. In this way, they arrive once again at their previous argument, for the good is not beautiful nor the beautiful good.

Despite his nominal agreement that certain affections can apply to both but not each, Hippias still understands the world in terms of natural science, which fails to account for such affections. That is to say, he still understands cause on the model of a material thing that makes something else come to be, in which case the thing making and the thing made are necessarily different. And so, if the beautiful is beneficial pleasure, the beautiful is a pleasure that makes a good thing, and so the beautiful and the pleasant are not themselves good but rather productive of the good. If Hippias is beautiful in the eyes of others, he would not be good himself but merely the maker of
good things for others. The current section alluded to Socrates’ turn away from natural science and toward an investigation of the truth of the beings in speeches, which entailed his hypothesis of the forms as causes. It also highlighted Hippias’ violent resistance to such a turn to speeches. Perhaps with a proper understanding of form Hippias could make more progress in understanding the beautiful. He could begin to consider situations in which the good arises for both but not each, as in the example of a fitting part of some greater whole (although he would still be faced with troubling question whether his political service to the city constituted such a good). He could also consider the way in which the pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing, both and each, seem to be those perceptions by which the forms appear most clearly as apparitional many. But this would require that he first and foremost acknowledge that he does not know what he appears, to himself and others, to know. He would have to resist the Siren song of praise from the many. His unreflective self-love is far too powerful for this, as his closing indictment of Socrates in the final section of the dialogue will confirm.
Section XI (304a3 – 304e9): Hippias’ Indictment and Socrates’ Apology

Socrates’ previous suggestion, that the beautiful is the pleasant that comes through hearing and sight, led Hippias towards a consideration of the form of the beautiful in two ways. First, Socrates, in the guise of the Refuter, explicitly asked Hippias what the pleasure of hearing and the pleasure of sight have in common, both and each, which distinguishes them from the other pleasures and to which Hippias looks when he identifies these pleasures as beautiful. This was the most detailed explanation of what the Refuter means by a “form” in the dialogue thus far. Second, the argument suggested that what the pleasure of sight and the pleasure of hearing have in common is that they are both pleasures arising from the apprehension of forms as each appears as an apparitional many. When Socrates claimed, however, that certain affections could apply to two things together but not to each individually, Hippias lashed out violently, insulting Socrates and criticizing his entire method of investigation. Socrates’ claim entailed a necessary distinction between particular, material beings and forms. Hippias’ unwillingness to make this distinction and his criticism of Socrates at first appeared to be a theoretical mistake, stemming from his attachment to natural science and its materialistic physics, which is unable to account for form (that is, unable to explain the cause of any one thing being what it is). But Hippias’ attachment to materialistic physics came to light as itself stemming from a deeper attachment to appearances and opinions. Hippias was revealed to be a lover of sights and sounds, a lover of opinion,
and above all a lover of his own opinion of himself as beautiful and wise, an opinion which depends on the praise he receives from the many. Socrates’ critique of materialistic physics threatened the opinion of himself that Hippias holds dear and thereby provoked his spirited defense. The desire for praise from the many, and the irrational self-love from which such desire arises, is the fundamental difference between Hippias and Socrates. For Hippias, at least, it is the most basic impediment to Socratic philosophy. In the concluding section of the *Hippias Major*, Socrates fleshes out this difference and thereby highlights the political implications of such self-love for the practice and preservation of Socratic philosophy.

The final formulation of Socrates’ last suggestion is that the beautiful is “beneficial pleasure” (303e). But this suggestion leads Hippias and Socrates to the same difficulty encountered in the previous argument; it necessitates (given Hippias’ understanding of cause) that the good is not beautiful and the beautiful is not good.

Ever since his outburst at Socrates, Hippias’ disinterest in Socrates’ investigation of the beautiful has been palpable. Here, faced once again with the difficulty of the separation of the beautiful from the good, Hippias reaches his limit. He is content to dismiss the argument, and all of Socrates’ arguments, as “scrapings and clippings of speeches... divided up into bits” (304a). But the alternative to Socratic philosophy, Hippias asserts, is both beautiful and valuable, namely:

...to be able to compose a speech well and beautifully in a law court or council chamber or in any other ruling group to which the speech is addressed and to go away having persuaded them and taking off not the littlest but the largest of prizes, the salvation of oneself and one’s money and friends. (304a-b)
Hippias advises Socrates to take up these things and let go of those little speeches, so that he does not seem extremely mindless by partaking in foolishness, as he was just now doing. But Socrates demurs, claiming that Hippias is blessed, because he both knows what a human being ought to pursue and has pursued it sufficiently (as Hippias claims, at least). Socrates, on the other hand, seems to be gripped by “a certain daemonic fate” [δαιμονία τις τύχη], such that he wanders and is always in perplexity. When he displays his perplexity to wise men like Hippias, he is reproached with accusations that his pursuits are silly and worthless.¹ But when he is persuaded by wise men and repeats what they say, that the greatest thing is the ability to compose a beautiful speech and thereby succeed in courtrooms and other such assemblies, he hears bad things from others and above all from the Refuter. Socrates cannot easily escape the interrogation of the Refuter, for (as he now reveals) the Refuter “is the nearest of kin and lives in the same house” [ἐγγύτατα γένους ὤν καὶ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ οἴκῳ]. As Socrates explains, whenever he goes “home to [his] own” [οἰκαδε εἶς ἐμαυτοῦ] and the Refuter hears him saying these things, he confronts Socrates, asking whether Socrates is not ashamed to converse about beautiful pursuits when he is so clearly refuted about the beautiful that he does not even know what it is. He continues by asking Socrates how he could know what things are beautiful when he is ignorant of the beautiful and, with this being Socrates’ situation, whether he believes it is better for him to live rather than to die. Socrates laments the fact that he is blamed and spoken of badly by wise men like Hippias, on the one hand, and spoken of badly by the Refuter, on the other. Nevertheless, Socrates concludes, it may be necessary to abide all these
things, for it may benefit him. And, in fact, Socrates seems to himself to have been
benefitted from his association with both Hippias and the Refuter, for he now seems to
himself to know what is meant by the proverb “The beautiful things are difficult” (304e).

The closing exchange confirms and develops the suggestion from the last
section, that the fundamental difference between Hippias and Socrates can be traced to
a difference in their desires and attachments, specifically a difference in their love of
their own. Hippias believes that the largest of all prizes is “the salvation of one’s self
and one’s money and friends” [σωτηρίαν αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν αὐτοῦ χρημάτων καὶ φίλων].
Hippias strives for the preservation of himself and his own, as this is conventionally
understood. He can use the power he garners with his political service to protect these
things in a practical sense; more importantly, however, the praise he receives for such
service fosters the opinion he holds of himself as a kind of god. His excessive self-love
and irrational attachment to his own prevents him from critically examining his
opinions, in particular his opinion of himself. He chooses the appearance of divine
wisdom over the reality of knowledge of ignorance. If Hippias represents one end of a
spectrum, completely consumed by irrational self-love, Socrates represents the other
end, unfettered by such attachments, as a consideration of his closing comments about
the Refuter reveals.

Socrates’ comment that the Refuter is the son of Sophroniscus implied that the
Refuter was some aspect of Socrates himself. With this in mind, Socrates’ imagined
interaction with the Refuter comes to light as a depiction of Socrates asking questions of
himself and suggesting answers to himself. This, however, is how Socrates characterizes
the act of thinking in the *Theaetetus*: “a speech which the soul by itself goes through before itself about whatever it is examining” (189e). A thinking soul thus appears to be “nothing else than conversing, itself asking and answering itself, and affirming and denying” (189e). Socrates’ imagined conversation with the Refuter in the *Hippias Major* appears to be an imitation of Socrates’ own thinking, specifically about certain conventional opinions which are embodied and given voice by Hippias.² Taken as an image of Socrates’ thinking about conventional opinions, Socrates’ depiction of the Refuter suggests that his philosophic thinking is marked above all by a complete lack of the very irrational love of one’s own that defines Hippias. If one takes Socrates’ depiction of the Refuter literally, the Refuter appears to be Socrates’ brother, who lives in his home, who interrogates and beats Socrates, albeit for the purpose of education, to the point of calling into question whether Socrates’ own life is worth living. Socrates’ “brother,” if he is in any way attached to the familial, does not express it by cherishing and preserving Socrates as he is; rather, he constantly points out how Socrates is lacking and in need of improvement. He is in fact so far from attempting to preserve and protect Socrates as he is that he suggests Socrates might be better off dead. He is not attached to his brother as such. According to the image he presents, Socrates’ thoughts lack any attachment to one’s own as such. Unfettered by this kind of attachment, Socrates is able, among other things, to be radically honest with himself about his own limitations and shortcoming; he is, above all, able to know what he does not know. Far from cherishing and preserving himself, Socrates not only acknowledges his need to improve but entertains the possibility that his life is not worth living. Such thoughts
appear abusive and punishing to someone like Hippias, since they entail constant and unyielding self-critique. Socratic philosophy is domestic violence, in the precise sense.

These considerations suggest a way of understanding Socrates’ “daemonic thing,” which he discusses in the *Apology*, among other places. Socrates begins his concluding comments about the Refuter by noting that he, as opposed to Hippias, has been gripped by “a certain daemonic fate,” so that he wanders and is always in perplexity. But it seems that it is the Refuter who always keeps Socrates in perplexity, and the Refuter appears to be some image of Socrates’ desire for knowledge, which is unique in that it is free from irrational self-love and attachments to one’s own. This implies that Socrates’ “daemonic thing” is itself a way of referring to Socrates’ desires, which are hyper-rational and free from attachments to the familial and familiar.

Socrates’ remarkable influence on others and his “erotic art” would entail, among other things, weakening such attachments, which would allow people to acknowledge that they do not know what they think they know. Again, a basic impediment to Socratic philosophy appears to be the irrational self-love that is affirmed by the praise of others.

Alcibiades’ account of his own experience with Socrates in the *Symposium* supports these suggestions. He recounts how Socrates made him feel distressed at his slavish condition, such that he came to hold the opinion that life was not worth living the way that he is; Alcibiades claims to feel shame before no one other than Socrates. As the Refuter affects Socrates, so Socrates affects Alcibiades. But Alcibiades claims that he flees Socrates, succumbing “to the honor he gets from the many” (216b). Praise from the many re-affirms Alcibiades’ delusions of grandeur.
Having reached the end of the dialogue, it is now possible to return to the questions posed in the Introduction and attempt to clarify the *Hippias Major* as a whole. The first question implicitly posed by the dialogue is why Socrates wants to speak with Hippias in particular. Why is Hippias the proper interlocutor for an investigation of the beautiful? As we have seen, Hippias is the paradigmatic sophist, whose wisdom consists of an intimate familiarity with the convictions of the many, the beliefs the city seeks to instill in its citizens. Being able to speak with Hippias about beauty is like being able to speak with the city itself. Moreover, Hippias is motivated above all by the desire for praise, which is ultimately the desire to appear beautiful to others and so to himself. This desire arises from Hippias’ irrational love of his own, which in a different form underlies the laws and gives them their binding force (as the discussion of fathers and sons in Sparta revealed). It is this desire which makes Hippias a willing political servant. And so, Hippias embodies not only the beliefs but also the fundamental motivations of the city. In examining Hippias and attempting to lead him to consider the form of the beautiful, Socrates can learn both what the many believe about beauty while also observing the impediments to Socratic philosophy inherent in the city and political life more generally. In this way, the interaction between Hippias and Socrates is an image of the relationship between the city and Socratic philosophy more generally.

This observation begins to clarify why it is appropriate that the dialogue begins with an extended discussion of Hippias’ public and private activities, which sets the stage for the question about beauty. First and foremost, this prefatory discussion reveals that Hippias is motivated above all by a desire for praise, which fosters his belief in
his own beauty. His conviction that he has harmonized the public good and the private
good hinges on his unexamined desire for praise, a private good that is acquired by
benefitting the city. Here we see the central importance of beauty to political life. This
prefatory discussion also suggests that the beautiful, and the difficulty with beautiful
things that Socrates comes to understand, can be thought of in terms of the relation of
the private good to the common, which is also suggested by the fact that beautiful laws
and pursuits recur as especially problematic. The seemingly apolitical discussions of
beauty that follow (such as the later suggestions that the beautiful is the fitting, the
useful, and the pleasant through sight and hearing) have important political dimensions.
In particular, the fitting (and the relation of the part to the whole that the fitting entails)
can and should be applied to the relation of the citizen to the city.

The primacy of the political dimensions of the beautiful in the *Hippias Major* also
reveal the deeper significance of Socrates’ need to use the elaborate rhetorical device of
the Refuter in his conversation with Hippias. The most basic reason Socrates conducts
his investigation in the guise of the Refuter is relatively obvious. Hippias explicitly
declares that he would not converse with someone who asks the kinds of questions
asked by the Refuter (291a). So, Socrates must imitate the Refuter, because Hippias
would refuse to converse with Socrates if he were to ask these questions in his own
voice. Socrates must pretend to be an intermediary of sorts, supplicating the refined
Hippias for help conquering the crass Refuter. Similarly, while examining Hippias’ third
and final answer, Socrates says that he will imitate the Refuter in order to avoid having
to direct toward Hippias the sort of expressions that the Refuter directs toward
Socrates, which are “both difficult and outlandish” (292c). By imitating the Refuter, Socrates is able to take brunt of the abuse, shielding Hippias and his arguments from direct criticism, which Hippias’ excessive self-love would not tolerate. Socrates’ conversation with Hippias, however, came to light as a more general image of the relation of Socratic philosophy to the city. Socrates’ inability to persuade Hippias that he is ignorant reflects the fundamental limits of Socratic philosophy in persuading the city and its citizens of their various shortcomings. Moreover, Hippias’ angry reaction to Socrates reflects the danger Socratic philosophy always faces from the city. Hippias concludes the conversation with a stinging indictment of Socrates, in which he advises Socrates to give up his little questions and instead learn to compose the sort of speeches whereby one can persuade people in a law court, in order to preserve oneself, one’s money and one’s friends. Hippias’ contemptuous advice clearly alludes to Socrates’ eventual trial and execution at the hands of the Athenians, his apparent inability to preserve himself. At first blush, it might seem strange that the cosmopolitan sophist Hippias would have the same angry reaction to Socrates that Athens does. But this is actually to be expected, if what animates Hippias is essentially the same as what animates the city, the unreflective attachment to one’s own, albeit in different forms. Unlike Hippias, Socrates is aware that it is imprudent to display his wisdom before all sorts of people. Just as Socrates needed to conceal himself and his thoughts from Hippias, and so took on the guise of the Refuter, so too does any Socratic philosopher need to conceal himself and his thoughts from the city and its citizens, all of whom (like Hippias) seem to themselves to know about the most important matters. Hippias is
thoroughly motivated by love of one’s own, which impels him to seek praise from the many and fuels his political service; in this and other ways, love to one’s own is revealed to lie at the heart of political life. The antagonism between Hippias and the Refuter then comes to light as an illustration of the fundamental tension between the beliefs and impulses essential to political life, on the one hand, and Socratic philosophy, on the other, which in turn suggests the impossibility of general philosophic enlightenment and the consequent necessity for the Socratic philosopher to conceal himself and his thoughts.

The way in which Hippias is meant to represent the city helps answer the question of why Hippias repeatedly mistakes particular beautiful things for the form of the beautiful, as well as why Socrates’ relatively obscure ontological claim inspires such a vitriolic condemnation of Socrates and Socratic philosophy more generally. Hippias believes he knows what is beautiful because he knows what the many say is beautiful; he knows the many particular things which are lawfully and conventionally believed to be beautiful. He does not recognize a standard for truth above or beyond what is conventionally believed by the many. He is a lover of opinions and appearances. Socrates’ ontological claim threatens to complicate and perhaps undercut the simplicity of the appearances, and in particular it threatens Hippias’ own appearance as a knower, to himself and others. And so Hippias lashes out at Socrates. Hippias’ claim to know the greatest things mirrors the claim of the city to know the greatest things, such as what pursuits are beautiful and just, a knowledge that is codified in laws and customs. In the same way that Socrates’ attempt to lead Hippias toward a consideration of form
threatens Hippias’ opinions, so too Socratic philosophy more generally threatens to undermine the laws and customs of the city, by seeking a standard for truth beyond mere respect for the ancestral.

The above considerations explain why it is fitting that the *Hippias Major* be extremely comic. First and foremost, Hippias believes he is wise, because he knows the convictions of the many; in fact, he believes he is omniscient. His extraordinary irrational self-love makes him more convinced of this than any other of Socrates’ interlocutors. In the face of repeated refutations, Hippias persist in simply asserting that he could easily discover the truth on his own. As one who believes he is both beautiful and wise, but is not, Hippias is the definition of ridiculous, as described by Socrates in the *Philebus* (49a-e). Moreover, Socratic dialectic analyzes the things believed to be beautiful and reveals the ways in which they are no more beautiful than ugly, as exemplified by Socrates’ refutation of Hippias’ three answers. The undermining of the apparently beautiful and consequent disenchantment is also necessarily comic.

Hippias’ mindless confidence in his beauty and wisdom also explains why there is not one reference to erotic desire in the *Hippias Major*. As Socrates explains in the *Symposium*:

No one of the gods philosophizes and desires to become wise – for he is so – nor if there is anyone else who is wise, does he philosophize. Nor, in turn, do those who lack understanding philosophize and desire to become wise; for it is precisely this that makes lack of understanding so difficult [χαλεπόν] – that if a man is not beautiful and good, nor intelligent, he has the opinion that this is sufficient for him. Consequently, he who does not believe that he is in need does not desire that which he does not believe he needs. (204a)
The praise Hippias receives from the many affirms his belief that he is beautiful and wise. He does not seem to himself to lack anything. The investigation of the beautiful in the *Hippias Major* is conducted with one who firmly believes that he is beautiful, and so does not desire beauty. It is fitting, then, that erotic desire is completely absent from the dialogue.\(^5\)

This brings us to Socrates’ enigmatic closing line, in which he claims to have been benefitted by his association with both Hippias and the Refuter. As Socrates explains, “For I seem to myself to know what the proverb means that says, ‘The beautiful things are difficult’” [τὴν γὰρ παροιμίαν ὃτι ποτὲ λέγει, τὸ “Χαλεπά τὰ καλά,” δοκῶ μοι εἰδέναι] (304e). What exactly has Socrates learned from his association with Hippias and the Refuter? What is the difficulty with beautiful things?

From the beginning of the dialogue, Hippias boasts that he has harmonized the private good and the common. He believes that his political service, benefitting the city, is good for him. But, in the course of the conversation, Socrates alludes to the requirements that would have to be met in order for this to be the case. Hippias would have to be fitting to the city, like a stone is fitting to a beautiful statue. The city would have to be a permanent whole, and Hippias would have to be a part of this whole. And even this does not seem to be quite enough, given the fact that political service can demand the ultimate sacrifice of one’s life. It seemed that not only would the city have to be a whole of which Hippias is a part, but there would have to be gods who cared about the city and were willing and able to reward Hippias for his service, especially seeing that the half conscious aim of Hippias’ political service is the eternal preservation
of himself and his own, apotheosis. A beautiful things appears to unite the formal cause of the good with the efficient cause of the good, which for a human being means benefitting others and thereby benefitting oneself. Despite Hippias’ claims to extraordinary prudence, it seems his political service comes at the cost of his private good. He exemplifies this difficulty of beautiful things, the problem of how such a unification of goods could be possible. The ancient wise men seemed more aware of this difficulty, and so they eschewed the kind of political service of which Hippias boasts.6

Hippias is unaware of his imprudence because he is blinded by the praise he receives from the many. In his own eyes, he has already achieved a kind of apotheosis. He believes, along with the many, that he is beautiful and wise. Plato indicates the importance of these considerations with the opening and closing words of the Hippias Major. The dialogue begins with the phrase “Hippias, beautiful and wise” [Ἱππίας οἱ καλός τε καὶ σοφός]. This opening phrase is in the nominative, as opposed to the vocative, which one would expect when Socrates is addressing Hippias. Plato thereby suggests from the start that Hippias’ name, which is to say his reputation for beauty and wisdom, is of primary importance. The final words of the dialogue are “I seem to myself to know” [δοκῶ μοι εἰδέναι]. As a result of his reputation, Hippias seems to himself to know, about the greatest things. The self-love that is affirmed by praise from the many is a necessary component of political life. It makes Hippias a willing public servant. But it also makes him fundamentally un-philosophic. Hippias gets angry and offers a spirited defense when Socrates’ threatens his opinion of himself, his beautiful image. This
difficulty with beautiful things, the difficulty of educating “Hippias the beautiful and wise,” is explained in a relevant passage from the *Laws*, with which I will conclude:

The greatest of all evils for the mass of human beings is something which grows naturally in the soul, and everyone, by excusing it in himself, fails to devise any way to escape it. This is shown by the way people talk, when they say that every human being is by nature a friend to himself and that it is correct that he should be so. The truth is that the excessive friendship for oneself is the cause of all of each man’s wrongdoing on every occasion. Everyone who cares for something is blind when it comes to the thing cared for, and hence is a poor judge of what is just and good and noble, because he always believes he should honor his own more than the truth…. This same failing is the source of everyone’s supposing that his lack of learning is wisdom. As a result, we think we know everything, when in fact we know, so to speak, nothing…. (721e – 732b)
Notes to Pages 1-3

Introduction

1 Hippias Major 304e; Symposium 211d.

2 For an excellent overview of the debate regarding the authenticity of the Hippias Major, see Woodruff (pgs. 94 – 103). The dialogue was considered genuine until the 19th century, when Schleiermacher called it into question. Although he ultimately concluded that the Hippias Major was genuine, his student, Ast, concluded otherwise. Many others scholars, most notably George Grote, defended the dialogue in turn. Woodruff notes: “Although a consensus has not emerged, English-speaking scholars have tended to decide in the dialogue’s favor, and many now treat the dialogue as genuine without comment.” In general, I defer to the tradition in accepting dialogues as authentic. I do hope, however, that my interpretation will help justify this deference, by revealing not only the philosophic depth of the Hippias Major, but its connection to and consonance with other Platonic dialogues whose authenticity is not questioned, above all Plato’s Republic.

3 This claim follows from the fundamental hypothesis underlying my method of interpretation; namely, that in his dialogues Plato strives to meet the criteria for good writing that Socrates lays out in the Phaedrus. These criteria can be summarized by saying that a good piece of writing must be composed with “logographic necessity” (264b), which means that the organization of the writing is akin to a living animal, in which each part is arranged such as to serve a particular function within an organic whole. Only by understanding the relation of the parts to the whole (that is, how the parts are all fitting to the whole) can one understand the dialogue and what Plato means to convey through it. Admittedly, there is no way to prove at the outset that a Platonic dialogue, or any piece of writing, is organized with logographic necessity; when beginning to read a dialogue, logographic necessity is merely a working hypothesis. The proof, in so far as such a thing can be proved, is in the interpretation produced thereby. I hope the interpretation I offer is agreed to constitute one such a proof.

4 This suggestion seems borne out by English as well, in so far as one can call a moral action “beautiful” more readily than one can call an aesthetically pleasing painting or song “noble.” See Burger (pg. 230, note 2).
Notes to Pages 6-13

Section I (281a1 – 283b4): Wisdom and the Good

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of the *Hippias Major* are of the David Sweet translation, found in *The Roots of Political Philosophy* (edited by Thomas L. Pangle).

2 It should be noted that the specific wise men of past whom Socrates cites were, to varying degrees, politically active, despite Socrates’ claim to the contrary. Pittacus, for example, ruled Mytilene as tyrant for ten years before abdicating power. Hippias is likely willing to accept Socrates’ mischaracterization of the ancient wise men as politically inactive because their political activities would make Hippias’ look trivial by comparison. This is the first, but not last, instance in the dialogue of Hippias willfully accepting a false claim in order to save face.

3 Given Hippias’ interest in the arts and sciences, it seems unlikely that he actually consciously fears the wrath of the dead; rather, this claim is an early example of Hippias’ concern with propriety and speaking in a seemly manner. This concern with proper and pious speech, and its effects on Hippias’ thoughts about beauty, are examined most directly in Socrates’ consideration of Hippias’ third answer, that the beautiful is to be honored with funeral rites (291c – 293c). This section does, however, suggest a connection between Hippias’ concern with propriety and latent religious beliefs.

4 The accusation that Anaxagoras was “mindless” [ἀνόητα] at practicing his wisdom appears to be a pun, referencing Anaxagoras’ own philosophy, which posits that the cosmos is ordered by Mind (*Phaedo* 97c). It seems that Anaxagoras does not agree with Hippias and the many on the relevance of money to the question of whether one is mindful of one’s own good.

5 This question is examined most thoroughly in Section VII.

6 The exceptional justice and piety of Bias are reported by Diogenes Laertius in his work “Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers.”

Notes to Pages 16-29

Section II (283b4 – 285b7): Persuasion and Paternal Law

1 It is worth noting the degree to which Socrates is tactfully controlling the entire opening discussion. Here, for instance, while ostensibly giving Hippias the chance to boast about his greatest success, Socrates is actually feigning ignorance of Spartan law
in order to induce Hippias to mention his own failures in Sparta, which become the focus of the conversation.

2 Bruell pg. 77.

3 This tension between βελτίων and ἀμείνων is central to the *Hippias Minor*, an investigation of who is “better,” Achilles or Odysseus, which evolves into a discussion of who is “better,” one who voluntarily does bad and shameful things or one who does them involuntarily. Socrates exploits the different connotations of βελτίων and ἀμείνων in order to defend the unorthodox and seemingly immoral position that the one who does wrong voluntarily is “better” than one who does so involuntarily.

4 “Paternal tradition” in my translation of πάτριον.

5 Socrates alludes to this effect of Hippias’ education just prior to his suggestion, when he asks why the Spartans fled his “association” or “company” (ὁμιλία) suggesting the importance of “similarity” or “likeness” (283d).

6 This question is the theme of Section III.

7 On the connection between familial attachments and respect for the law, see *Republic* 537e – 539a.

8 Bruell pg. 78.

9 Bruell pg. 78.

10 This question is addressed explicitly in two relevant passages from the *Republic* (419a – 421c and again, somewhat differently, at 519c – 521c).

11 Ironically, if law is understood as good for the individual (as opposed to the city as a whole), progressive and unstable Athens might be the most lawful of all Greek cities.

12 Insofar as a city or society is defined by its shared beliefs, it would seem that the knowers are in an essential way outside of and foreigners to the city of the many. Conversely, one could say that all knowers, regardless of physical location, are (by the very fact of knowing) citizens of a different kind of city.

13 This characterization of the modern wise man matches the description of the sophist at *Republic* 493a.

Notes to Pages 30-37

Section III (285b7 – 286c3): Beneficial Education

1 Socrates appears to deliberately belabor this list, suggesting each possible subject before finally asking Hippias to tell him what the Spartans do enjoy, thereby highlighting the Spartans’ lack of education in the arts and sciences. The fact that Hippias does not interrupt to tell Socrates what the Spartans praise him for suggests that he does not hold the myths that he memorizes and recites in particularly high regard.

2 Although this can be established on the grounds of the Hippias Major alone, the basic point is confirmed by a comparison of this passage with the education of the philosopher kings in the Republic. Socrates’ list of possible areas of study rejected by the Spartans in the Hippias Major is roughly the reverse of the proposed list of studies in the Republic, which lead one out of the cave and prepares the soul to behold the idea of the good and which Socrates claims is a necessary condition for being prudent in public or in private (Benardete, “The Being of the Beautiful,” pg. xxx). The suggestion seems to be that, whereas the proposed education in the Republic leads one out of the cave, Hippias’ education in Sparta leads one into cave, obscuring the idea of the good and replacing it with blind deference to the ancestral. Hippias matches the description of the sophist in the Republic. He would seem to be the man in the cave who has memorized the order of shadows on the cave wall and wins honor as a result. He knows what the many believe to be beautiful and just, although he has no idea or concern for what is beautiful and just in truth. This also explains the one notable difference between Socrates’ proposed course of study in the Republic and the reverse list in the Hippias Major. In the Republic, Socrates includes the study of cubes, but he notes that people do not pursue this study because it is not held in honor by the cities. When Socrates asks Hippias what he teaches in Sparta, he skips over cubes; Hippias is only interested in what is honored by the city.

3 Hippias himself will give voice to certain confused materialistic beliefs in what follows (301b).

4 As Socrates notes in the Minos, law wishes to be the discovery of what is (315a).

5 Hippias’ comments in the Protagoras highlight the tension between what is by law and what is by nature (337d). The influence of Hippias’ education in the liberal arts can be seen in his student Phaedrus, who is notably distrustful of the ancient mythological accounts, preferring “rational explanations.” In the Phaedrus, Socrates explicitly says that wise men (of whom Hippias would be the primary example) distrust ancient mythological accounts and attempt to replace them with naturalistic accounts
They are mutually exclusive accounts of origins, which is the point alluded to here. See also Laws 888e1 – 890b3

6 The list of Athenian archons refers to the list of “eponymous archons,” whose exact power and responsibilities changed over time. The office was held for a single year and that year was named after the archon, hence the title.

7 F.G. Kenyon translation.

8 Perhaps there is an implication about why Solon’s laws were so quickly abandoned, since they lacked the supporting mythology, whereas the Spartan laws remained unchanged for generations. This consideration touches on the similarity and difference between Sparta and Athens, which is addressed in what follows.

9 Hippias refers to the beginning of this speech, in which Neoptolemus asks Nestor what is beautiful, as a πρόσχημα, which can mean “preface” but more often in the Platonic corpus means “pretext,” “cloak,” or “disguise,” specifically those used by sophists to hide their heterodox wisdom (e.g. Protagoras 316d). Ironically, though, Hippias’ wisdom, which the preface cloaks, amounts to nothing more than conventionally lawful opinions.

10 As proof that Hippias not only speaks but also thinks as the many do, note how he characterizes his own public service to Socrates in his opening speech. He begins by personifying the city of Elis. She comes to him, as he puts it. Somewhat later in the dialogue, it becomes clear that the view of the city as a natural whole, like a beautiful girl, is one of the basic beliefs fostered by the founding myths that Hippias recites in Sparta. Although Hippias consciously holds such stories in contempt, they nevertheless define how he sees the world and himself.

Notes to Pages 43-52

Section IV (286c3 – 287e3): Posing the Question, “What is the Beautiful?”

1 Socrates claims that Hippias “reminded him beautifully” [καὶ γάρ με εἷς καλὸν ὑπέμνησας] and, shortly thereafter, that Hippias has “arrived beautifully” [εἷς καλὸν ἥκεις] (286c; 286d). The colloquial expression on which Socrates puns, εἷς καλὸν, implies that something has happened fortuitously. The pun then draws attention to the connection between the beautiful and situations in which things happen to fall together as though ordered by mind; or, in other words, it suggests some connection between the beautiful and the “fitting” or “appropriate,” which is the answer suggested by the Refuter. Incidentally, the Platonic dialogue itself could be thought of as the ultimate example of something happening εἷς καλὸν, since all the apparently contingent details come together to form a whole. The goal of interpreting a Platonic dialogue would be
to discover how every speech and deed is fitting to the whole, or (in other words) how the dialogue itself is “εἰς καλὸν.”

2 Although Socrates’ language mirrors Hippias’ spirited concern with eristic disputation, it should be noted that when Socrates is bested by the Refuter, he is angry at himself and sets out to learn the answer. This self-critical response stands in stark contrast to Hippias’ obstinate refusal to take responsibility for, or ever acknowledge, his own shortcomings when they are revealed to him. This touches on the central difference between Socrates and Hippias, which will be highlighted by Socrates’ description of the Refuter.

3 As Hippias later acknowledges (291a).

4 This also explains Socrates’ decision to have this conversation with Hippias now, in private. In Socrates’ story of his interaction with the Refuter, he was in exactly the position that Hippias could have been two days from now. Socrates could have asked the same questions about beauty the day after tomorrow, after Hippias publicly exhibited his speech about beautiful pursuits, without the pretext of the Refuter. Socrates must suspect that Hippias would be far less likely to continue a conversation in public, where he may look foolish before the many. Socrates’ choice arises from his awareness of the imprudence of displaying one’s wisdom in public, before all sorts of people, which will become thematic in what follows.

5 The point is similar to Alcibiades’ claim regarding how he learned about justice (Alcibiades I 110d – 112d).

6 Obviously, this fits Socrates’ description of his philosophy in the Apology (21d). The Hippias Major will suggest that knowledge of ignorance requires that one lack the unreflective self-love embodied by Hippias. This unreflective self-love, however, is at the heart of the city and family. Ironically, in the Apology, when Socrates emphasizes his extraordinary knowledge of his own ignorance, it would seem that he is tacitly acknowledging his extraordinary lack of unreflective self-love. But this suggests a radical freedom from and opposition to the city and family. In this way, Socrates’ ostensible defense in the Apology can be seen as an admission and explanation of his guilt.

7 Tarrant pg. lxxviii.

8 Socrates’ use of “beauty” here and elsewhere suggests that knowing “beautifully” is a euphemism for knowing “imprecisely” or “confusedly.”

9 Hippias’ offense is made apparent by the fact that he responds to Socrates’ possibly patronizing address of “good man” (287d) with his own clearly patronizing address of “good man” (287e). This exchange, in which Socrates cannot even clarify the
question without giving offense, highlights Hippias’ intractability and resistance to Socratic philosophy from the very start.

10 Bruell pg. 80.

11 Although I will use the term “form” here and in what follows, it should be noted that it is unclear exactly what this means at this point. The salient point is just that the “form” of the beautiful is in some sense different than the many particular things opined to be beautiful.

12 Allan Bloom translation.

13 Allan Bloom translation.

14 See 284e and 286d; and later, 295a.

Notes to Pages 59-80

**Section V (287e3 – 289c8): Hippias’ First Answer, A Beautiful Virgin**

1 He has similar confident boasts at 289e and again at 291e.

2 As David Sweet notes: “Commentators suppose that this oracle is one that Apollo gave in response to some Megarians when they asked him who were better than they. His answer was: ‘Of all the earth, Pelasgian Argos is better, Thracian mares and Lacedaemonian women’ ” (Sweet translation, footnote 20). This supposition, however, is untenable for a few different reasons. Most obviously, Socrates appears to be referencing an oracle in which a “beautiful” mare is praised, but the oracle to the Megarians praise Thracian mares as “better,” not beautiful. Hippias’ response provides even more decisive evidence against the commentators’ suggestion. Hippias responds that the god spoke correctly, since very beautiful horses come to be “among us,” clearly implying that the oracle in question was specifically about beautiful mares in the area of his home, Elis, which was known for horse breeding. Hippias’ affirmation that beautiful mares come to be “among us” would make no sense if the oracle in question were about Thracian horses. For these reasons, I find the commentator’s suggestion unpersuasive. It seems more likely to me that the oracle referenced is unknown. One can nevertheless glean the relevant aspects of the missing oracle from the context clues, which is what I attempt to do.

3 *Odyssey* 4.632.

Hippias’ exclamation that the man would “dare” to use such paltry words seems to echo Socrates’ early question as to whether they could “dare” to deny that a beautiful mare is a beautiful thing. For Socrates, daring seems to consist in contradicting oneself. For Hippias, it seems to consist in using language that is deemed indecent.

This observation is clarified by a section of Plato’s *Parmenides* (130b – e). When a young Socrates first proposes a distinction between forms and particular things, Parmenides asks whether there is a separate form for things that would seem laughable, such as hair, mud, dirt, or anything that’s most dishonored and paltry [ἀτιμότατον τε καὶ φαυλότατον]. In this passage from *Parmenides*, Parmenides describes items such as mud with the superlative of the same word Hippias had used to describe the word for a clay pot, φαύλος. Socrates emphatically responds that these kinds of things do not have a separate form. Although he admits that it troubles him that the same case does not apply to all things, Socrates claims that he nevertheless avoids thinking about such things, since he is afraid that he’ll fall into the depths of foolishness. Parmenides notes that this is because Socrates is still young, and philosophy has not yet taken hold of him as it will, for then he will not dishonor any of these things; but, for now, Socrates still looks to the opinions of human beings, because of his age. This concern for the opinion of the many and fear of appearing ridiculous, which hindered a young Socrates’ pursuit of the truth, defines Hippias. The same point can be made by considering the allegory of the cave, which is said to be an image of our education and lack of education. Hippias’ exclamation that the Refuter is “uneducated” alludes to the ambiguity in what constitutes the education and lack of education in the allegory of the cave. A philosophic education will always look like lack of education from the perspective of the city, and vice versa.

Socrates here refers to the Refuter as “man” [ἀνήρ], as opposed to Hippias who had referred to him derogatorily as “human being” [ἄνθρωπος].

Zeyl translation.

*Nicomachean Ethics* 1123b.

Tarrant pg. 50.

Benardete translation

See, for example, Hippias’ claim that he can teach Socrates to answer questions so that no “human being” will have the power to refute him (287b).

Hippias’ concession here is somewhat moderated. He does not admit that the human class is ugly compared to the gods, but merely that the human class is not beautiful compared to the gods. Perhaps this is due in part to his recognition that,
despite hopes to the contrary, he is a human being and he is unwilling to admit that he is ugly.

14 Bruell pg. 81

Notes to Pages 102-105

Section VI (289c9 – 291c8): Hippias’ Second Answer, Gold

Although other commentators have noted the similarity between these two passages (such as Tarrant), to my knowledge none have explained the connection, owing in large part to the fact that most commentaries overlook the political dimensions of this section and the dialogue more generally.

2 Bloom translation.

3 He personifies Athens in a similar way in the next section (292a).

Notes to Pages 112-133

Section VII (291c9 – 293c7): Hippias’ Third Answer, To be Honored with Funeral Rites

This is my translation.

2 Bruell pg. 83.

3 It is interesting to note that Socrates’ refutation of Hippias’ first answer suggested that the most beautiful thing would be a god or the class of gods. Hippias was prevented from giving this answer, however, by the way in which the Refuter reformulated his question, which emphasized that the beautiful is a cause of beauty in other beautiful things. This led Hippias to suggest gold, which beautifies things by adorning them. Now, however, Hippias returns to answering the question by stating what he believes to be the most beautiful thing – but instead of suggesting the class of gods, as one might have expected after his first answer, he states that the most beautiful thing is to be honored with funeral rites. In some sense, “to be honored with funeral rites” replaces the class of gods as the most beautiful thing. This may make sense if being honored with funeral rites makes the deceased appear to be a god, as I will argue. In this way, being honored with funeral rites seems to be the cause of beauty for human beings.

4 In the Gorgias, Socrates mentions a similar list of private goods that occurs in a drinking song: “Being healthy is best, and second is to have become beautiful, and third... is being wealthy without fraud” (451e). Hippias exchanges becoming beautiful with being honored by the Greeks, perhaps because they are in a certain way the same.
The connection between being “perfect” and being dead is playfully alluded to early in the dialogue; shortly after Socrates calls Hippias’ “perfect” [τέλειον], Hippias mentions fearing the wrath of “the dead” [τετελευτηκότων] (281b and 282a, respectively).

This is perhaps why, when Hippias speaks of one’s own parents, he mentions burying them when they have reached the end or died; but in reference to the man himself, he says rather that he is honored with funeral rites, never stating that the man has reached the end or died.

In this way, Hippias’ final answer attempts to combine the two previously identified conditions of the beautiful itself: it is the most beautiful thing as well as the cause of beauty in other things. The beautiful funeral is in a way the cause of the beauty of the deceased.


Collins and Stauffer translation.

Tarrant pg. 57.

Hippias boasts of this ability early in his conversation with Socrates (281b; 286c).

Pages 99 – 100.

The items of this list point back to each of the previous sections. In the last section, where Hippias claimed gold was the beautiful, “stone and wood” are featured. In the section previous to that, where Hippias claims a beautiful virgin is a beautiful thing, “humans and gods” are featured. And the beginning of the dialogue features a discussion of “activities and learnings” taught by Hippias.

This is reminiscent of how Socrates says Aspasia taught him to memorize a funeral oration, threatening a beating whenever he forgot (Menexenus 236c).

In another account, Dionysus is the child of Zeus and Persephone. In this account, Hera sends the Titans to kill the child Dionysus, and they tear him apart, devouring everything but his heart, which Zeus takes and sews into his thigh, from which he is born again. Both stories feature the persecution of Hera and the theme of rebirth with the help of Zeus.

Woodruff suggests that Hippias is here represented as “trying for a laugh” (pg. 61). I believe this is very mistaken, not only because Hippias is a serious man, but
because it does not account for the fact that Hippias is apparently unwilling to say the most usual comic curse, instead coining his own. Rather, Hippias is more serious now than ever.

17 Hippias had earlier asked whether the man who beat Socrates would not be “led away” [ἀχθήσεται] and made to pay a penalty, provided Socrates’ city is just. The same sense of retributive justice displayed in that section underlies this oath.

18 This sheds some light on why, in the Plato’s Protagoras, Hippias is explicitly likened Heracles, but only the phantom or image of Heracles in the underworld, which is explicitly opposed to Heracles the immortal god (315b). As Odysseus explains in the passage there referenced, although Heracles’ shade is in Hades, Heracles himself rejoices among the deathless gods. Likewise, Hippias is the image of a complete and self-sufficient human being, the image – but only the image – of a god.

Notes to Pages 141-154

Section VIII (293c7 – 295b7): The Refuter’s Suggestion, the Fitting and the Nature of the Fitting Itself

1 These same confusions are highlighted in subtler ways as well. For instance, when the Refuter asks Socrates to consider whether “this” is the beautiful, the “this” is ambiguous, referring to either “gold” or “the fitting” (293e), suggesting Hippias confusion about how to understand the form.

2 Some commentators emend the text here, but Hippias’ response indicates a confusion that makes sense at this point, especially considering that he will soon reveal that he wants to say “both.”

3 E.g. Woodruff pg. 65.

4 This is illustrated by Socrates’ allegory of the cave in Book 7 of the Republic, which corrects for the overly stark division of the visible and the intelligible suggested by the preceding images of the sun and the divided line.

5 Commands to “look” and in particular to examine what “we say” do not occur in the first half of the dialogue, but recur throughout the second half, in particular when Socrates introduces his own suggestions.

6 Socrates mentions searching at 294a, b, c (twice), d, and e.

7 E.g. Woodruff pg. 66.

Notes to Pages 162-186
Section IX (295b7 – 297d9): Socrates’ First Answer, the Useful, the Powerful, and the Beneficial

1 In particular, as regards law. Earlier, the imprecision of the many was exemplified by their use of the word “law,” which the many apply to what is beneficial and to what is harmful alike (or, they do not distinguish between what is good for oneself and good for the city). This allusion to the earlier discussion of the imprecise use of the word “law” anticipates the reference to “practices and laws” in the upcoming list of useful things.


3 Benardete, “The Being of the Beautiful,” pg. xxiii.

4 The only other time Socrates explicitly said he was scared was at 292d, where he is responding to the abuse of the Refuter. The abuse implied that he was incomplete, not truly a part of any divine whole.

5 Bruell pg. 87.

6 Socrates’ choice of words is ambiguous, suggesting that perhaps the useful “for them” is not beautiful, alluding to problem of beautiful laws.

7 I use my translation of the Hippias Major throughout the remainder of this section.

8 Judging by Socrates’ comments in the Phaedo, it seems that the causes of a thing’s coming into being are not truly causes, in the precise sense. They are that without which the cause (i.e. the form) could not be a cause (95e – 102a; especially 99a-c).

9 At this point in the argument, Socrates uses production [ποίησις] and generation [γένεσις] interchangeably, which may obscure an important difference between the conventional and natural. The basic point, however, seems to be to distinguish the causes of a thing coming into being from the cause of its being (i.e. the form).

10 Bruell pg. 90.

11 Socrates’ specific choice of the relation of father and son calls to mind the importance of love of one’s own, which in its various forms came to light as the fundamental impediment to Socratic philosophy. It is this love of one’s own that motivates Hippias to seek praise from the many and attaches him to conventional
opinions, which itself prevents him from moving beyond the particular beautiful things to a consideration of the form of beauty. In this way, Socrates’ comment that the father is not a son both evinces Hippias’ blindness to relational aspects of being while at the same time alluding to the underlying cause of this blindness, his overdeveloped love of his own.

This is the same basic point that was earlier illustrated by the references to the gold and figwood ladles in the dual case (290e, c).

Notes to Pages 195-211

Section X (297d10 – 304a3): Socrates’ Second Answer, The Pleasant through Hearing and Sight

Socrates asks Hippias not to bring beautiful laws and pursuits “into the middle.” Perhaps not coincidentally, if one looks at the middle of the dialogue, one finds the section examining whether “being honored with funeral rites” is the beautiful; more precisely, the middle of the dialogue contains a reference to Achilles. Achilles exemplifies the desire for glory and praise that will account for the beauty of beautiful laws and pursuits.

Tarrant pg. 73. Although Tarrant notes this, she assumes that it is simply a mistake.

The ugliness of the act is reflected in the fact that it is referred to with a euphemism, “the things of Aphrodite.”

Collins and Stauffer translation.

This basic point is reminiscent of the opening of Aristotle’s Metaphysics.

This also explains the ambiguity of the list, an inter-dependence that Benardete too notes (“The Being of the Beautiful,” pg. xli). A comparison of the two lists suggests that the pleasure of seeing and the pleasure of hearing might not be wholly separate or distinct. Beautiful human beings in the first list correspond to beautiful voices in the second. Human beings are unique in that they have voice (meaning “speech” in particular), and so human beings and voice are in a certain sense inseparable. A human being can please us to see or to hear. All adornments corresponds to music altogether; the term “all adornments” would include musical adornments, such as the variety of rhythms (e.g. Laws, 812e). So, adornments can please us to see or to hear. Paintings corresponds to speeches; paintings and speeches (or words) can both be said to be kinds of images or imitations of things (Cratylus 430a – 431e). So, images of things can please us to see or to hear. And figures corresponds to stories; a figure refers to anything formed, such as a formed style in writing or speaking, and so would include
stories. So, figures can please us to see and to hear. The things that please us to see are, in a certain way, the same things that please us to hear. The pleasure is not in the simple perception, but in the appearance of and recognition of the thing itself, the appearance of the form.

7 Socrates refutes these answers by showing that they are both beautiful and ugly, which Socrates notes is characteristic of things opined to be beautiful as opposed to the form (479a-b).

8 Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem translation.

9 Strauss pg. 107.

10 As suggested by Zilles (Tarrant pg. 78).

11 This is my translation.

Notes to Pages 220-231

Section XI (304a3 – 304e9): Hippias’ Indictment and Socrates’ Apology

1 Socrates claims to be “bespattered” [προπηλικίζομαι]. At Republic 536c, Socrates claims to get angry when he sees philosophy similarly “bespattered.”

2 Christopher Colmo makes this same observation in his essay “Socrates Talking to Himself? On the Greater Hippias,” found in the collection Socratic Philosophy and Its Others, edited by Dustin and Schaffer (pg. 76).

3 Hippias’ being comic depends on his also being harmless. The fact that he represents the city, however, may have frightening or tragic implications.

4 Benardete translation.

5 Perhaps Socrates, being on the complete opposite end of the spectrum, also lacks erotic desire (in the precise sense). This would be the case if the experience of erotic desire requires the overcoming or forgetting of irrational self-love and attachment to one’s own. Hippias would be un-erotic because he is wholly consumed by and unable to overcome irrational self-love. Socrates, on the other hand, would be un-erotic because he has no irrational self-love to overcome. These possibilities are examined in dialogues closely associates to the Hippias Major, the Phaedrus and the Symposium.

6 This interpretation is supported by the fact that the saying “the beautiful things are difficult” was reportedly Solon’s response to the tyrant Pittacus, who abdicated his
throne claiming “it is difficult to remain good” (Sweet translation, footnote 45). Pittacus’ lament suggests a tension between what is good for his city and what is good for himself.

7 Pangle translation.
Bibliography


Biography

Travis John Mulroy received his BA in Liberal Arts from St. John’s College (Annapolis) in 2003, and he received an MA in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago in 2004. He is currently an adjunct instructor at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA.