

“Chalepa Ta Kala,” “Fine Things are Difficult”: Socrates’ Insights into the Psychology of Teaching and Learning

ABSTRACT: The proverb “*chalepa ta kala*” (“fine things are difficult”) is invoked in three dialogues in the Platonic corpus: *Hippias Major*, *Cratylus* and *Republic*. In this paper, I argue that the context in which the proverb arises reveals Socrates’ considerable pedagogical dexterity as he uses the proverb to rebuke his interlocutor in one dialogue but to encourage his interlocutors in another. In the third, he gauges his interlocutors’ mention of the proverb to be indicative of their preparedness for a more difficult philosophical trial. What emerges in the study of these three Platonic dialogues is that Socrates believes that how he and others *describe* learning makes a tangible difference in philosophical investigation.

In the scholarship on the Socratic dialogues, there has been much spirited and illuminating debate about the logical features of Socrates’ method or methods.¹ It is to the great credit of several scholars interested in the educational problems in the dialogues, however, that they have gone beyond the general argumentative features of the Socratic dialogues. Instead, they have broached the question of Socratic pedagogy by considering the rich dramatic features of the dialogues in which the characters depicted bring their own experiences, interests, egos and ambitions to their conversations with Socrates. Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, for example, has contended that readers are led astray when they try to understand Socrates through the “prism of a method or characterization that we impose from without.” Rather, we ought to “understand him in the context of the fictional dialogue itself—to see him in the company of the characters, the setting, the question he addresses, the response he makes and that others make to him” (1989, p.

¹ Much of the recent scholarship on Socrates’ method stems from Vlastos’ seminal paper (1983). Gary Alan Scott (2002) gives a helpful overview of this scholarly discussion.

16; see also 1987, p.128). Likewise Gary Alan Scott declines to use the terms “method” or “methods” in his book *Plato’s Socrates as Educator*. Scott argues that “since the most important questions Socrates puts to his interlocutors always seem to refer back to their character, his method cannot be invariable. Unlike an ordinary *technê*, Socrates’ educational strategy would be a bad one if it could not respond to the unique tendencies of each interlocutor. Hence, his reflections on method in the dialogues seem to be quite local and case specific” (2000, pp. 181-2). To mention but one more example, David Roochnik (2001) has offered an illuminating contrast of Socrates’ educational interactions with Calicles and Theaetetus, leading the former away from the realm of becoming towards being, but the latter back towards becoming.

The above noted scholars are correct that Socrates seems quite sensitive to the intellectual, moral, and emotional potentialities and limits of his interlocutors. Xenophon’s reflections on Socrates highlight this element of flexibility in Socratic pedagogy. Xenophon writes that Socrates “did not approach everyone in the same way” and then goes on to mention a variety of personalities that warranted different approaches – those who thought that they were naturally talented, those who were proud of wealth and believed that they had no need of education, and those who prided themselves on the wisdom they received from their education (Xenophon 1990, *Mem.* 4.1.3-4.2.1). Xenophon also pointedly contrasts Socrates’ treatment of the politically ambitious brother of Plato, Glaucon, with Charmides (*Mem.* 3.6 & 3.7). Glaucon was eager to take center stage in Athenian political life despite his young age (he is less than 20 years old at the time of Xenophon’s story). When he offered his political orations, however, he was laughed at and dragged off the public platform. Socrates often embarrasses other interlocutors while refuting them in order to force them to confront their folly. Since mockery and derision did not seem to deter Glaucon, however, Socrates approaches him with a mixture of

gentleness and flattery rather than embarrassment. Xenophon describes how Socrates, after his gentle approach won him Glaucon's ear, exhorted Glaucon to spend time gaining expertise in other matters of management before trying to persuade others to allow him to manage the entire city. Xenophon's depiction of the encounter demonstrates that Socrates had success with Glaucon by means of kindness while others failed by means of mockery.

In many ways, the conversation with Glaucon has much in common with other Socratic conversations in which Socrates flatters his interlocutor and then asks questions which lead his interlocutor to recognize an inconsistency in his beliefs. But Xenophon next records a conversation that is much different. Unlike Glaucon, Charmides is a young man who is fearful of laughter and, as a result, does not engage in public political discussion. Socrates assesses that Charmides is eminently capable of giving sound political advice, however. Xenophon describes how Socrates used his probing questions to exhort Charmides to enter public life. Though Xenophon does not close the story with Charmides immediately encouraged by Socrates, Xenophon's readers would be well aware of the fact that Charmides did eventually enter political life.² Xenophon's Socrates possesses tremendous psychological insight into his characters' ambitions and temperaments and puts these insights to use in his educational interactions with them.

² Socrates' encouragement of Charmides to enter the political life of the city did not necessarily bode well for Athens as Charmides would eventually become closely associated with the Thirty Tyrants, being one of the Ten appointed to govern the Piraeus (see Nails 2002, p. 92; Nails argues against the commonly held view that Charmides was actually a member of the Thirty). The issue of the moral character of Socrates' associates is a central problem in the Socratic dialogues. Was he responsible for the character of people considered by many to be traitors to Athens such as Alcibiades, Critias and Charmides? Or was the problem that those men did not spend *enough* time associating with Socrates? Plato's dialogue about temperance, *Charmides*, features, similar to Xenophon, a bright, young and relatively modest Charmides. But Plato ends with the young man *compelling* Socrates to associate with him; Charmides is executing, notably, the order of his older cousin Critias when he compels Socrates to associate with him. Charmides says, "We shall have to use force... seeing that this fellow here [Critias] has given me my orders" (Plato 1997b, 176c). Plato leaves readers with the impression that Critias – rather than Socrates – is the most significant influence on Charmides. This reading of the close of *Charmides* is suggested by Eva Brann (Brann 2004, pp. 66-87).

Whenever scholars have tried to make sense of Socrates' educational interactions, new layers of complexity emerge. The intriguing nature of Socrates' associations is the impetus for this paper, which has two central purposes. First, I will further highlight and explore Socrates' considerable pedagogical dexterity in dealing with different people. Second, and more importantly, I will focus on how Socrates *describes* learning and how he is cognizant of how his interlocutors describe it. I organize my observations around a proverb which appears in three Platonic dialogues, *Hippias Major*, *Cratylus* and *Republic*. The proverb is *chalepa ta kala* and it means that fine, beautiful, good or noble things (*ta kala*) are very difficult (*chalepa*). There is a further implication that these fine things are very difficult to acquire, learn or achieve (in *Cratylus*, Plato explicitly qualifies the proverb with fine things are difficult *to learn*). There is good reason to believe that this proverb has long been associated with the Platonic corpus. In his entry for *chalepa ta kala*, Zenobius, one of the earliest paroemiographers, *graphês* (writers) of *paroimiai* (proverbs), writing in the second century BCE, opens by noting that it is "a proverb of which Plato also makes mention" (in Leutsch and Schneidewin 1958, p. 172; my translation). I propose that the context of this proverb in these three dialogues demonstrates that Socrates was aware of the power of language to affect learning dispositions and his teaching employed this psychological insight.

In addition to my central purposes in this paper, Socrates' multifaceted use of the *chalepa ta kala* proverb may be particularly relevant for educators and educational theorists today. There are several critics of contemporary schooling who contend that parents, teachers, administrators, counselors and others increasingly shield students from discouragement, difficulty and frustration (e.g., Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; McEwan 2000; Stout 2000). In the United States, a "self-esteem movement" even arose featuring advocates of the view that low self-esteem brings

about countless negative educational and social effects. Indeed, some international comparative research has shown that American teachers in particular attempt to minimize confusion and errors by briskly leading students through easy exercises (e.g. Stigler and Hiebert 1999). Some scholars have worried that an increasingly managerial, technocratic idea that learning ought to be efficient and smooth captivates educators and causes them to view difficulty, error and confusion as deviations from or obstacles to learning (Biesta 2001; Kuhlman 1994; Smeyers et al. 2007). I agree with these critics that there is indeed a need to recognize and appreciate the important role that difficulty may have in learning. Though I will not take up the contemporary value of the Socratic dialogues for this problem further here, Socrates' use of the proverb *chalepa ta kala* may serve to remind us that how teachers talk about difficulty can help students tolerate and even embrace it. Perhaps more importantly, talking about difficulty in an appropriate way may make it possible for students to generate constructive responses to the difficulties they encounter.

Before I turn to appearances of the *chalepa ta kala* proverb in the Platonic dialogues, however, I should address two issues. First, though the three dialogues of which I will be speaking are in the Platonic corpus, there is only a scholarly consensus that *Cratylus* and *Republic* are authentically Plato's. Paul Woodruff (Plato and Woodruff 1982) argued in favor of Plato's authorship of *Hippias Major* but Charles Kahn (1985) has offered a counterpoint. Operating from a different set of premises is Thomas Pangle (1987), who contends that *Hippias Major* (along with the other dialogues in the Platonic corpus deemed authentic in antiquity) ought to be presumed authentic. The arguments about authenticity do not concern me here but I will take care only to speak of the "Platonic Socrates" in this paper rather than "Plato's Socrates." Since the three Platonic dialogues I consider here offer highly suggestive contrasts of Socrates' use of the proverb in different situations, all three dialogues are of equal interest.

Further, I should note that when I speak of the Platonic Socrates I am not implying that my observations pertain to the historical Socrates; I am rather interested here only in the Platonic depictions of Socrates.³

Second, Socrates is not the traditional pedagogue of the Ancient Greeks, nor is he precisely a member of the class of Greek sophists, nor is he similar to a formal teacher found in contemporary classrooms. Socrates can be said to be educating in the dialogues that I will discuss, but he is an educator only in an unusually extended sense.⁴ Discussion of Socrates' "method" often fails to distinguish the different ages and professions of his interlocutors. Only in the broad sense of "education" that I discuss here can Socrates be said to be both educating the relatively young Glaucon and the sophist Hippias. Indeed, Socrates' interactions with sophists could probably be better described as debates. Obviously, debates too can have an educational component both for the participants and the audience and I think that it is appropriate to call all these discussions, even the debates, educational in the broad sense that Socrates is concerned with exploring the thoughts and arguments of his interlocutors. Further, Socrates "educates" his interlocutors in that he consciously attempts to bring their attention to problematic aspects of their arguments or, as I will discuss below, their character.

The other side of this equation is that, if Socrates does not "teach" in the usual sense, what might it mean to "learn" something from Socrates? Socrates' students did not learn from

³ The fact that Xenophon represents Socrates' pedagogical flexibility in a similar way does not necessarily mean that we ought to attribute that educational gift to the historical Socrates. I think that it is likely that it was a feature of the historical Socrates, though it is rather possible that such depictions of Socrates became part of the genre of Socratic dialogues. Either way, I will not speculate further on the issue. And hereafter in the article, I will set Xenophon aside and focus only on Platonic dialogues.

⁴ It is essential to note this extended sense both because Socrates is obviously doing something different than other educators in his time and ours and, further, because Socrates famously denies that he is a teacher twice in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*: "if you have heard from anyone that I attempt to educate human beings and make money from it, that is not true" and "I have never been anyone's teacher" (Plato 1998; 19d & 33a). Though many scholars take Socrates' denial in the *Apology of Socrates* as Plato merely distinguishing Socrates from the sophists – after all, how could Plato believe anything other than that Socrates was the educator in Athens *par excellence*? – I read the *Apology of Socrates* as a meditation on the question, "what is a teacher?" A Platonic answer to that question is no simple matter.

him a fixed set of beliefs, or a craft, but the Platonic dialogues certainly seem to point towards a type of learning that is possible for Socrates' associates (even if the dialogues rarely show Socrates' successes on that front). The most obvious candidate for what one might learn from Socrates is the answer to some specific intellectual or moral question; in the three dialogues on which I focus, the questions are what is *to kalon* (the fine), what is justice, and what is the relationship between the names of things and the things themselves. But such superficial readings of the dialogues are surely not satisfactory and other candidates for the type of learning that occurs under Socrates' probing emerge. In the *Republic* the search for the definition of justice is explicitly tied to the question of how one ought to conduct one's life; Socrates remarks, "the argument concerns no ordinary topic but the way we ought to live" (1997d, 352d; see also 344e and 618c). Thus, if someone learns from Socrates (though many of his interlocutors are similar to Hippias in that they do not appear to learn anything from him) it must be an education in *aretê*, the kind of excellence that makes human beings excellent human beings. Even the discussion in *Cratylus* on etymology, a clearer understanding of which would not readily be presumed by many to be part of an education in excellence or virtue, gradually moves towards the theory of the Forms. Returning to the *Republic*, it is the recognition and appreciation of the Forms that enables people to live well. Similarly, a conversation about defining *kalon*, which readers encounter in *Hippias Major*, seems to point towards living a fine, noble or beautiful life. But to understand the type of teaching and learning in the dialogues, it is better to consider each in turn, which I will do next. One final caveat, however: though I will primarily address three dialogues, I am not going to offer anything near a full reading of these dialogues. Rather, I am principally concerned with exploring the context in which the proverb *chalepa ta kala* appears.

Chalepa Ta Kala* as Reprimand in *Hippias Major

The placement of *chalepa ta kala* proverb in the three Platonic dialogues is quite interesting and has great implications for its dramatic effect; the proverb appears at the beginning of *Cratylus*, in the middle of *Republic* and at the end of *Hippias Major*. I will begin by discussing *Hippias Major*, where Socrates' final statement is "I think I know the meaning of the proverb, 'What's fine is hard' [*chalepa ta kala*]" (Plato and Woodruff 1982, 304e).⁵ There could hardly be a more fitting way to end this dialogue for (a) the dialogue is an investigation into the definition of *to kalon*, the fine; (b) Socrates and Hippias use *kalon* and its cognates at virtually every turn of the dialogue, punning on it almost relentlessly;⁶ and (c) the proverb is used as a pointed rebuke of Hippias' conceit.

The third of these reasons warrants consideration here but first some background to the dialogue is necessary. Hippias was one of the leading Greek sophists, and like many other sophists depicted in the Platonic corpus, he is extremely confident about his knowledge and abilities. In *Hippias Major*, after Socrates remarks that Gorgias came to Athens and made much money by giving speeches and tutorials to young people (282bc), Hippias responds, "If you knew how much money I've made, you'd be amazed... I almost think I've made more money than any other two sophists you like put together" (282de).

The conversation quickly turns to Hippias' professed skill at teaching virtue. Hippias says that he has visited Sparta often as an ambassador on official business. Socrates then asks him whether he made money making young men virtuous while in Sparta. Though Hippias agrees

⁵ I have used the Kahn's suggested correction of Woodruff's translation here (Kahn 1985, p. 263).

⁶ To mention just two brief examples: The first line of the dialogue is Socrates' greeting of Hippias: "Here comes Hippias, fine [*ho kalos*] and wise!" (281a). A later exchange uses several cognates of *kalon*,

Socrates: So if the fine [*to kalon*] is a cause of the good, the good should come to be from the fine [*tou kalou*]...

Hippias: Certainly. You're talking finely [*kalôs gar legeis*], Socrates.

S: Then see if I say this finely as well [*oukoun kai tode kalôs legô*]... (297b; I have made a minor change to Woodruff's translation to highlight the adverbial sense of *kalôs*)

with Socrates' remark that he (Hippias) knows "most finely of men how to pass virtue on to other people" (284a), he responds to Socrates that, because of laws against foreign education in Sparta, the Spartans did not let Hippias teach their sons for money. Hippias says he has delivered many speeches there that the Spartans enjoyed, however, and he adds proudly that he has spoken there about "fine activities." He continues, "I made a great impression there speaking about the activities a young man should take up. I have a speech about that I put together really finely, and I put the words particularly well" (286a).

At that point in the conversation, Socrates ostensibly abandons the discussion of the teaching of virtue and other fine things and says that Hippias' description of his latest display about the fine (at 286a-c) reminded him of a conversation he had with someone else about what the fine is (286cd).⁷ The conversation becomes a concerted attempt to find a definition of the fine and there is some progress, though the dialogue ends with much work remaining to be done. Thus, Socrates concludes the dialogue with the *chalepa ta kala* proverb because it is both hard to define what the fine is and, more generally, fine things like definitions are difficult to determine.

As though this double-reference is not sufficient, there is a third way that one can interpret the proverb at the conclusion of the dialogue. The proverb can be read as Socrates' rebuke of Hippias' general intellectual and moral conceit, which is perhaps also intended to remind the reader of the lengthy introduction to the dialogue.⁸ Not only has Hippias said that it is

⁷ The strategy of couching one's criticism in the name of some non-present other is, pedagogically, a noteworthy move by Socrates. Rather than confront Hippias directly, as he often does with other interlocutors, Socrates distances himself from the criticism of Hippias' views that he raises. Perhaps the assuredness that Hippias maintains through much of the conversation is best explained by Socrates' feigning to be teaming with Hippias against the unnamed other in a joint enterprise of inquiring into the fine. Hippias does not appear to be annoyed, frustrated or embarrassed until relatively late in the dialogue. This device demonstrates a profound educational insight that there is a considerable difference between asking someone, "what would you respond to someone who says that X undermines your argument?" and telling someone, "X undermines your argument."

⁸ It is noteworthy, however, that in *Hippias Major*, Socrates is not wholly estimable nor is Hippias simply clueless. Woodruff's analysis of the dialogue defends Hippias against the charge of stupidity and notes that "Socrates comes

easy to define the fine – which it clearly is not – he also said that he can easily improve young men and, by inference, that it is as easy for young men to become more virtuous and fine as it is to find a sophist who will take their money. Thus, the proverb is Socrates’ attempt to humble Hippias. There is also an implication here that humility is a prerequisite for learning. People who believe that they already know are unlikely to be open to opportunities for learning and people who believe in the goodness of their character are unlikely to strive for moral improvement. *Chalepa ta kala*, therefore, both (a) describes a general type of effort or struggle necessary for learning and moral development and (b) serves to chastise those who have avoided the necessary effort or struggle.

Chalepa Ta Kala* as Encouragement in *Cratylus

As opposed to the use of the *chalepa ta kala* proverb in *Hippias Major* to admonish Hippias, the proverb plays a positive role in *Cratylus*. *Cratylus* begins as Socrates is invited to enter a conversation that is already underway between Hermogenes and Cratylus about the correctness of names, or etymology, one of the most pressing intellectual problems of the fourth century BCE.⁹ Unlike in *Hippias Major*, which features an overly confident interlocutor, *Cratylus* begins with Hermogenes and Cratylus in a joint search for a satisfactory position. Socrates’ first words in the dialogue are “Hermogenes, son of Hipponicus, there is an ancient proverb that ‘fine things are very difficult’ [*chalepa ta kala*] to learn about, and it certainly isn’t easy to get to learn about names” (Plato 1997c, 384ab).¹⁰ Zenobius, in his aforementioned entry on *chalepa ta kala*, writes that the proverb was used to encourage people to persevere in the face

off badly in the dialogue. He is ironical and insulting. He punishes Hippias for no apparent crimes, and takes advantage of whatever it is that makes Hippias stand up to such treatment” (Plato and Woodruff 1982, p. 119).

⁹ See Guthrie on the prominence of the issue of etymology (1971, p. 204 ff.).

¹⁰ I have altered Reeve’s translation to use the more common translation of “learn” for *mathein* (and its cognate *mathêma*) in place of “know.”

of difficulty, which seems to be the specific sense in which it is invoked in *Cratylus*.¹¹ Perhaps Socrates believes that Hermogenes and Cratylus lack the strength to persevere in this investigation and he says *chalepa ta kala* to encourage them to continue with the difficult task.

The fact that Socrates follows his opening lines in the dialogue with an impressive display of etymological knowledge may suggest that Socrates does not actually believe that etymology is such a difficult subject and, thus, invokes the proverb ironically. However, the dialogue seems different than some of the other Socratic texts that feature obvious Socratic irony in that there is a considerable amount of goodwill that exists among the three interlocutors. Socrates says, “it’s certainly difficult to know about these matters, so we’ll have to conduct a joint investigation to see who is right, you or Cratylus” (384c). Hermogenes follows by offering his position along with a qualification: “No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name. However, if I’m wrong about this, I’m ready to listen not just to Cratylus but to anyone, and to learn from him too” (384d). Further, perhaps Socrates utters the proverb in recognition that Hermogenes and Cratylus had ceased to make progress in their conversation before his arrival. At the opening of the dialogue, Hermogenes says that Cratylus “responds sarcastically and makes nothing clear” (383b). Cratylus and Hermogenes have fallen into a conversational gutter from which Socrates encourages them to emerge. They are encouraged to step back from their entanglement in their present debate and recast their frustration as merely a difficulty proper to such a fine thing as investigating the nature of names.

When Cratylus finally enters the conversation, Hermogenes has invited him to respond to the conclusions that he (Hermogenes) has reached with Socrates: “So tell me now, Cratylus, here

¹¹ Zenobius writes that “people are told of the ‘difficulty’ proverb when they lack strength.” My translation of *alloi de to chalepon akouousin epi tou adunatou* (Leutsch and Schneidewin 1958, p. 172).

in the presence of Socrates, do you agree with what he has been saying about names, or do you have something better to say? If you have, tell it to us, and either you'll learn about your errors from Socrates or become our teacher" (427e). Cratylus responds that etymology, which is "among the most important topics," cannot "be taught or learned so quickly" (427e).

Hermogenes insists, "if you can add even a little more, don't shrink from the labor, but assist Socrates—he deserves it—and assist me, too" (428a). Socrates follows, "Yes, Cratylus, please do. As far as I'm concerned, nothing I've said is set in stone. I have simply been saying what seems right to me as a result of my investigations with Hermogenes. So, don't hesitate to speak, and if your views are better than mine, I'll gladly accept them" (428a). Since this statement as well could be dismissed as mere Socratic flattery of Cratylus, which might later be followed by a harsh refutation (and a refutation does indeed follow), it is important to note that Cratylus follows up this comment with a humble statement about his confidence in his own views: "Socrates, I have, as you say, occupied myself with these matters, and it's possible that you might have something to learn from me. But I fear the opposite is altogether more likely" (428bc). Again there seems to be a genuine willingness to proceed with the inquiry regardless of whether the inquiry will challenge Cratylus' views.

With the goodwill involved in this investigation in *Cratylus*, it is apparent that *chalepa ta kala* is used by Socrates to express support and encouragement in the face of a difficult task. This is a sharp contrast to how Socrates used the proverb to rebuke in *Hippias Major*. The mere fact of someone else's acknowledgement that something is difficult may affect a person's fortitude and perseverance. Having a task described as difficult may spare someone the discouraging thought that insight which has not arrived easily will not arrive at all. It is fitting that these divergent invocations of the *chalepa ta kala* proverb are placed at the close of one dialogue,

Hippias Major, and at the beginning of the other, *Cratylus*. The opposing locations of the proverb, and the different uses Socrates makes of them, demonstrates that Socrates recognizes differences in the characters of his interlocutors and varies his approaches to them accordingly. But underneath each use of the proverb lies a Socratic insight into the fact that how we talk about learning may affect people's learning dispositions.

Chalepa ta kala* and the Disposition Required for Philosophy in *Republic

Whereas in *Hippias Major* and *Cratylus* it is Socrates who says *chalepa ta kala*, the first mention of the proverb (of two) in *Republic* comes from Socrates' interlocutor, Glaucon, in Book Four, just after a definition of justice in the city has been reached as "For the money-making, auxiliary, and guardian classes each to do its own work in the city" (Plato 1997d, 434c). Though this definition sounds promising, Socrates says that they must recall that they set out to understand justice first by looking at justice in the city and then by comparing justice in the city to justice in the soul. Hence, a discussion about justice in the soul is required, and that discussion follows next in the dialogue. Socrates asks Glaucon an "easy question" about whether the soul has three parts. Glaucon responds, "It doesn't look easy to me. Perhaps, Socrates, there's some truth in the old saying that everything fine is difficult [*chalepa ta kala*]" (435c). Socrates seems to sense that Glaucon's statement provides a new opening in the conversation. He responds, "Apparently so. But you should know, Glaucon, that, in my opinion, we will never get a precise answer using our present methods of argument—although there is another longer and fuller road that does lead to such an answer" (435cd). It is Glaucon's acknowledgement about the difficulty of the inquiry at hand that leads Socrates to suggest that the group ought to embark on the even "longer and fuller road." Since Glaucon acknowledges that *chalepa ta kala*, he has perhaps

indicated that he is prepared to tolerate difficulties associated with philosophical conversation. Notably, Glaucon resists the “longer and fuller road” at this point of the dialogue. Instead, he says that he prefers to continue to use the current methods of investigation. Nevertheless, Socrates is acutely aware of how Glaucon has described their current investigation and has tested Glaucon to see if he really is prepared to embrace the true difficulty in their inquiry. That Glaucon is not yet ready for the longer and fuller road may not be as important at this point in the discussion as the fact that Socrates has planted the idea that there exists a longer and fuller road; the door is open to this manner of investigation and the conversation returns to it in Book Six (504b).

The second *chalepa ta kala* reference in *Republic* occurs in Book Six at 497d when Socrates wonders aloud whether a genuinely philosophical city could survive, as “all great things are prone to fall, and, as the saying goes, fine things are really hard to achieve.”¹² The just city – or at least the just dialectical city – will be very difficult to create and, if created, will require much effort to maintain. Plato also describes other things as difficult using cognates of *chalepa*. For example, Socrates laments at 498a, just after he invokes the proverb, that other Athenians study philosophy when they are young, but then abandon it before they get to the most difficult part, *tô chalepôtaton*, arguments (*logous*). For readers of the Platonic dialogues, the most difficult part is clearly also the most important part – the part that leads one to the Good. Similarly, Socrates notes that it would be very difficult, *chalepa*, though not impossible for philosophers to come to rule cities (499d) and that the constitution under consideration would be difficult but not impossible to bring into existence (at 502c and again at 540d). Thus, difficulty is associated with philosophical projects, such as inquiring into a just city or constitution, and with

¹² The second instance inverts the word order of the proverb. It reads *ta kala tô onti chalepa*. Adam argues that one should not read *tô onti* as part of the proverb. Adam suggests reading it as “it is true that fine things are difficult.” I am of the view that it could also be translated as “fine things *really* are difficult” (Adam 1963, p. 34).

philosophy itself. Further, one of the characteristics of the philosopher is *philoponia*, a love of difficulty or labor (535d).

The discussion of the difficulty involved in constructing a just city and of philosophy in general precedes Socrates' return to the idea that there is a "longer and fuller road" available in the investigation. Glaucon's initial invocation of the proverb led Socrates to bring up its possibility and now the discussion about difficulty leads him to revisit the issue. It is possible that Socrates' invocation of the proverb was meant to cause Glaucon, Adeimantus and the others present to recall that there is a more important issue at stake than the issue of justice in the city and soul. At 504b and following, Socrates exhorts his interlocutors to think about how their analysis of the city and the soul has fallen short. Adeimantus is finally enticed by Socrates' suggestion about the existence of a longer road and that there is something "even more important than justice and the other virtues" already discussed. Adeimantus asks. "Do you think that anyone is going to let you off without asking you what this most important subject is and what it concerns?" (504e). Socrates replies that the most important subject is the form of the Good and the long road toward it involves much time and effort. Glaucon, Adeimantus and Plato's readers are presented with only allegories and similes for the Good. But they are offered a tantalizing sketch of its importance and how one might ascend to it.¹³

It is important to recall that the philosopher's ascent from the cave in *Republic* includes several pointed statements about how difficult and painful the process will be. Once freed from the cave, and able to look at the light (the source of the shadows that had been the prisoner's reality), Socrates says that such a person would be "pained and dazzled and unable to see things

¹³ Mitchell Miller (2007) has recently offered a helpful discussion of "the longer and fuller road" that specifically addresses Socrates' education of Glaucon and Adeimantus and Plato's education of the reader. Miller helpfully situates the mathematical curriculum as central to "the longer and fuller road" and notes that Glaucon and Adeimantus lack the preparatory education that would be necessary for Socrates to present them with more than a partial and incomplete description of the Good.

whose shadows he'd seen before" (515c). Only with time and perseverance will the freed man become adjusted to the light, as looking at it would "make his eyes hurt" and naturally incline him to "turn around and flee toward the things he's able to see" (515e). Plato makes it particularly clear that the light, the Good, can only be seen with *mogis*, toil and trouble (517c). Tzachi Zamir puts it well, drawing from *Phaedrus* in connection to *Republic*, when he writes that pain "initially motivates the [philosopher's] ascent, is continuously felt during the climb, and is only momentarily relieved during the soul's encounter with knowledge" (Zamir 1999, p. 84). In Socrates' description in *Republic*, the pursuit of knowledge, and the type of moral life which makes the pursuit of knowledge possible, will be marked by difficulties and struggles.

I take it that the general encounter with difficulty in dialectical investigation and the philosophical life is one important side of the difficulty associated with philosophy in Socrates' description. Another side of this is the difficulty involved in a challenge to one's beliefs, which is an integral aspect of the Socratic conversations, in which people come to see through Socrates' questions that their beliefs are unsound, inconsistent or false. There is a strong element of this sort of pain in the cave metaphor as well. Socrates says that, if the freed prisoner did not turn towards the light (i.e. the Good) willingly and was instead compelled to do so, the prisoner would be "pained and irritated at being treated that way" (515e). It is painful to discover that one's dearly held beliefs are false or problematic, and throughout the Platonic corpus many of Socrates' interlocutors become angry, embarrassed and irritated in various other ways with him.

Socrates discusses this effect of his conversations on others in *Republic*. Since it can be so painful to discover that one is wrong, Socrates suggests that ideally the participants in the conversation will proceed with genuine goodwill and humility, perhaps the sort of goodwill and humility that I argued are on display in *Cratylus*. Goodwill and humility require that one sets out

to find the truth, even if one's own initial position is proven wrong; or, as Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, "whatever direction the argument blows us, that's where we must go" (394d). In the Platonic corpus much is made of this attribute of philosophy and philosophers, especially in contrast to the "sophistications and eristic quibbles that, both in public trials and in private gatherings, aim at nothing except reputation and disputation" (499a). The educational implication is obvious: ego can be a powerful impediment to learning.

Socrates explains how ego is a particularly difficult obstacle when dealing with very bright young men.¹⁴ Because of his abilities, such a young man will experience much success and have praise heaped upon him. Socrates asks, "as a result, won't he exalt himself to great heights and be brimming with pretension and pride that is empty and lacks understanding?" (494cd). Socrates then asks how such a young man would respond to someone who tries to help him accept with humility that greater understanding is only reached through difficulty: "And if someone approaches a young man in that condition and gently tells him the truth, namely, that there's no understanding in him, that he needs it, and that it can't be acquired unless he works like a slave to attain it, do you think it will be easy for him to listen when he's in the midst of so many evils?" (494d).¹⁵ The answer is that it is very difficult to draw such people into genuine inquiries, and it may be painful for them to discover their errors. Because of his commitment to greater understanding, both of oneself and the world, Socrates persevered in his attempts to

¹⁴ Socrates specifically refers to young men who have philosophic natures; i.e., "ease in learning, a good memory, courage, and high-mindedness" (494b).

¹⁵ This story may be a thinly-veiled reference to Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades, especially because of the references to the young man's beauty matching his intellectual gifts (though it could apply to other bright young men who Socrates engaged in conversation). The brief account in *Republic* is similar in its most important details to another account of Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades in the Platonic corpus, *Alcibiades* (two other Platonic dialogues also offers an extended conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades, *Second Alcibiades* and *Symposium*) (Plato 1997a and 1997e). It is fitting, therefore, that in *Symposium* Plato has Alcibiades say in the last line of his speech, "Remember our torments; be on your guard: don't wait, like the fool in the proverb, to learn your lesson from your own misfortune" (Plato 1997g, 222b). Alcibiades had the misfortune (and fortune) of having Socrates show him his foolishness.

undermine people's false beliefs, creating difficulties for his interlocutors in the process. In both word and deed Socrates makes learning difficult; he speaks of learning as difficult and makes learning difficult by challenging his interlocutors at every turn.

While for some having their beliefs exposed as false may stimulate them to embrace philosophy or learning in general, others will seek to avoid those experiences and might abandon the quest for knowledge. Likewise, the struggle to catch a glimpse of the Good will be overwhelming for some. Socrates acknowledges in *Republic* that if people do not enjoy some success in learning, they will not persevere. He says that one should never "expect anyone to love something when it pains him to do it and when much effort brings only small return" (486c). Socrates' qualification further demonstrates his psychological insight into education. Though creating difficulties for others is inevitably part of the Socratic encounter, there are limits that must be minded, limits that are crucial in distinguishing the sadist from the educator.

Describing Learning as Difficult in the Platonic Corpus Beyond the *Chalepa Ta Kala* Proverb

In the preceding analysis, I have focused on the three Platonic dialogues in which the *chalepa ta kala* proverb appears. Before I close, it is worth considering two other noteworthy examples of the Platonic insight that one's description of the difficulties proper to learning may have profound educational import. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates presses a bright, modest and young Theaetetus to provide a satisfactory definition of knowledge. After his initial, failed attempt to provide Socrates with an adequate definition, Theaetetus says that he is frustrated and does not know what to do next; he says to Socrates, "I have often tried to think this out, when I have heard reports of the questions you ask. But I can never persuade myself that anything I say will really do; and I never hear anyone else state the matter in the way that you require" (Plato 1997h,

148e). Socrates' response to Theaetetus is not to proceed with the inquiry but rather to offer a detour – the famous midwife metaphor. The midwife metaphor in *Theaetetus* is an elaborate attempt to convince Theaetetus that the difficulty he experiences, his frustration, ought to be reconceived as a product of progress in the investigation rather than as a symptom of ineptitude. Socrates tells Theaetetus not only that he is experiencing the pains of labor “because [he] is not barren but pregnant” (148e) but also that Socrates the midwife has “the power to bring on the pains” and “to relieve them” (149d). As a consequence of Socrates' new description of the difficulties suffered by Theaetetus and his other interlocutors, Theaetetus' spirit appears to be bolstered and the conversation continues.

The other instance that I want to discuss does not feature Socrates, and does not appear in a dialogue, but is purportedly Plato's own history and contains a highly relevant description of Plato's endorsement of the importance of describing philosophical learning as difficult when teaching others. The author of the Seventh Letter in the Platonic corpus – possibly Plato – describes Plato's journeys to Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse. Dionysius had claimed that he was afire with a love for philosophy but Plato, who had already visited him, has his doubts. He decides to “test” Dionysius by describing the difficulty involved in studying philosophy. Plato tells the readers of the letter that “You must picture to such men the extent of the undertaking, describing what sort of inquiry it is, with how many difficulties it is beset, and how much labor it involves. For anyone who hears this, who is a true lover of wisdom, with the divine quality that made him akin to it and worthy of pursuing it, thinks that he has heard of a marvelous quest that they must at once enter upon with all earnestness, or life is not worth living” (Plato 1997f, 340bc). How well this passage seems to fit with the depictions of Socrates in the Platonic corpus; learning is described as difficult and learning is made to be difficult. That Plato may have used

the description of learning as a test to deter non-committed students or to arouse their excitement for the challenge seems consistent with the dialogues discussed thus far. The description may serve as an implicit rebuke if Dionysius is unwilling to undertake the difficulty inherent in philosophy, just as Socrates' invocation of the proverb *chalepa ta kala* served to rebuke Hippias. It may serve to excite and entice some students as the talk of the "longer and fuller road" did with Glaucon and Adeimantus. Or talking about the difficulties proper to learning, in different contexts, might encourage people to continue their philosophical journey in the face of frustration as were Cratylus, Hermogenes and Theaetetus.

In conclusion, if the above analysis is well-taken, in the Platonic corpus Socrates invokes the *chalepa ta kala* proverb in different ways that depend primarily on his interlocutors. Socrates knows how to talk about learning and he is shown to describe learning in a manner that benefits or may benefit others. He also notices the cues from his interlocutors' descriptions of learning that indicate when they are ready for more struggling and for greater challenges, as the conversation with Glaucon and Adeimantus indicates. Much is made of the educational implications of the type of questions that Socrates asked and the kind of answers he found acceptable. By examining the *chalepa ta kala* proverb, I hope that I have shown that much of the praise of him as educator is also due to the depth of his insights into the psychology of teaching and learning.

References

- Adam, J. (1963). *The republic of Plato* (Second ed. Vol. II). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2001). How Difficult Should Education Be? *Educational Theory*, 51(4), 385-400.

- Brann, Eva. (2004). *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates' conversations and Plato's writings*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books.
- Ecclestone, K., & Hayes, D. (2009). *The dangerous rise of therapeutic education*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. (1971). *The sophists*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (1987). Evaluating teachers: The case of Socrates. *Teachers College Record*, 89(1), 117-132.
- Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (1989). Socrates as teacher. In P. W. Jackson and S. Haroutunian-Gordon (Eds.), *From Socrates to software: The teacher as text and the text as teacher* (pp. 5-23). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kahn, C. (1985). The Beautiful and the genuine. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 3, 261-287.
- Kuhlman, E. (1994). *Agony in education: the importance of struggle in the process of learning*. Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey.
- Leutsch, E. L. v. & Schneidewin, F. W. (Eds.) (1958). *Corpus paroemiographorum Graecorum* (Vol. 1). Hildesheim: G. Olm.
- McEwan, H. (2001). On Making Things Difficult for Learners. In L. Stone (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education 2000* (pp. 258-266). Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Miller, M. (2007). Beginning the "longer way". In G. R. F. Ferrari (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Plato's republic* (pp. 310-344). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nails, D. (2002). *The people of Plato: a prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub.
- Pangle, T. L. (1987). Editor's introduction. In T. L. Pangle (Ed.), *The roots of political philosophy: ten forgotten Socratic dialogues translated, with interpretive studies* (pp. 1-20). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Plato. (1997a). Alcibiades. (D. S. Hutchinson, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 557-595). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997b). Charmides. (R. K. Sprague, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 639-664). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997c). Cratylus. Translated by. (C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 101-156). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997d). Republic. (G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 971-1223). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997e). Second Alcibiades. (A. Kenny, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 596-608). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997f) Letters. (G. Morrow, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 1634-1676). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997g) Symposium. (A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 457-505). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato. (1997h). Theaetetus. (M. J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat, Trans.). In J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.) *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 157-234). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Plato (1998) The Apology of Socrates. In Plato and Artistophanes, *Four Texts on Socrates*. (T. West and G. S. West, Trans. & Eds.) (pp.63-97). Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.
- Plato and Woodruff, P. (1982). *Hippias major: Translated with commentary and essay*. (P. Woodruff, Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.

- Roochnik, D. (2001). Socrates' Pedagogical Flexibility: Two Case Studies. *Teaching Philosophy*, 24(1), 29-44.
- Scott, G. A. (2000). *Plato's Socrates as educator*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Scott, G. A. (2002). Introduction. In G. A. Scott (Ed.), *Does Socrates have a method?: rethinking the elenchus in Plato's dialogues and beyond* (pp. 1-16). University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Smeyers, P., Smith, R., & Standish, P. (2007). *The therapy of education: philosophy, happiness and personal growth*. New York: Palgrave.
- Stigler, J. W., & Hiebert, J. (1999). *The teaching gap: best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*. New York: Free Press.
- Stout, M. (2000). *The feel-good curriculum: the dumbing-down of America's kids in the name of self-esteem*. Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books.
- Vlastos, G. (1983). The Socratic Elenchus. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1, 27-58.
- Xenophon. (1990). *Memoirs of Socrates* (H. Tredennick, Trans.) In R. Waterfield (Ed.) *Conversations of Socrates* (pp. 68-216). London, New York: Penguin.
- Zamir, T. (1999). The face of truth. *Metaphilosophy*, 30(1/2), 79-94.