A Newer Protagoras

Robert Williams and Christopher S. Wood

In 1929, The Art Bulletin published a mock Platonic dialogue, “The New Protagoras,” by the philosopher and historian of art theory A. Philip McMahon. With a text only five pages in length but outfitted with exactly one hundred learned footnotes, the dialogue is both playful and serious: it attempts to summarize current debates about the nature of art that bear most directly on the ways in which art history might define its aims and methods. Imbued with the pragmatism common to American thinkers of the author’s generation and preoccupied with the implications of “scientific” aesthetics, it ends when Socrates appears and intones part of his famous speech about the nature of love from Plato’s Symposium. Thus deferring to idealism without actually endorsing it, the text suggests that an idealistic aesthetics might serve as a necessary corrective to the excesses of science, and that the critical integration of those seemingly incompatible approaches might well be the specific challenge of a future art history.

We choose to read the appearance of Socrates allegorically, as a foreshadowing of the influx of great émigré scholars in the 1930s—the most influential espousing a neo-Kantian idealism—and an indication of the transformation they would work on the field. We understand the dialogue to document a pregnant moment in the development of art history, a moment when, at least in the United States, the discipline attained a new level of philosophical reflexivity. Its value as a point of departure—as a tool with which to anatomize the challenges now confronting us—rests on the figure of Protagoras, who, as a Sophist, can be taken to represent the fact that so much of the modern thought on which contemporary art history depends betrays a deep affinity with Sophistry.

SETTING The Blessed Isles

CHARACTERS Protagoras, Charmides, Eryximachus, Barbarian Stranger

ERYXIMACHUS We’re pleased to see you, Protagoras. We’ve encountered newcomers to these Isles who have told us much about that new craft or science, practiced among the moderns, about which you were recently so curious.

PROTAGORAS Greetings, young friends! I’m afraid I don’t immediately remember the object of my curiosity: What is this science you speak of?

CHARMIDES Why, Protagoras, not so long ago you questioned one of our colleagues at some length about a “science of beauty” proposed by certain modern thinkers. Naturally, you were much intrigued by the possibility of a rational explanation for the experience of the beautiful, even if in the end you judged that this modern pragmatist had not yet succeeded in refuting the foolishness of Plato.¹

PROTAGORAS Yes, of course; now I begin to recall. It’s so hard to keep a clear head in this place, don’t you find? The conversation is both very present and very distant to me, and yet it was a recent conversation, indeed, it was. Tell me: The moderns cannot already have found a solution to their puzzle?

CHARMIDES How right you are about the bends of otherworldly time, Protagoras: for us shades, the conversation was as yesterday. And yet for the men and women of the world, two generations and more have passed since then. For the living a great deal has changed, even if little has changed here among the blessed.

ERYXIMACHUS In the meantime, in fact, many of the moderns seem to have abandoned their preoccupation with beauty.

PROTAGORAS Why, already Parmenides argued that we will never know what beauty is, as I believe I pointed out in that very conversation you mentioned.

ERYXIMACHUS It seems that the moderns have now sought to define their pursuit in a new way, devoting their attention more to the subject of illusion than to beauty. Indeed, their pursuit might well be described as a history or science of illusions, for it involves lengthy debates about the nature of illusion, the uses to which illusions have been put, and how illusion making has changed from one epoch to the next.

PROTAGORAS A science of illusions? How interesting! It suggests that the moderns have rediscovered something of our Sophistry, no?

CHARMIDES In fact, there is widespread dissatisfaction with Socrates and Plato among the moderns and a corresponding revial of interest in earlier teachers—among whom they number the Sophists, including yourself, Protagoras—and given the importance they attach to rigorous scientific methods in their search for knowledge, this development is truly remarkable. Many moderns believe that it reveals the profound inadequacy of the kind of rationalism on which they had come to rely; some go so far as to accuse Socrates and Plato of having deflected philosophy from its proper course!

PROTAGORAS How exciting! Tell me, who among the moderns has taken the lead in this development? Who is the modern champion of Sophistry?

CHARMIDES That is no easy question to answer. Many acknowledge their indebtedness to a certain Frederick, a barbarian philosopher from beyond the mountains to the north, apparently well versed in the ways of us Greeks. He seems to have been the first of the moderns to ridicule Socrates
THE NEW PROTAGORAS

A Pedantic Dialogue

BY A. PHILIP McMAHON

Characters: Protagoras, a Friend, Socrates.

PRO. Have you just arrived, or have you been a long time in these islands?

FR. I have just come, and I have been looking about, but so far I have not seen Socrates.

PRO. At first it is indeed hard to recognize friendly shades. But we are well met, for I knew Socrates while we still walked on earth. I was famous among the Greeks, yet I was the least envious of men, and I admired him more than all with whom I was in the habit of conversing. As an older to a younger man, I said to him that I should not be surprised if he, also, were to rank high among the sophists. I am Protagoras.

FR. Happy I am to meet you. While we are waiting to see whether Socrates may not pass this way, there are some things about which surely you can enlighten me. Or are you unaware of what happens among men today?

PRO. Now I perceive that you are truly a new arrival. For while the shades wander about in this place, they gradually remember all that they have read, or heard, or said. But you as a newcomer can doubtless give us interesting reports. Do my doctrines still prevail? Do the younger men continue to gather about my successors?

FR. It is precisely about such matters that I would question you. Plato made the name of sophist so unpopular that few if any now admit that title. But if you find your own principles among those that are being taught, you can answer both your own questions and mine.

PRO. I agree with you.

FR. With Socrates I would inquire, can any one possess a scientific knowledge of a thing of which he cannot apprehend the truth?

PRO. I should reply, with Theaetetus, how can he?

FR. But if any one should say that science and perception are the same, what would you say?

PRO. But is it now thought to be the case that science and perception are the same?

FR. Since 1876, I am told, it has been fancied that an inductive science of beauty might be reached through controlled experiments.

PRO. So the science of beauty has been attained in that way?

FR. A recent writer says the resulting generalizations have been not only dubious but trivial.
and his followers, but the import and value of his thought are much contested, and, in any event, there are many others.  

ERXIMACHUS Long before Frederick, in fact, the natural scientists had abandoned Socrates and Plato; that is to say, even those who exercise the greatest rigor in their distinctions between true and false find fault with the dialectics of Socrates and Plato.  

PROTAGORAS Why, I almost begin to feel sorry for my old rival and his disciple! Tell me more about the science of illusions.

CHARMIDES Well, from what we’ve heard, it takes many forms, and its practitioners disagree as to which is the best. Some seem to approach it more as a science of artifacts than of illusions.

PROTAGORAS Of objects that create illusions, then, such as painted pictures?

CHARMIDES That sort of object of course, but also those that do not, such as buildings and furnishings, as well as all kinds of vessels, utensils, and fabrics.

ERXIMACHUS Among the moderns, even paintings do not always create illusions in the manner that was common among us.

PROTAGORAS So I’ve heard. I can’t help wondering, though, what makes such objects deserving of study? I mean, what would one want to know about utensils apart from how to make them or how to use them?

ERXIMACHUS From what we gather, the ability to tell where and when an object was made and what is noteworthy about it is a highly valued skill among the moderns. Not only that, but how to care for the object and repair it, as well as how much money to expect if one wishes to sell it—this, too, is considered useful knowledge.

PROTAGORAS No doubt it is useful—for the steward of a great household, the caretaker of a temple, the merchant of woven carpets, or the metalsmith or cabinetmaker or carpet maker himself. But why would you or I wish to know how every sort of old object is made, or what they are worth? What is the real source of their interest? Is it their expensive materials? Their beauty?

CHARMIDES This seems to be precisely the point of disagreement among the moderns. Many attribute beauty to these objects and take pleasure in the contemplation of them; many spend large sums of money collecting them, and those who can’t afford to do so spend their leisure hours visiting great storehouses where such artifacts are carefully displayed. If you ask these people what it is about these objects that they find so fascinating, most of them, apparently, will say, “Beauty.” Others, including many of the most sophisticated practitioners of this science of illusions, say that however beautiful such objects may be, their real interest must lie in something else. The term “beauty” is problematic not only because it is imprecise but also, they say, because it is often used to include some things and exclude others in order to serve ulterior aims. In short, they maintain that the concept of beauty is insufficient to describe the interest of artifacts.

PROTAGORAS And what do they offer in its place?

CHARMIDES Well, some of them maintain that the artifacts, in effect, speak, that they have “meaning.”

PROTAGORAS How does a clay vessel or a chair or a carpet have meaning—unless, of course, it is adorned with writing or pictures?

CHARMIDES What is even more baffling than the idea of a meaningful chair, at least to me, is that some of those very people who most vigorously deny the usefulness of the term “beauty” nevertheless persist in gathering beautiful things around themselves, and not only that, but they array themselves in the finest clothes and treat themselves to the most exquisite meals, cultivating beauty in every aspect of their lives.

PROTAGORAS An inconsistency, to be sure, but very likely harmless. Tell me, though, for I am curious: How does a utensil or garment have meaning?

CHARMIDES I’m not sure I can explain it. Frankly, I suspect that the extension of the idea of meaning to bowls and shoes is simply a fig leaf for a deep and continuing attraction to beautiful and finely crafted artifacts.

ERXIMACHUS The difficulty of this issue has even led some of the moderns to propose that the only sensible solution is to set it aside entirely and reckon the value of such objects simply in terms of the prices paid for them.

PROTAGORAS Ah, now I remember! This argument was propounded by the stranger in that conversation you recalled to me: he held that a history of prices might result in a more accurate history than the kind prevalent in his day.  

ERXIMACHUS Yes, it is an idea that passes in and out of fashion, and that even now seems to enjoy some limited favor, but one that does not satisfy me at all.

PROTAGORAS Why, to me it sounded promising, then and now!

CHARMIDES I, too, am skeptical, Protagoras: it seems to me to reduce all forms of desire to a single common denominator.

PROTAGORAS Perhaps—as you yourself have just suggested, Charmides—all the many ways devised for speaking
about such objects are but so many ways of disguising the desire for beautiful things.

CHARMIDES You may be right, Master. One senses a certain evasiveness among the moderns, even among those practitioners of this craft whom one would expect to be most forthcoming. Perhaps desire for shaped objects seems too close to desire for the body itself.

PROTAGORAS How things have changed! I remember that at the end of that conversation with the stranger the shade of Socrates himself appeared and spoke—eloquently, it must be said—about the absolute and disembodied beauty to which the love of beautiful earthly things may lead.5

ERYXIMACHUS He was repeating something he said while he lived among mortals, Protagoras, a speech he made during a memorable banquet in the house of Agathon.6 I was present on that occasion; I think it unlikely he will reappear and try repeating himself again.

CHARMIDES In any event, many moderns would no longer be impressed by such a speech.

ERYXIMACHUS I think that when the moderns use the word “meaning” in the way you described a moment ago, Charmides, they do not limit themselves to the literal sense in which, say, a picture illustrating a story might have meaning, but in an extended, even metaphorical, way. Every crafted object has a place in the history of human activity: beyond its intended function, it has a relation to all the other products—not only physical objects, but customs, institutions, and ideas—of the people who produced it, and even to the products of all other peoples from the beginning of time and into the remotest future. We might say that in any all-encompassing narrative of human history, each object would have to have its place, however small, and that place could be called its “meaning.”

PROTAGORAS So this extended conception of meaning implies some larger, hypothetical narrative?

ERYXIMACHUS Yes, and such a narrative represents the ideal form of their science. The fascination with artifacts might be referred, on the one hand, to a science of the beautiful: the moderns invented such a science, as you know, and in tribute to us gave it a Greek name, “aesthetics.” But according to the alternative I have described, it could be referred to a comprehensive science of human activities. The moderns have also created such a science, and again have given it a Greek name: “anthropology.”

PROTAGORAS And the science of artifacts is seen as falling within this all-comprehending science of man?

ERYXIMACHUS My sense is that for most practitioners it does; for more, at any rate, than see it falling within aesthetics.7

CHARMIDES Eryximachus is right, yet the moderns also distinguish between “art” and “craft” in a manner that is unfamiliar to us Greeks, and this distinction has also had a shaping influence on their science of artifacts. At some point they came to see certain kinds of objects—especially certain paintings, sculptures, and buildings—as different from others. Such objects, they believed, require a higher concentration of intellectual effort and skill to make, and they are thus able to offer a higher kind of intellectual interest to viewers. At first, it seems, only these special objects—which they call “works of art”—were thought worthy of study, and even though the distinction between them and other kinds of artifacts has proved increasingly difficult to sustain, there remains a sense that in studying “art” one is studying something special, something other than mere craft.

PROTAGORAS This distinction is certainly new to me, and I would have to ponder it at some length. I can see that it might create all sorts of difficulties.

CHARMIDES Oh, Protagoras, if only you knew! The moderns often seem to be so much cleverer than we are, but in this matter they have revealed themselves to be the most perfect muddleheads. Painting is considered an art, pottery a craft, yet especially fine pots might be considered works of art, and many paintings of a crude or formulaic nature are dismissed as unworthy of the name “art.” They say that when the wonderful little machine called the camera was invented, there was a great debate over whether the images it produced could be called works of art or not. These images—for which the moderns, again in touching tribute to us, created a Greek word, “photograph”—did not seem to fit the traditional category “craft” either, since they were produced by machine and could be reproduced in endless numbers of perfectly identical copies. Now we hear that the moderns have developed still more wonderful machines for creating images, including images that move and speak—more amazing than the statues of Daedalus—yet there are those who would insist that such things do not count as art at all.8

PROTAGORAS So the moderns created a distinction only to have it crumble in their hands.

ERYXIMACHUS That’s not all, Protagoras. At first, the practitioners of this science of artifacts, being Europeans, concentrated their attention only on objects produced by Europeans. The marvelous works of other barbarian peoples were excluded because they did not conform to European ideas of the beautiful. Later, as an anthropological conception of the science gained hold, the works of non-Europeans began to be recognized by Europeans as art worthy of study, yet it proved difficult to integrate them into a conceptual framework devised for the study of European artifacts, and apparently it remains so to this day.9 Not only is the idea of “art” problematic in its relation to “craft,” it seems to be culturally specific in a way that undermines any pretensions of the science of artifacts to be truly universal, that is, to be truly a science.
PROTAGORAS Why not discard this troublesome distinction altogether?

CHARMIDES Opinion is divided: some believe that it should be abandoned, others think not. Though the members of this second group may deplore the kinds of limitations that marginalize non-European works, they do not feel that the idea of “art” is something that can be done away with entirely.

PROTAGORAS So the problem is that this idea of art, as you describe it, Charmides, does not lend itself to consideration within an anthropological perspective. To want to distinguish our interest in works of art from our interest in artifacts generally seems to imply that anthropology does not offer an adequate model for the kind of science the moderns seem to wish to practice.

CHARMIDES Yes, and yet, though that may seem to be the case, I’m not sure that the two modes of interest are necessarily opposed. One might rather say that the challenge of this science is to find a way to accommodate them both.

ERYXIMACHUS Yes, to find a way in which the interest in art might itself be made an object of anthropological interest, perhaps by treating beauty itself as a kind of meaning.

CHARMIDES Or meaning as a kind of beauty!

PROTAGORAS Charmides, what do you mean?

CHARMIDES I mean that art never plainly shows us anything, but rather disguises, encrypts, and defers its meaning. And that the rhythms of seeking, decoding, and anticipation that art therefore imposes on its beholders are the rhythms of desire itself. Beauty in art, I would say, is just a figure for the role that desire plays in the production of meaning.

PROTAGORAS Surely not all works of art represent beautiful or desirable objects.

CHARMIDES That’s right, they do not; some works are ugly, and still they are admired. This is because their ugliness is once again read as a figure for desire. For does not desire lie perilously close to its opposite, disgust? Artistic beauty is simply the suspension of the opposition between the beautiful and the ugly.

ERYXIMACHUS What?

PROTAGORAS When you speak of “art,” it occurs to me that the term applies as well to poetry and to rhetoric, to music and to dance as to artifacts of the kind we’ve been discussing.

CHARMIDES Quite, and many leading practitioners of this science are well aware of the fact. Yet the study of artifacts has worked itself loose from the study of other art forms, in part for the purely practical reason that the kind of expertise required for the adequate comprehension of all forms of art would be beyond the abilities of any individual, in part because some believe that artifacts, especially images, work in distinctive ways that make them unlike poems or songs, and that this distinctiveness is precisely what practitioners of this science must explain.

PROTAGORAS In what is this distinctiveness believed to consist?

CHARMIDES Well, some maintain that because images appeal to the sight and poetry and music to the hearing, the “visual” arts affect us in fundamentally different ways.

PROTAGORAS Yet don’t all the arts appeal to the mind?

ERYXIMACHUS Well said, Protagoras!

CHARMIDES Yes, of course, but many of the moderns believe the content and efficacy of each art to differ significantly depending on the specific sense it addresses. Their conviction rests on the assumption that sense experience itself is an essential part of the experience of art. This emphasis may seem strange to us, but it is actually part of that reaction against the rationalism of Socrates and Plato that we mentioned earlier.

PROTAGORAS How so?

CHARMIDES As suspicion of reason grew, so did suspicion of language, since language seemed to be the principal means through which reason exerted its influence over the mind and thence over society as a whole. Painters came to believe that in order to circumvent the perversity of reason, they had to dispense with those elements of pictures that depended on language, which included all stories derived from myth or history, as well as any representation of ideal beauty that might be thought to endorse doctrines of Plato and his followers. The presence of such things in pictures came to be regarded as impure, as something that actually inhibited the capacity of painting to express what it was best suited to express.

ERYXIMACHUS That partly explains how the moderns came to practice a manner of painting in which there were finally no recognizable objects at all, a kind of painting they call abstract. Sculptors followed suit, avoiding the representation of things like the human figure, and turning instead to forms that did not make any reference to natural objects.

PROTAGORAS Ah, now I see! Fascinating! Still, I don’t understand why language is any more the instrument of rationalism than images. After all, we Sophists prided ourselves on our use of language, and images—as the moderns themselves seem to have realized—can be made to express ideas.

ERYXIMACHUS In fact, at about the same time that the
painters began to move in the direction of abstraction, poets too began to explore the ways in which language might be made to expose the fallacies of reason, and here they were just as ingenious as the painters and sculptors. They used words in such a fashion as to undermine their commonly accepted meanings. They made it clear that language is not a transparent medium for the expression of ideas at all, but rather something with a peculiar life—a logic or, rather, illogic—of its own. Their poems, it seems, though almost incomprehensible in the usual way, are thought by many to be more expressively suggestive in another.

PROTAGORAS Ingenious they are! What an exciting development! Yet I wonder whether abstract art is really less rational just because it dispenses with an obvious dependence on recognizable objects and stories, or even whether the kind of abstract poetry you've described, Eryximachus, really succeeds in avoiding reason, or at least in avoiding what is most objectionable about it. This rigorous purification of art seems to me itself a highly rationalistic endeavor, and though it might well result in individual works virtually empty of rational content, those works could only be approached and understood as art because they exist within a highly rationalized conceptual environment.

ERYXIMACHUS Ah, Master, you are as subtle as ever.

PROTAGORAS And something else bothers me. The fact that painting and sculpture, on the one hand, the so-called visual arts, and poetry, on the other, could both move in a similar direction at the same moment in time indicates that there is a problem with the idea of sense specificity, no?

CHARMIDES In pursuing their purification of art, Protagoras, many of the moderns were guided by the belief that they were doing away with illusion altogether and revealing the truth in all its naked purity. They were animated by the same sort of self-righteous zeal that—if I may speak frankly—made our friend Plato so insufferable, even though they claimed that the truth at which they arrived had nothing to do with Plato's.

ERYXIMACHUS Others, clearly recognizing that such simplistic antirationalism is itself an effect of reason, abandoned the preoccupation with sense specificity and even the assumption that a work of art must take the form of a physical object. They understood that any object we regard as a work of art is defined as such less by its specific physical features than by all sorts of concepts and values that lie, as it were, in the cultural environment surrounding it. Because art is thus fundamentally conceptual, what connects the various arts to one another as art is more important than the properties that distinguish them.

PROTAGORAS An art without artifacts! By Zeus!

CHARMIDES Yet just because art is conceptual does not mean that it is not also about sense experience. To disassociate art from objects is not to claim that it consists solely of ideas. If I understand the moderns correctly, their abandonment of the object is not so much an end in itself as a way of establishing a more liberated relation between the physical and the notional, of allowing a far larger range of expressive possibilities.

PROTAGORAS I must confess to being excited by the news of these developments, as well as by the thought that the moderns have returned to a recognition of the interdependence of the arts, for it seems to me that in doing so they bear witness to my belief that the single art of Sophistry underlies all the arts. You will remember how, in the course of my debate with Socrates in the house of Callias, I explained that the art of the Sophist is of great antiquity, but that in remotest times those who practiced it, fearing the resentment of others, veiled and disguised themselves under various names: some under the name of poet, as did Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides; others as hierophants and prophets, as did Orpheus and Musaeus; still others as musicians, such as Agathocles and Pythocleides of Ceos; some even as gymnastics masters, like Incus of Tarentum and Herodicus of Selymbria. All these and many others, I said, adopted their different arts as veils or disguises, when what they really practiced was the art of Sophistry; and so things remained until our own time, when we could openly insist that Sophistry is the art of arts. It seems to me that the moderns, in their efforts to define a science of art, are trying to ascertain the common principle of the arts, the principle which, long ago, I identified as Sophistry.

ERYXIMACHUS There is much in the development of modern art to suggest that you're right.

PROTAGORAS And as you both well know, those of us most ambitious for Sophistry saw it as comprehending an even wider range of arts and practices: not just poetry, music, prophecy, and gymnastics, but also ethics, politics, even philosophy itself! As a means of considering any issue from different points of view, we thought it perfectly suited to the needs of the democratic city-state and to the promotion of those virtues necessary for life in such a society: it offered a position from which the citizen might engage all forms of knowledge as they bear on his present needs, or even reject superfluous learning and the oppressive preoccupation with those things of which we cannot be certain, such as the existence, nature, and will of the gods. Why, to us Sophistry offered nothing less than the best way of living as a free individual.

CHARMIDES And the moderns agree! After all, what is the successful statesman, or merchant, or technician but a master of illusion? In his own way, each of these craftsmen must attend to the frontier between truth and falsehood and know how to orient himself along that border territory.

ERYXIMACHUS Yes, your wisdom has not been lost on the moderns, Protagoras. Not only do they recognize the merit of your thought in a general way, as we said before, but it
seems to me that the very existence of the science of anthropology can be understood as a validation of your insight that man is the measure of all things.¹¹

CHARMIDES Just as you understood the being of things to consist in their being perceived,¹² modern philosophers recognize that we only have access to the world through our perceptions and mental representations. Some even insist that we cannot know the world as it really is, only as we are able to represent it to ourselves; which is to say that we only have access to illusions, even if some illusions are better than others.

PROTAGORAS I’m glad to hear it, for this is a point that Socrates always refused to acknowledge. He disparaged all our perceptions and judgments because they are grounded in interests and appetites.¹³

CHARMIDES So he did.

ERYXIMACHUS Yet the moderns seem to realize that the need for a master science of illusions or representations is even more urgent now than it was in our times.

PROTAGORAS Why more urgent?

CHARMIDES Because illusions are so pervasive and so powerful. As we said, the moderns have developed means for creating the most wonderful images, and, from what we hear, these marvels are to be found everywhere, in all public places and in almost every household. Why, there are machines that people with only the most rudimentary technical training can use to create the most complex images, adapting them to their own needs and desires.

PROTAGORAS Every man his own Pygmalion! Wonderful!

ERYXIMACHUS However, this apparent triumph of illusion has a dark side, Protagoras, and has produced a reaction, which is why the moderns are so anxious to distinguish between art and illusions of other kinds. While some of these illusions serve as a source of entertainment and may be innocent enough, others are used as instruments of manipulation. The most common kind are used to sell things. In order to make the commodity as appealing as possible, for instance, an image of it is juxtaposed with the image of an attractive man or woman so that the viewer’s desire is displaced from the figure onto the commodity.

PROTAGORAS What’s wrong with that? It seems to me a harmless, if rather crude, application of basic rhetorical principles.

ERYXIMACHUS In theory, perhaps, but the moderns are bombarded by such images constantly. Some say that the accumulated effect of this overstimulation is to deaden the mind and, worse, to contaminate and slowly degrade a person’s response to all images, so that all images come to mean the same thing, to stand for the impulse to buy commodities—even to degrade the capacity for critical thought.¹⁴ What is even more sinister, those who wield power over the great nation-states use all this formidable technology of illusion to deceive those they rule, stirring up fear and hatred to justify persecution and war. And though the moderns know so much more than we did, and are so much richer in the lessons of history, they are seduced by these deceptions and let themselves become the instruments of demagogues and tyrants.

CHARMIDES Some would say that, far from realizing the triumph of Sophistry, this situation bears out the truth of Socrates’ critique of Sophistry.

PROTAGORAS By Zeus!

ERYXIMACHUS This is why the moderns have come to think of art as illusion of a special kind, an illusion that works against illusion, a critique of illusion.

PROTAGORAS A sophisticated Sophistry?

ERYXIMACHUS Exactly. One of the greatest of the modern artists, Paul of Spain, said that “art is a lie that yet persuades you of the truth.”¹⁵

PROTAGORAS How acute!

CHARMIDES Yes, but Paul’s remark has always troubled me, and for two reasons. First, it assumes that truth is something there to be found, and second, that the task of art is to reveal it. Neither assumption seems to me correct. Such a remark proves what I said earlier, that even among the modern artists there were those animated by a misguided zeal similar to Plato’s.

PROTAGORAS I am reminded unhappily of my debate with Socrates in the house of Callias. We argued over the meaning of a poem about virtue. Socrates abruptly ended that part of the discussion, claiming that exegesis was an idle pastime, fit only for the kinds of men who would rather hire flute girls than engage in serious conversation among themselves.¹⁶

ERYXIMACHUS Of course we know of that famous exchange. Was not the apple of discord a poem by Simonides on the topic of excellence or virtue?

CHARMIDES It was, but the subject of the poem was immaterial. The real point of the debate, if I understand correctly, was to establish a new common format for discussion between the two teachers. The speeches of Protagoras—forgive me, Master, if I misrepresent the event—were judged by the company too long and self-contained, sailing as it were on a sea of words out of sight of land.¹⁷

PROTAGORAS I suppose that is how it was.

CHARMIDES Whereas you, Protagoras, felt that Socrates, by insisting on a question-and-answer format, was unfairly manipulating the conversation to his own ends.¹⁸ So you
both agreed to steer a middle course, and you, Master, began by proposing the study of a poem.

PROTAGORAS That is exactly how it was. And then Socrates, although he claimed to believe that poetry was a perfect waste of time, admitted to knowing the poem well and even to having studied it. How duplicitous!

CHARMIDES At that moment Socrates was certainly not to be trusted, for he showed himself to be in fact a most acute reader of the lyric art and a lover of words. The meaning of words, and the meaning of such patterned verbal artifice as a poem, is an elusive quarry, worthy of any conversationalist. Just contrast the views of Socrates on poetry with the great respect that the study of illusion is accorded in the modern world. The moderns gather their young into academies, where they expose them to the dangerous power of illusions.

PROTAGORAS Well, did we not do the same? I used to travel up and down Attica teaching and conversing with the young.

ERYXIMACHUS It is all very different now. The academies are much larger, and they number in the hundreds and more, all over the known world. They draw youths—and maidens (as was once the custom in Crete and Sparta)—from every sphere of life, high and low.

PROTAGORAS To instruct them in the arts of dialectic and persuasion?

CHARMIDES Not only that. Many are initiated into the secrets of the physical world in order to master its hidden forces. Others learn statecraft, or the arts of buying and selling.

ERYXIMACHUS Or even the art of reading poetry! Some modern teachers are so convinced of the urgency of these questions that they speak of nothing but illusions, and in fact occupy themselves all day long with riddling poems and pictures.

PROTAGORAS There are teachers who teach nothing but the art of reading poetry? Astonishing!

CHARMIDES Yet even among the moderns there are some who would side with Socrates and argue that because poems and paintings are so clearly marked as illusions that only an innocent could confuse them with ordinary, useful speech or pictures, any serious study devoted to them is a vain squandering of time. At most we should allow ourselves to enjoy them only mildly.

PROTAGORAS Is this your view, Charmides?

CHARMIDES Of course not.

ERYXIMACHUS Nor is it mine. Poems, paintings, and other such works of art are indispensable. Society creates these focused illusions in order to warn us of the really dangerous illusions, which are harder to detect.

CHARMIDES This brings us back to the aphorism of the painter Paul, who like Socrates imagined that art could help him find the path to truth. ERYXIMACHUS But Charmides, I don’t think Paul’s remark implies the kind of idealism we associate with Socrates: he simply tried to express the paradoxical nature of art in as pointed a manner as possible. We might choose to say it differently—to say, for example, that art mobilizes our susceptibility to illusion against our susceptibility to illusion.

CHARMIDES I still find that formulation unsatisfactory. Eryximachus. You imply that the aim of studying illusions, even of making illusions, is to arrive in the end at some point beyond or behind or above—anyway, some useful place outside—the domain of illusion. As if the point of illusion were to abolish itself.

ERYXIMACHUS No. I agree that there is always the danger that art will be mistreated, as it was by Socrates on the occasion Protagoras has recalled, and even more ruthlessly at other times, as when he debated Thrasymachus and the brothers of Plato in the house of Polemarchus, advocating the most appalling censorship.19 My position, though, does not imply what you seem to think it does: I don’t believe we can transcend the realm of illusions, as Socrates and his followers did, but the fact remains—as you yourself said a moment ago—that some illusions are better than others. Some kind of critical process is integral to the making of illusions, or at least to those kinds of illusions we call art.20

CHARMIDES I must say that the notion of illusion also troubles me; fundamental as it seems to be, I think it may be inadequate to account for the distinctive fascination of the arts. I’m not sure that “representation” is any better. Both terms seem to me to require an appeal to something outside art. To me, the basic structure of the work of art is a pointless circling or looping on itself. Structurally it resembles play.21 And like play, art must remain marginalized within society and can never be instrumentalized to any local practical end.

ERYXIMACHUS Pointless? The idea that art is a kind of play is quite widespread among the moderns, as you know, Charmides, but it is usually bound up with some sense that the play involved is useful or beneficial—even if only therapeutic or restorative—either for the artist or the public, or both.

PROTAGORAS I, too, am troubled by this imputation, Charmides. Our aim is not to run in circles but to get somewhere, no? To educate, or “lead forth,” as even the Italian soldier folk would come to appreciate. Sophistry is not pointless; it is a vital instrument of liberation and social engagement, a technology of freedom. Believing as I do
that it is a comprehensive art of arts, I cannot accept that it must remain marginalized in society.

CHARMIDÉS Do not misunderstand me; if I note that art and sophistry are marginal pursuits in many societies, I am not therefore implying that art and sophistry are mere luxuries. Far from it. I only wonder whether now, among the moderns, Sophistry must not define itself differently than it did in our time.

PROTAGORAS Can you explain what you mean?

CHARMIDÉS Remember your own argument, which you recalled for us only a few minutes ago, about Sophistry as a master art that once had to hide behind all the other arts? I am only pointing to a new danger, namely, that Sophistry now deceives itself and fails to recognize that behind it hides a still deeper, more fundamental art. The true art of arts, perhaps, is nothing more than simple imitation.

PROTAGORAS You’ve lost me.

CHARMIDÉS Forgive me; perhaps I have not made myself clear. By imitation I do not mean a simulation of nature, of nature’s appearance or effects. Rather, I refer to the very act itself of imitating, or miming, regardless of what object or action is mimed. In the doubling itself—as pointless as such doubling may often seem—lies the force of the artful work, the poem or painting.

PROTAGORAS Then the term “representation” would seem to fit exactly. Art doubles, it “makes present again,” that is, offers its object a second time. The work serves society by making the absent present and thus overcoming absence and forgetfulness and the wasteful flow of time that consumes and destroys all the patient work of civilization.

CHARMIDÉS No, Master, that is not what I wish to say. I would concede that art may well function as a kind of prosthetic memory, but such a description hardly exhausts the potentialities of the artwork, nor does it capture what is distinctive about art, what differentiates it from ritual and festival, cosmogony and saga, cabinetmaking and city building—in short, all the ways a society “makes itself present” to itself.

ERYXIMACHUS Here I must agree with Charmides: art must be thought of as representation of a special kind.

CHARMIDÉS All right, then we agree. Now we must push on and try to determine just what it is that distinguishes art from other kinds of representation and what accounts for its peculiar power and appeal. Let us consider for a moment the drama. We may judge a theatrical representation by what we take to be the adequacy of its duplication of past events, real or mythical. The true source of the drama’s power, however, lies somewhere else. Because the drama is duplicating the forces and rhythms of life itself, it is able to insinuate itself dynamically into the life of its witnesses. One could say that the actor’s work intervenes between two lives, the life of King Oedipus and the life of the spectator. The spectator leaves the theater only to reenter the roles and speeches of his or her own life—for what is life but a performance?—leaving us to wonder whether the actors truly imitate life, or whether the reverse is not the case. Does not the teacher likewise imitate his subject in order to coax his students into patterns of imitation, not in the expectation that they will really duplicate the model, but that in the process they will become something new and unique? Does not the religious leader ask for imitation? And the athlete imitate the warrior—or perhaps it is the reverse? The imitated object is altered by pantomime, and then the imitation reenters the chain of pantomimes as a new object.²²

PROTAGORAS You seem to be saying that even despite itself, the mimetic act results in something new, and that the value of the representation is not to be judged in its relation to what it represents, but by something else that happens in the process of representing.

CHARMIDÉS Please be patient with me while I try to explain what I have in mind. You both remember the dictum of Heraclitus, that the sun is new each day.²³ What can he have meant by this? Well, he meant that although the sun looks every bit like the sun of yesterday, its very existence alters the meaning of yesterday—creates it as a yesterday, in fact. Behind the apparent resemblance hides a hierarchy, perhaps even an invidious hierarchy. For will not some prefer the original to the copy, but others the copy to the original?

PROTAGORAS The work of art, then, doubles, but it cannot repeat.

ERYXIMACHUS Surely not all art attempts to double.

CHARMIDÉS That’s just the thing, Eryximachus, I think that all art does attempt to double! Even when no object seems to be imitated and even when the aim is to create something new. Buildings, for instance, are not usually thought to represent anything, but they could be said to represent the idea of a building, which means not what Plato would say it means, but simply that they double earlier buildings in their functions and effects. Even the abstract art of the moderns doubles the effects of earlier art, although it contains no recognizable images. Doubling is essential to what art is. All art is the mimesis of mimesis.²⁴

PROTAGORAS You mean that art does not refer to nature so much as to earlier acts of miming, that the real content of the mimetic act has only an incidental relation to appearance?

CHARMIDÉS Yes. Sometimes the work of art seems literally to duplicate its object, as when a painting re-creates the very look of a thing, or when we seem to see King Oedipus on the stage. But resemblance as it is commonly understood is simply a veil that conceals the deeper work of
mimicry. In other cases the painting is not adequate to its object at all, which may make the doubling difficult to recognize, but which actually reveals the power of mimesis most clearly. The real force of doubling, which is the force of irony or dissembling, is only activated—only really becomes apparent—when the reference is concealed.

PROTAGORAS So art succeeds best when it tries but fails to mime its object?

CHARMIDES In a sense, yes. Art is a gesture toward the idea of replicating the real without any pretense of replacing the real. The artwork refers to the concept of deception without ever actually deceiving anyone.

ERYXIMACHUS Isn’t that exactly what Paul of Spain says?

CHARMIDES No, because I would deny that the deception leads us to anything like truth, that it has some kind of redeeming value.

ERYXIMACHUS It’s simply a lie?

CHARMIDES Not exactly.

ERYXIMACHUS Then how do you distinguish it from a simple lie?

CHARMIDES Its playfulness, its ludic quality.

ERYXIMACHUS So it’s simply an entertaining lie?

CHARMIDES Well, that’s closer to what I mean, but not exactly.

ERYXIMACHUS It seems to me that far from being simply playful or entertaining, the miming or doubling you describe looks back to the primitive power of magic and witchcraft. You describe a dark art.

PROTAGORAS Quite so. What distinguishes this mimetic art of yours from the spurious art of witches and soothsayers?

CHARMIDES The art of the witches and soothsayers should not so hastily be dismissed. Like poets and painters, they struggle with powerful forces and cannot be blamed if they do not always succeed in mastering them.

PROTAGORAS These arts have nothing to do with one another, Charmides. Witchcraft produces no artifact or performance that affords any pleasure or instruction.

CHARMIDES You’re right, Master. The art of the dramatist or painter, while related to the art of the sorcerer, is not the same. One might say that the drama or the painting restages the operations of magic. That is, it shows how the force of miming might work if that force were ever really to be harnessed.

ERYXIMACHUS If art imitates magic, if it is an imitation of an imitation, then it is not play, not pointless at all, but highly and distinctively motivated; it is specifically a reflexive form of mimesis. Instead of play, art should rather be said to perform a certain kind of work, a critique of mimesis.25

CHARMIDES Well, I suppose that “work” might do as well as “play” to describe the process involved, were it not for the fact that work implies directedness to a purpose and fails to account for the way in which art tends both to undermine and overload any straightforward movement to a consciously determined end. I prefer “play” because it leaves room for a distinctive kind of movement, the circling or doubling back I described earlier. The concept of play also comes closer to grasping art’s tendency to ironize or mislead.

PROTAGORAS Can you explain yourself a little more clearly?

CHARMIDES Play and art, in order to make whatever overall point they want to make about reality or time or anything else, must suspend the apparent thesis embedded within their fictions. Artwork and game say the opposite of what they seem to say, Or as one ingenious modern has put it: “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.”26

ERYXIMACHUS The model of play still seems to me frivolous; it fails to account for the seriousness of what art does, for the depth of its engagement with the real array of forces that produce it.

CHARMIDES I would contend that play is the essential structure of fiction in the sense that only the imagination, in an open-ended performance, is capable of devising the ingenious links and combinations that produce illusion.27 In stressing the ludic nature of art, I am really pointing to that open-ended, unpredictable, and unrepeatable quality that in the end distinguishes art from craft. Art is a process that cannot be derived from its premises or conditions. And I am also pointing to art’s essentially performative nature, for it is only by unfolding in real time, by following time’s arrow, that the work of art connects with the real existence of men and women.

PROTAGORAS I can see how the dramatic art might accomplish such a thing.

CHARMIDES Yes, absolutely, that is just what I mean. Drama happens in real time, as does music. Yet I would argue that my claims are equally sustained by the supposedly static arts, such as painting and sculpture, for those arts emerge—they are performed—only in the imagination of their beholders, and are therefore not as static as they seem. But you are right, it is perhaps easiest to make the case with the example of the drama.
ERYXIMACHUS I suppose that my real problem with your position is that this notion of play seems to suppress something. There are undoubtedly many arbitrary and mysterious aspects to the creative process; an artist need not entirely understand why he does what he does; to be sure, he may be completely unaware of many of the things he does. Yet much of an artist’s work is conscious, a calculated, disciplined manipulation of certain techniques to achieve certain effects. To define art as you do is not only to devalue that aspect of the creative process but to imply that the content of art is always the same.

CHARMIDES Yes, I suppose I do depreciate that aspect of the process. Still, I would go even further and say that art is not a kind of work but a kind of free movement, a movement that, moreover, cannot even be said to be performed by anyone, or in any specific place or time, but is simply movement, unrelated to anything outside itself. Art performs the oscillating or looping movement of the game, whose overall flow cannot be derived from the actions of its players.29

ERYXIMACHUS An interesting suggestion, Charmides, and perhaps not without some deeper truth, yet certainly inadequate as stated. The exploratory or experimental art of the moderns does seem to require a degree of freedom from preconceived aims, yet even “imagination” is not the completely free and open-ended performance that you assume it is; rather, it is driven by motives, whether the artist is aware of them or not. Many admirers of such art would justify it by saying that even when it seems to abandon itself to illogic, it follows—and, at its best, succeeds in retrieving—a deeper logic. Your approach seems to me both to devalue the conscious efforts of the artist, the way in which he works deliberately to achieve certain effects, and to underestimate the ways in which even the unconscious aspects of his activity may represent a response to the deeper historical forces at work in him. I still think that critical reason plays an important, even essential role in the creative process, and that critical reason thus offers a better model than play or magic for the understanding of what art might be, as well as a better basis on which to establish a systematic understanding or science of art.

CHARMIDES I cannot agree, Eryximachus. Reason may play a role in the creative process, but only an incidental one.

ERYXIMACHUS Don’t you see where you’re heading, Charmides? You yourself complained earlier about those who would define the science of art entirely in terms of the prices paid for works of art because they would reduce all forms of desire to a single common denominator, yet you reduce all art to some kind of primitive, universal, and impersonal impulse—which you describe first as “doubling,” now as “movement”—and which eludes all directness to purpose. In so doing, you detach art from all those specific conditions and motives that shape its appearance; you detach it from history, and so deny the possibility of integrating historical understanding into the science of art.

CHARMIDES Well, one aspect of art’s reflexivity, it seems to me, is its commentary on its own historical origins.

PROTAGORAS Are you saying that art writes its own history?

CHARMIDES Yes, although the art history it writes is anything but accurate, at least according to the standards of modern antiquarians. I suppose all I mean to say is that art needs to dream its origins in nonart and its own priority to reason and to history. It is obvious, however, that art can never really find its way back to that supposedly lost ground.

ERYXIMACHUS My friend, you are speaking as inscrutably as the oracle today! What we both want to know is: How does your approach make room for history?

CHARMIDES Perhaps a more satisfactory way of putting it is this: art invents a fable of its own primordial origins and then continually reframes that fable from work to work and over the course of time. Art, as it were, remembers an authentic art that is no longer possible, and moreover has forgotten what the content of that art was. That remembering is the structure of art’s desiring. The real historical dynamic, therefore, is not the retrospective gesture, but rather the relentless process of recontextualization that allows the gesture to be repeated.

PROTAGORAS I think I understand. The mimetic act as you describe it could be said to have two sides, inseparable from one another like the sides of a coin. The one side is retrospective; it looks back to a model. The other faces the future, in that the result is always something new. So the backward- and forward-looking qualities of a work of art are inextricable.

CHARMIDES Yes, and that explains how art fits into history. Time draws us forward, so to speak, whether we like it or not. With every new sun we enter upon a new world; to orient ourselves in that new world and, even more, to summon the strength to face its challenges, we find ourselves reaching back for something—not so much the actual past, perhaps, as what we take to be the past. The two-sidedness of the work of art, its simultaneous oldness and newness, is a figure for the paradoxical nature of our own existence in time; it is, we might even say, our revenge on time.

PROTAGORAS Nicely said, Charmides, yet if it is true, then the making of art can hardly be described as play; it is driven by the deepest imaginable urgency and necessity.

ERYXIMACHUS Again, it seems more like work than play.

CHARMIDES To be sure, art can be set to urgent tasks. Some of the moderns, students of the violence that societies do to one another, have identified imitative doubling as one of the few weapons available to the dispossessed. For nothing prevents one from deploying ludic imitation to mock and demystify, in such a way that prestigious origi-
nals are diminished. And who would deny the deep homology between the artwork and other kinds of performances? Much of the contest of life, after all, involves a testing of the frontiers between appearance and reality, between reality and the not-yet-seen, between what is and what might be. Works of art, some others have argued, are no more and no less than protests against the pretense of reality to be all that is real.

ERYXIMACHUS Certainly, many moderns are so dissatisfied with the world they find themselves in that they do hold such views, and to judge from what I hear about the condition of civil society in their time, I am inclined to agree with those who believe that art is too important to be uncoupled from the guidance of reason, even that, in order to justify its place in the modern world, it must fashion itself as a form of reason.

CHARMIDES Play, though, is not a form of reason—and that is the crux of the difference between you and me, Eryximachus. Why don’t we simply let it rest on the idea that play can be serious, as it is for children, and as many among the moderns clearly recognize? Frederick, the barbarian philosopher whom I mentioned earlier, said that “a man’s maturity consists in having found again the seriousness of a child, at play,” and even Paul of Spain claimed to learn a great deal by watching children draw. I would insist that play is both the form and content of art: form in the sense that the kind of reframing and recontextualization I have described is itself a kind of play, offering complex kinds of pleasure, and that the lost archaic play at the origin point is always in some sense the content of every artwork.

ERYXIMACHUS Well, I’m not sure that play is not a form of reason, but I am in perfect agreement with you in one thing, Charmides, namely, that the history of art involves a continual process of reframing and recontextualization; the old materials are ceaselessly reassembled into different configurations. Still, your formulation seems to me to deny the historicity of art in a crucial respect: it does not allow that the aims and purposes of art might themselves ever undergo serious development or redefinition. You speak of desire, and you are right to emphasize how important it is to art, yet desire gets invested in all sorts of objects and is continuously displaced from one object to another. Just as the desires of an individual might move from one object to another, so in the lives of societies, collective desire could be said to evolve, and the function of art evolves correspondingly. These movements are significant—they are the very substance of history!—but your approach reduces them to so many repetitive gestures, pointless variations on a single theme. I would say that anything of the past that a work of art takes up is transformed as much as it is preserved; it seems to me that the process involved is one of continual reariculation and redefinition. Art transforms and refines desire, and its cumulative effect is constructive; it leads people forward, both individually and collectively.

PROTAGORAS Aren’t the two of you merely emphasizing different aspects of the same process? You, Charmides, stress the relation to the past, while you, Eryximachus, lay greater weight on progress.

ERYXIMACHUS No, Protagoras, I think there is a deeper difference between our orientations. Charmides sees art simply as an entertaining distraction from the meaninglessness of life; I see it as an instrument of human advancement, an essential means by which people address the challenges they face, by which they perfect the faculties and aptitudes that enable them to imagine, construct, and maintain a better world.

PROTAGORAS So the fundamental difference might rather be expressed by saying that while you, Charmides, liberate art by defining it as play, you also constrain its freedom by reducing it to a single thing, and that you, Eryximachus, restrict the freedom of art by insisting on its directedness to purpose, yet liberate it by insisting that its purpose can change over time.

CHARMIDES I am not happy with that formulation. Moreover, I think I can point to a still deeper level of disagreement. If I didn’t know Eryximachus better, I’d say he was following in the path of Socrates, trying to elevate art into a species of wisdom. In assimilating art to reason, he simply justifies its use as an instrument of social control. My belief is that this step is precisely what art always resists.

PROTAGORAS How do you answer, Eryximachus?

ERYXIMACHUS I deny the charge, of course. I realize that among the moderns there are many who emphasize that art is fundamentally irrational, and they include many whom we might count among our friends, the new Sophists, but, as I said earlier, there are others—and they seem to me to show greater perspicuity—who see the emphasis on the irrational as itself a symptom or effect of reason. Where Charmides here believes that a new Sophistry must redefine itself in terms of pure mimetic play that always frustrates any rational instrumentalization, I would side with these others and say that the way for Sophistry to redefine itself in the modern world is to engage and assimilate reason more deeply and aggressively, to recognize that reason is something we cannot do without, even if we must also be continually on our guard against its sinister effects.

PROTAGORAS So rather than seeing art as an abandonment of reason, you would see it as reason turning on itself?

ERYXIMACHUS Exactly.

PROTAGORAS This is what you mean by critical reason?

ERYXIMACHUS Yes. Critical reason is what undermines the false reason used by the advertisers, dogmatists, and tyrants to achieve social control. The power to resist false reason comes not from irrationality, which proves, in fact, to be a
most effective means of social control, but from within reason itself. It seems to me that art must be about bringing to realization the liberatory potential of reason.

CHARMIDES Look, Eryximachus, such a rational and critical conception of art is just as limited and reductive in its own way as you accuse my emphasis on play of being. It may well happen that among the moderns art occasionally serves the kind of critical function you describe, but that is a special occurrence, not essential to what art is. Art—mimetic play, as I understand it—names a sensuousness that is more than appetite, and an irony that is less than critique.

PROTAGORAS An elegant formulation, my friend.

ERYXIMACHUS Yes, but also one that elegantly makes a virtue of its limitation. You want to define some specific, essential, and universal function for art, as have some among the moderns who call themselves aesthetes. As you know, however, other moderns argue that no such narrow, essential function can possibly be enforced, that art continually transgresses all such efforts to limit its scope.

CHARMIDES Exactly! The playful urge to transgress cannot be contained.

ERYXIMACHUS But such transgression is not playfully motivated at all: it is the product of critical reflection on the aims of art and a deliberate effort to enlarge its scope.

CHARMIDES That is far from certain, Eryximachus: some among the moderns may believe that the history of art is motivated by an overarching rational and progressive agenda; others think it more chaotic.

ERYXIMACHUS What troubles me even more is that by isolating art in a realm of play you sever it from other human activities, just like the aesthetes, when what is called for—as Protagoras has said—is a definition that establishes the centrality of art to human affairs.

CHARMIDES My understanding is that among the moderns it is your position—the belief that life and art are somehow one and the same—that is associated with the aesthetes. I would say rather: that the work of art can only represent the idea that life is art. Art is always something distinct from life.

ERYXIMACHUS A few minutes ago you yourself said that life is a performance!

CHARMIDES We only find out from art that life is a performance. And art is capable of offering new knowledge of this sort only because its relation to the experienced world is recursive. It is neither of the world nor entirely cut off from it, but somehow both at once.

ERYXIMACHUS I am afraid I am still not sure what you mean by recursivity.

CHARMIDES The artwork, like many texts or rituals, projects an imagined world and offers it implicitly for comparison with a real, perceivable world. Interestingly, though, art is a kind of representation that operates by doubling perception itself. Whatever points it wishes to make about, say, the unreliability of sensory perception have to be made with forms, sounds, or textures that are only perceivable through the senses. This is what differentiates art from philosophy or theology. The disjunction between the perceived world and an imaginary world—whether dreamed, conjured, acted out, or painted—is not merely one of art’s themes: it is perhaps the theme of art. For where better but inside a staged illusion to reflect on the distinction between reality and illusion? The recursivity comes in when distinctions in the world that art itself has clarified, such as the distinction between imagined and real worlds, are copied back into an artwork, which then in turn performs further clarifications. The artwork is after all basically a complicated kind of response to an awareness that things are not what they seem. At the same time, the artwork creates such awareness. Art’s modeling function—its power to clarify—proceeds in a circular pattern that is, in the end, anything but pointless.

ERYXIMACHUS So art does have a rational function! This modeling you speak of is conceptual abstraction, pure and simple, and it has a constructive social purpose. Yet what, if not the exercise of critical reason—the setting of these abstractions against each other in an aggressive and purposeful way—prevents them from assuming the monolithic quality of Plato’s Ideas?

PROTAGORAS I must say that both your positions strike me as strangely one-sided and extreme. The turn toward an intensified irrationalism, on the one hand, and toward a rarefied critical rationalism, on the other, are evidently complementary products of the pressure to which the idea of art has been subjected in the modern world. It saddens me to think that the moderns, clever as they are, feel as though they must choose between two such limited options.

ERYXIMACHUS Some might say that the pressure of the modern world has simply exposed an ambiguity in the older idea of what art is, and that there can be no turning back to a time when the two possibilities existed peaceably together.

PROTAGORAS The question is, can either of them offer an adequate basis for a truly comprehensive science of art?

CHARMIDES I still think that children’s games provide the best paradigm. They are spontaneous and innocent, yet they are motivated and have a modeling function. Children restage the actions and identities of adults and at the same time rehearse for adulthood.

PROTAGORAS An interesting thought, Charmides. Children’s games combine the rational and irrational in such a way that one cannot say which comes first.
CHARMIDES Just as children at play attempt to double an adult world they do not fully understand, perhaps the adult artist’s efforts are half comprehending intimations of some reality that we cannot fully grasp.

ERYXIMACHUS Children’s games can only be a metaphor for art, and not an especially useful one, since any similarity between the two is outweighed by what to me seem crucial differences. I do not doubt that play figures importantly in creative activity, and that the kind of critical intentions I have been describing may not even be present to the mind of the artist as he works, but play is something that the artist uses, not something he is used by. Where you, Charmides, insist that the play of art is an impersonal force, an infinite reversibility, I would say that such play is a feature of the world in general, of language, of signs, and something that art seeks to control, to counter, if not to rectify. Art is a directedness wrested from the relentless, leveling effect of the play of the world.

PROTAGORAS Well, perhaps here you two should let your debate rest. You are unlikely to reconcile your positions any further—at least today.

ERYXIMACHUS I am prompted to add one more point: a moment ago Charmides said that art is a kind of movement; I agree, but I would describe it rather as a movement from one image to another, as the critical process that revises representations. Art is thus not to be seen so much in any single image as in the relation between images; it is there that the kind of work we call art is most clearly revealed. And that is why history is so essential to the understanding of art, why this science that the moderns seek to fashion must be essentially a historical science.

PROTAGORAS You remind me that our aim here is not so much to determine the nature of art itself as the proper object and scope of the science of art. Perhaps we should expect of such a science that it leave room for a range of opinions on the nature of art; that it allow us to discuss art productively without having to commit ourselves on matters that may be impossible to resolve.

CHARMIDES Yet if the difficulty of such issues moves us to bracket them off, there is nothing to prevent us from avoiding them entirely, and from reverting to the view of those who propose that a record of prices might stand in for all such considerations.

PROTAGORAS You’re right, Charmides: now it’s my turn to clarify myself. What I mean to say is that this science must be responsible for sustaining consideration of what art is, even if the question cannot be decided. Perhaps only by defining the proper study of art do we have any hope of defining what art is; perhaps our clearest and most valuable insights into the nature of art come to us in those moments when we have a sense of having studied it either well or badly. Perhaps we can only come to a knowing of art through a knowing of the knowing of art.36

ERYXIMACHUS Master, you’ve become oracular yourself!

CHARMIDES There is still one further point that I think needs to be made about the deeper relation of poetry to philosophy.

PROTAGORAS Again you summon the gloomy memory of my debate on poetry with Socrates!

CHARMIDES Humor me a moment, Protagoras. For if the accounts of that occasion are reliable, Socrates used the disagreement as an occasion to reassert the superiority of the dialogue form itself as a medium for critical thought. He presented his third and crucial argument—namely, that the point of Simondes’ poem was to criticize the dictum of the sage and ruler Pittacus—not in his accustomed dialogic form but as a full-blown speech, and in your style! Then, after expounding on the poem at length and in such an un-Socratic manner, he renounced his own performance and in a sweeping fashion dismissed the whole topic of poetry, pretending that he was indifferent to the results of the debate.37

PROTAGORAS An arrogant trick, for it implied that his entire speech had been a dissembling pantomime of an argument, as if it were only the speech of an actor!

CHARMIDES He went on to complain that not only the exegesis of poetry, but also poetry itself, was an inadequate analytical tool because it is inscriptive; that is, because the text of the poem is fixed by writing or by memory, and because the poem cannot answer back. Only a fluid dialogue will lead to truth, according to Socrates.

ERYXIMACHUS Yes, and he went even further, to propose the idea—which he actually repeated on many other occasions—of an art of measure that would repudiate all false appearances.

PROTAGORAS He quickly abandoned the topic of poetry because he did not want to risk confronting its true power, and he tried to compensate by substituting his own dogma.

CHARMIDES He recognized that a poem embedded within a dialogue discloses the metaphoricity of philosophical discourse. For dialogue, too, is a persuasive art, a rhetoric, and even our spoken words are not transparent windows into our thoughts but are themselves composed of bits and pieces of already patterned language. No sooner are they uttered than they become inscriptions. And this realization brought him face to face with the limits of the dialogue format. It revealed the opacity and impossibility of the poem embedded within it. Any access to truth is blocked finally by the poem.

ERYXIMACHUS Well, he may have been mistaken in thinking that dialogue leads to the science of measure he kept dreaming about, and thus to some kind of absolute truth, but insofar as dialogue brings contrasting positions up against each other, it could be said to turn rhetoric on
itself, and thus effect a critique of rhetoric. Did not Socrates himself once compare the dialogue form to the moving statues of Daedalus?

PROTAGORAS Why, yes, if I remember correctly, he did so on the occasion of his conversation with Euthyphro on the threshold of the law courts, just before his own trial. Poor Euthyphro protested that his arguments were no sooner formulated than they seemed to walk away under their own power, and Socrates jestingly agreed that the words were behaving like the ingenious automata devised by Daedalus. 38

ERYXIMACHUS He recognized dialogue, therefore, as a kind of art.

CHARMIDES So you’re saying that Socrates was speaking as a Sophist?

ERYXIMACHUS I think I’m saying exactly what you’re saying, that he unwittingly demonstrated the strength of the Sophistical position.

PROTAGORAS Socrates a Sophist! By Zeus!

ERYXIMACHUS In so doing, he demonstrated that critical reason is fundamental to art.

CHARMIDES No! Dialogue is simply a miming of argument, an opaque, daemonic escalation of rhetoric incapable of transcending itself. Euthyphro, in his helplessness, was disclosing a truth about the dialogic art that Socrates himself was unwilling to face, and in fact sought to evade through levity: namely, that words tend to wander unpredictably away from their sources in thought.

ERYXIMACHUS And I suppose you think that dialogue is pointless, too?

PROTAGORAS Colleagues! Colleagues! Again, it seems to me that we need to do better than reduce our options to such unsatisfactory alternatives—alternatives that seem, moreover, to need each other even in their opposition.

CHARMIDES Who is this imposing stranger in knee breeches?

ERYXIMACHUS A philosopher, I take it, though not a Greek.

PROTAGORAS Welcome, friend!

BARBARIAN STRANGER I thought I could detect in nature—both animate and inanimate, with soul and without soul—something that manifests itself only in contradictions, and which, therefore, could not be comprehended under any idea, still less under one word. It was not godlike, for it seemed unreasonable; not human, for it had no understanding; nor devilish, for it was beneficent; nor angelic, for it often betrayed a malicious pleasure. It resembled chance, for it evolved no consequences: it was like Providence, for it hinted at connection. All that limits us it seemed to penetrate; it seemed to sport at will with the necessary elements of our existence; it contracted time and expanded space. In the impossible alone did it appear to find pleasure, while it rejected the possible with contempt. To this principle, which seemed to come in between all other principles to separate them, and yet to link them together, I gave the name of Daemonic, after the example of the ancients, and of those who, at any rate, had perceptions of the same kind. 39

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Notes
2. For Friedrich Nietzsche’s engagement with Sophistry—as opposed to his engagement with pre-Socratic thought generally—see Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language, ed. Sandler L. Gilman et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). For an overview of his influence on French thought, and hence on those thinkers whose works constitute the most important theoretical foundations of the “new” art history, see Douglas Smith, Transvaluations: Nietzsche in France, 1872–1972 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Nietzsche’s enterprise was only one of many efforts made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to escape the limitations of traditional reason and to create new ways of thinking. Others include the attempt of Wilhelm Dilthey to ground the study of the humanities (Geisteswissenschaften) on a model different from that of the natural sciences, the vitalism of Henri Bergson, and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl—a critique of traditional idealism, on the one hand, and scientific positivism, on the other—with its revision at the hands of Martin Heidegger into an even more sweeping critique of traditional metaphysics. Perhaps the most radical of all was psychoanalysis. In addition to being symptoms of the same cultural pressures that produced some of the most important innovations in modern art, these developments have had a profound influence on late-twentieth-century approaches to cultural history and theory: vitalism, for instance, was recuperated for a radically liberatory project by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Perhaps it is thus not inappropriate to characterize much of the new art history that derives from these approaches as “phenomenological,” even when it does not employ the specific conceptual vocabulary of phenomenology: psychoanalysis might be seen as a phenomenology of subjectivity, semiotics a phenomenology of signification.

5. Ibid., 192–93.

6. Plato, Symposium 211.

7. This shift in emphasis in the systematic study of art (Kunstwissenschaft) that parallels the shift in the study of history described by Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780–1950 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), esp. 17–18.

8. Contemporary interest in the notion of “visual culture” as an alternative to art history might thus be seen as existing in genealogical relation to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century debates over the nature of photography and allied discussions of the hierarchical distinction between “high” and “low” art or between avant-garde and kitsch: one of the crucial conceptual sources for visual studies, William Benjamin’s essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility, for instance, is centrally concerned with photography. For a recent overview of the state of visual culture studies, see James Elkins, Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2003).


10. Plato, Protagoras 316d.

11. Plato, Thaetetus 151e; and Aristotle, Metaphysics 1062b, 13–19.


17. Ibid., 338a.

18. Ibid., 334d–335a.


20. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, esp. 54–55: “To speak of the ‘magic of art’ is trite because art is allergic to any relapse into magic. Art is a stage in the process of what Max Weber called the disenchantment of the world, and it is entwined with rationalization. . . . Art is a rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it; art is not something prerational or irrational, which would peremptorily condemn it as untruth in the face of the entanglement of all human activity in the social totality.” Such a passage resonates with the critique of Heidegger presented in Adorno’s Negative Dialectics (1973), trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), which climaxes with the assertion (85): “Today, as in Kant’s time, philosophy demands a rational critique of reason, not its banishment or abolition.”


22. As revealed, for instance, by René Girard’s analysis of the mimetic and unbounded nature of desire: “[The model] imitates his own desire, through the intermediary of the disciple. The disciple thus becomes model to his own model, and the model, reciprocally, becomes disciple of his own disciple. In the last resort, there are no genuine differences between the two, or to put it more precisely, between their desires. . . .” Girard, Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World (1978) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 299.


25. See Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 317–18, for a critique of Huizinga, and 330, where he suggests that the “play drive” as it is understood in modern aesthetics is a later and ideologically charged formation.


27. Wolfgang Iser, The Fictive and the Imagery: Charting Literary Anthropology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. 287. See also Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, 86: “mimesis sutures the real to the really made-up.”

28. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 93: “The movement of play as such has, if it were, no substrate. It is the game that is played—it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays.”


30. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 335: “What is essential to art is that which in it is not the case, that which is incomparable with the empirical measure of all things.”


32. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, esp. 336–37: “Art’s naive and reflexive elements have, in truth, always been much more internal to each other than the longing that arose during the rise of industrial capitalism wanted to recognize. . . . Art without reflection is the retrospective fantasy of a reflective age.”


35. See Hans Sedlmayr, “Bruegel’s Macchia” (1954), trans. Frederic J. Schwartz, in The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 346: “Pictures such as these demand a double audience. One audience is optimistic and naive and cannot see these ‘funny’ objects ‘without laughing’ (Karel van Mander). The other is pessimistic, aesthetic, capable of seeing through the mask, and yet still enjoys this penetrating vision. . . . Both a simple visual pleasure and a subtle form of contemplation that can grasp, in vision, the problems of the human world, have in Bruegel’s work an infinite domain.”

36. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, esp. 341, discusses the way in which works of art are only really completed in the process of “second reflection.” “If they are not timelessly self-same, but rather become what they are because their own meaning is a process of becoming, they summon forth forms of spirit—commentary and critique, for example—through which this process is fulfilled.” That this activity might have a liberatory effect is indicated when he adds (357): “The knowledge of art means to render objectified spirit once again fluid through the medium of reflection.”

