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Critias of Athens and the Sisyphus Fragment

Sarah Adison Phillips
Mississippi State University

Critias of Athens and the Sisyphus Fragment

by

Sarah Adison Phillips

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Name: Sarah Adison Phillips

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This paper undertakes a discussion of the Sisyphus fragment and Critias of Athens, examining the question of authorship and arguing that, ultimately, the attribution to Critias is more important than whether or not his authorship of the fragment is historical fact, though it is also likely that he did indeed write it. The attribution to Critias is supported by the consistencies between the views present in the fragment and Critias' character and actions as reported by contemporaries and later biographers. Moreover, those views are a natural extension of pre-Socratic thought and share some commonalities with Plato's own philosophy; by establishing the philosophical context of the fragment, this paper cements Critias' relevancy as a philosopher, not just a ruthless politician.

Key words: Critias, Euripides, Thirty Tyrants, atheism, Sisyphus fragment, Plato

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The first known theory of religion as a mechanism of social control,[1] and perhaps the first truly atheistic text in Western thought,[2] the Sisyphus fragment's forty-two lines of iambic trimeter are teeming with ideas of historical and philosophical significance. Though the fragment's authorship is uncertain, it likely dates to the fifth century B.C.E. Unfortunately, our only sources for the fragment are two second-century C.E. authors, and they hardly provide a wealth of information.[3] Sextus Empiricus cites forty-two lines and attributes them to the tyrant Critias;[4] Aëtius quotes only four lines but attributes them to Euripides.[5] In this fragment, the speaker explains that religion is a human invention intended to keep people in check with the ever-present threat of divine retribution for any wrongdoing, no matter how secret. This idea, that the gods are a fabrication and religion merely a useful tool invented by some superior man to keep the masses in check, may

[1] William K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), 244; Tim Whitmarsh, "Atheistic Aesthetics: The Sisyphus Fragment, Poetics and the Creativity of Drama," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 60 (2014): 109.

[2] Pieter W. Van der Horst, "The First Atheist," in *Jews and Christians in their Greco-Roman Contexts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 242.

[3] Whitmarsh (2014): 109-10.

[4] *Adv. Math.* 9.54

[5] *Plac.* 1.7.2 = [Plut.] *Mor.* 880e-f

seem like a modern invention, calling to mind the likes of Marx[6] and Nietzsche,[7] for instance, but it existed at least as early as this fragment and was, in fact, a natural extension of even earlier philosophies. I have provided the Greek text of the fragment below, followed by my own translation of it into English.

1.2 Greek Text[8]

ἦν χρόνος, ὅτ' ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος
καὶ θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ' ὑπηρέτης,
ὅτ' οὐδὲν ἆθλον οὔτε τοῖς ἐσθλοῖσιν ἦν
οὔτ' αὖ κόλασμα τοῖς κακοῖς ἐγίγνετο.
κἄπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους
θέσθαι κολαστάς, ἵνα δίκη τύραννος ᾖ
<ὁμῶς ἁπάντων> τήν θ' ὕβριν δούλην ἔχῃ,
ἐζημιοῦτο δ' εἴ τις ἐξαμαρτάνοι.
ἔπειτ' ἐπειδὴ τἀμφανῆ μὲν οἱ νόμοι
ἀπεῖργον αὐτοὺς ἔργα μὴ πράσσειν βίᾳ,
λάθρᾳ δ' ἔπρασσον, τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ
<πρῶτον> πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ
<θεῶν> δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως
εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἂν λάθρᾳ
πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσί <τι>.
ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο,
ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτῳ θάλλων βίῳ,
νόῳ τ' ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τ' ἄγαν
προσέχων τε ταῦτα, καὶ φύσιν θείαν φορῶν,
ὃς πᾶν τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκούσεται,
<τὸ> δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται.
ἐὰν δὲ σὺν σιγῇ τι βουλεύῃς κακόν,
τοῦτ' οὐχὶ λήσει τοὺς θεούς· τὸ γὰρ φρονοῦν
<ἄγαν> ἔνεστι. τούσδε τούς λόγους λέγων
διδαγμάτων ἥδιστον εἰσηγήσατο
ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ.
ναίειν δ' ἔφρασκε τοὺς θεοὺς ἐνταῦθ', ἵνα

[6] "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie," *MEW* Bd. 1, 378: "Die Religion ist…ihre moralische Sanktion" ("Religion is [the world's] moral sanction").
[7] See Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch, who is above the morality of the masses.
[8] DK 88 B25 [=*TrGf* fr. 19].

μάλιστ’ ἂν ἐξέπληξεν ἀνθρώπους λέγων,
ὅθεν περ ἔγνω τοὺς φόβους ὄντας βροτοῖς
καὶ τὰς ὀνήσεις τῷ ταλαιπώρῳ βίῳ,
ἐκ τῆς ὕπερθε περιφορᾶς, ἵν’ ἀστραπάς
κατείδεν οὔσας, δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα
βροντῆς, τό τ’ ἀστερωπὸν οὐρανοῦ δέμας,
Χρόνου καλὸν ποίκιλμα τέκτονος σοφοῦ,
ὅθεν τε λαμπρὸς ἀστέρος στείχει μύδρος
ὅ θ’ ὑγρὸς εἰς γῆν ὄμβρος ἐκπορεύεται.
τοίους δὲ περιέστησεν ἀνθρώποις φόβους,
δι’ οὓς καλῶς τε τῷ λόγῳ κατῴκισεν
τὸν δαίμον(α) οὖ<τος> κἀν πρέποντι χωρίῳ,
τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς φόβοις κατέσβεσεν.
οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἶομαι πεῖσαί τινα
θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος.

1.3 English Translation[9]

There was a time when the life of men was unordered
and bestial, a servant of strength,
when there was no prize for good men,
nor in turn was there chastisement for evil ones.
And then men seem to me to have established laws
as punishers, so that Justice might be a tyrant
<of everything altogether> and have violence as her slave,
and if anyone did wrong, he was punished.
Then, when the laws hindered them from openly
doing deeds through violence,
and they began to do [them] secretly, it seems to me that
at that time some shrewd man wise in judgment <first>
invented fear <of the gods> for mortals, so that
there might be some fear for evil men, even secretly
doing or saying or thinking <anything>.
Henceforth, then, he introduced the divine, [saying]
that there is a divine power flourishing with immortal life,
hearing and seeing with his mind, thinking very much and
being intent on these things, and possessing a divine nature,
[one] who hears everything spoken among mortals,
and will be able to see everything being done.
Even if you plan some evil [deed] in secret,
this will not escape the notice of the gods; for thought

[9] All translations, including this one, are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

is <wholly> in [them]. Telling these stories,
he introduced the sweetest of doctrines,
having covered the truth with a false story.
And he said that the gods dwell there, so that, speaking,
he could especially astound men, [in that place]
from where he knew that mortals' fears come,
and good fortune for the miserable life,
from the vault [of heaven] above, where he saw there are
flashes of lightning and terrible crashes
of thunder, and the starry frame of heaven,
the beautiful embroidery of Chronos its wise craftsman,
from where the radiant red-hot mass of a star comes,
and the rainy thunderstorm goes forth onto the earth.
And he brought round these fears for men,
through these [stories] he established the divine power
in a fitting place with his speech,
and he extinguished disorder with fears.
Thus I think that someone first persuaded
mortals to think that there is a race of divinities.

1.4 Objective

I propose to examine the Sisyphus fragment as an explanation of the origins of religion, which through its treatment of cult reveals the writer's ideas about human nature and the political order. Who that author is remains uncertain. Though the fragment's attribution to Critias has been less accepted recently than the attribution to Euripides,[10] I reconsider the evidence that points to Critias as the author and argue that what really matters is that, even if he himself did not write it, the attribution to him indicates that the ancients must have considered it to be a fitting characterization of his beliefs and actions as a member of the Thirty Tyrants. In other words, it is the sort of thing he might have written, and as such the fragment should be interpreted as a programmatic rationale for

[10] See Charles H. Khan, "Greek Religion and Philosophy in the Sisyphus Fragment," *Phronesis* 42, no. 3 (1997): 249. He states that Dihle's argument for Euripidean attribution "has been widely and rightly accepted."

the public policies and violent actions Critias infamously led the Thirty in enacting. Drawing upon Xenophon, Plato, and Critias' own poetry, I then explore the character of this complex and sophisticated Athenian. I argue that, despite the contradictory portrayals here, the views presented in the Sisyphus fragment are informed by a number of other sources, in particular Solon's political order of *eunomia*, Thucydides' assertion that the final step in revolution is the misuse of language, and Plato's conception of the power of poetry and his own "noble lie," which he deems necessary for a just society, just as Critias deems religion necessary for law and order to prevail over human nature.

CHAPTER II

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORHSHIP

Regarding the question of authorship, Sextus Empiricus, in his citation of the fragment, attributes it to Critias.[11] That would date the fragment to the fifth century B.C.E.; since Sextus Empiricus was writing over half a millennium later, his attribution is itself likely the result of a pre-existing tradition of Critias as the author. Other sources, however, namely the doxography of Aëtius,[12] have claimed this as a fragment of Euripides. This attribution still puts the fragment in the fifth century; thus, regardless of which man wrote it, it can be understood as a product of fifth-century Athenian thought.

The most apparent link between Critias and the fragment is atheism. As I mentioned in the beginning, this fragment is one of the first, if not *the* first, written expressions of atheistic ideas in Western thought. Critias appears on several lists of atheists.[13] Obviously, this alone is not enough to establish authorship, as it is rather circular to say that we know Critias wrote the fragment because he was an atheist, which we know because of the fragment he wrote. Sextus Empiricus' introduction of the

[11] *Adv. Math.* 9.54.
[12] *Plac.* 1.7.2 = [Plut.] *Mor.* 880e-f
[13] See for example Sextus Empiricus *P.H.* 3.218; Plut. *De superst.* 171c. According to Phil. *Piet.* 2.106 [=Obbink 1.19.5], Epicurus criticized Critias for his atheism in *De Natura*; ca. 4th-3rd c. B.C.E., Epicurus' would be the earliest such list of atheists, as per David Sedley, "The Atheist Underground," *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Verity Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 329.

fragment says that "Critias, one of the tyrants in Athens, seems to be among the company of atheists since he says that the ancient lawgivers…made up god" (καὶ Κριτίας δὲ εἷς τῶν ἐν Ἀθήναις τυραννησάντων δοκεῖ ἐκ τοῦ τάγματος τῶν ἀθέων ὑπάρχειν φάμενος, ὅτι οἱ παλαιοί νομοθέται…ἔπλασαν τὸν θεὸν);[14] this seems to suggest that the attribution was made based on a pre-existing tradition of Critias as the author. The assertion that Critias was an atheist would, therefore, have then followed based on the atheistic content of the fragment. It is thus likely that Sextus Empiricus put Critias on his list of atheists because of the Sisyphus fragment, rather than attributed it to him because of his place on the list of atheists. That the fragment was known as a work of Critias in antiquity and incidentally provided an example of his atheism is indeed stronger evidence for his authorship than a link between the man and the fragment based only on their shared atheism.

Because of Critias' reputation for atheism and Sextus Empiricus' attribution, the prevailing thought for a long time was that Critias was the author, and he was indeed the sort of man who would have been interested in and quite capable of producing such a piece of literature. I will come back to that later. As I mentioned before, Aëtius quotes four lines of the fragment and attributes them to Euripides, claiming that the playwright "was not willing to speak his mind, because he feared the Areopagus; but he let [his opinion] be seen in this way: he introduced Sisyphus, champion of this opinion, to be an advocate for his thought" (ἀποκαλύψασθαι μὲν οὐκ ἠθέλησε, δεδοικὼς τὸν Ἄρειον πάγον· ἐνέφηνε δὲ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον τὸν γὰρ Σίσυφον εἰσήγαγε προστάτην

[14] *Adv. Math.* 9.54.

ταύτης τῆς δόξης καὶ συνηγόρησεν αὐτοῦ ταύτῃ τῇ γνώμῃ).[15] It seems that Euripides' association with atheism is what connects him to the fragment—he had the reputation of being the poet of the Sophists, and there was enough of a link between atheism and Euripides that Aristophanes has a character claim that Euripides "has persuaded the men that gods do not exist" with his tragedies (νῦν δ' οὗτος ἐν ταῖσιν τραγῳδίαις ποιῶν / τοὺς ἄνδρας ἀναπέπεικεν οὐκ εἶναι θεούς).[16] Because Euripides is also linked to atheism, Critias cannot be assumed to be the author based only on his own reputation as an atheist; this is why it is important that Sextus Empiricus seems to assert that Critias is the author apart from that connection. On the other hand, Euripides did actually write a satyr-play called *Sisyphus* to accompany his Trojan trilogy (i.e., *Alexander*, *Palamedes*, and *The Trojan Women*) of 415 B.C.E.[17] That could be interpreted as damning evidence against the case for Critias as author, but given that Aeschylus, too, had at least one (maybe two) satyr plays featuring Sisyphus, and Euripides himself had another, it is not so difficult to believe that Critias might also have penned a satyr play involving Sisyphus, which later became confused with the Sisyphus play(s) by the more famous playwright Euripides.[18]

Nevertheless, Aëtius' attribution and the fact that Euripides is known to have written a Sisyphus satyr-play have led many to accept Euripides as the author.[19] That may be so, though I agree with Whitmarsh that "the hypothesis that the play was originally

[15] *Plac.* 1.7.2 = [Plut.] *Mor.* 880e-f
[16] *Thesmophoriazusae* 450-51
[17] Khan (1997): 249; Martin Cropp, "Lost Tragedies: A Survey" in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Justina Gregory (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 287.
[18] Whitmarsh (2014): 111-12; Patrick O'Sullivan, "Sophistic Ethics, Old Atheism, and "Critias" on Religion," *Classical World* 105, no. 2 (2012): 168; Cropp (2005), 287.
[19] See for example Albrecht Dihle, "Das Satyrspiel 'Sisyphos,'" *Hermes* 105 (1977): 28-42; also Khan (1997).

attributed to Critias and subsequently reallocated to the more famous Euripides (who already had a reputation for atheism) seems *prima facie* more plausible than the reverse."[20] But, for the sake of argument, suppose for now that Euripides is the author of the Sisyphus fragment. If that is the case, then why did the ancients (and many modern scholars) decide that it was the work of Critias instead? Because it exemplifies his character. In other words, even if Critias himself did not write the Sisyphus fragment, it must be so consistent with who he was that he might as well have, and therefore we can talk about the two alongside each other.

[20] Whitmarsh (2014): 112

CHAPTER III

CRITIAS OF ATHENS

3.1 Xenophon and the Biographers

Who, then, was Critias? I've said already that he was the sort of man who would have been capable of and interested in writing something like the Sisyphus fragment. Born ca. 460 B.C.E.[21] into an aristocratic family descended from Solon's brother Dropides—the same family that would eventually produce Plato (see figure 3.1)—Critias was wealthy and very well-educated (ἄριστα…ἦν πεπαιδευμένος)[22] and thus heavily involved in philosophy, politics, and literature. Among his "large and diverse" body of literary endeavors are two separate sets of *Republics*, both fragmentary; poetry on Anacreon;[23] a critical response to Archilochus' poetry;[24] and possibly three tragedies (these have also been attributed to Euripides).[25] Critias was also steeped in the philosophical conversations of his day, not least because philosophy and politics were deeply intertwined in fifth-century Athens.[26] He followed Socrates for some time but ultimately abandoned his teachings to pursue political power, which he went about doing

[21] Michael Gagarin, "Critias," *The Oxford Classical Dictionary,* 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 394.
[22] Philostratus, *Vitae sophistrarum* 1.16.
[23] DK 88 B 1
[24] DK 88 B 44
[25] Guthrie (1971): 302-03.
[26] Ibid., 304.

in a sophistic way, with little regard for the morality of his actions or rhetoric so long as they furthered his ends.[27] Critias' political involvement in Athens is first recorded in 415 B.C.E., when he was implicated as one of the Herm-mutilators alongside Alcibiades,[28] and, of course, reaches its apex in the coup of 404 and reign of the Thirty Tyrants, of whom he was the foremost in power and ruthlessness until he was killed in 403.[29]

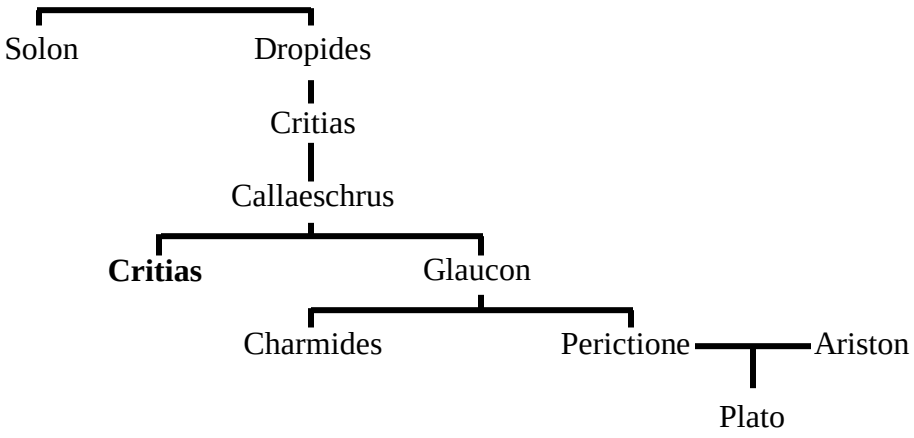

Figure 3.1

Family Tree of Critias, According to Diogenes Laërtius[30]

Xenophon, an historian and contemporary of Critias, has a superlatively negative view of the tyrant. He reports that he "was the most greedy and violent of all [the oligarchs]" (Κριτίας…πάντων πλεονεκτίστατος τε καὶ βιαιότατος ἐγένετο).[31] Moreover, Critias and Alcibiades, Xenophon argues, associated with Socrates only out of

[27] Ibid., 298.
[28] Guthrie (1971): 301; see also Andocides, *De Mysteriis* 1.47.
[29] Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 94; Guthrie (1971): 301.
[30] *Vitae phil.* 3.1.
[31] *Memorabilia* 1.2.12.

a desire to learn how to argue effectively, not because they ever wanted to imitate his moderate lifestyle.[32] In support of this is their abandonment of Socrates to seek political power as soon as they thought they had learned enough from him, as well as their eagerness to seek out conversation with prominent politicians even while they were still followers of Socrates.[33] Socrates' ability to persuade his interlocutors of whatever he wished would be a useful skill indeed for two such as these who wanted "to govern everything by themselves and be most famous of all" (βουλομένω τε πάντα δι' ἑαυτων πράττεσθαι καὶ πάντων ὀνομαστοτάτω γενέσθαι),[34] whereas Socrates' life of simplicity is diametrically opposed to that objective; Xenophon's conclusion that "they would rather have died" (ἑλέσθαι ἂν μᾶλλον αὐτὼ τεθνάναι) than follow the example of their once-mentor may be hyperbolic, but it is not inconsistent with the description of these men that Xenophon lays out.[35] To be sure, Xenophon's Critias was not a moderate man either in the public sphere (see the below discussion of the *Hellenica* for his lack of restraint as a tyrant) or the private. Socrates reportedly criticized this private lack of restraint:

> "When he perceived that Critias yearned for Euthydemus, desiring and making an attempt on him…he dissuaded him…but when Critias did not listen to these things or desist, it is said that Socrates…said that Critias

[32] Ibid., 1.2.15.
[33] Ibid., 1.2.16.; 1.2.39.
[34] Ibid., 1.2.14.
[35] Ibid., 1.2.16.

seems to have the mind of a pig, lusting after Euthydemus just as pigs rut against stones."[36]

Beyond providing an unflattering assessment of Critias' moral character, this account suggests that Critias was not inclined to listen to Socrates' advice concerning virtue, reinforcing Xenophon's hypothesis that he only followed the man to learn the art of argument from him.

Xenophon gives a more detailed account of Critias' tyranny in the *Hellenica*. Perhaps the most salient tale is of his disagreement with Theramenes, another member of the Thirty who opposed Critias' readiness to kill those whom he perceived as having wronged him (ἐπεὶ δὲ αὐτὸς μὲν προπετὴς ἦν ἐπὶ τὸ πολλοὺς ἀποκτείνειν… Θηραμένης ἀντέκοπτε).[37] When Critias then aimed that readiness to kill at Theramenes and gave a speech to the Council in favor of putting his ally-turned-opponent to death,[38] Theramenes won the Council over with his own speech.[39] But Critias was loathe to let this threat to his power live (γνοὺς ὁ Κριτίας ὅτι εἰ ἐπιτρέψοι τῇ βουλῇ διαψηφίζεσθαι περὶ αὐτοῦ, ἀναφεύξοιτο, καὶ τοῦτο οὐ βιωτὸν ἡγησάμενος), so he circumvented the authority of the Council, calling in assassins to put Theramenes to death anyway.[40] Before his death, Theramenes, standing atop an altar, asks for justice[41] and says, "By the gods, I am not unaware that this altar here will avail me nothing, but I want

[36] Ibid., 1.2.29-30. "Κριτίαν μὲν τοίνυν αἰσθανόμενος ἐρῶντα Εὐθυδήμου καὶ πειρῶντα χρῆσθαι…ἀπέτρεπε…τοῦ δὲ Κριτίου τοῖς τοιουτοῖς οὐχ ὑπακούοντος οὐδὲ ἀποτρεπομένου, λέγεται τὸν Σωκράτην…εἰπεῖν ὅτι ὑικὸν αὐτῷ δοκοίη πάσχειν ὁ Κριτίας, ἐπιθυμῶν Εὐθυδήμῳ προσκνῆσθαι ὥσπερ τὰ ὕδια τοῖς λίθοις."
[37] Xenophon, *Hellenica* 2.3.15.
[38] Ibid., 2.3.24-34
[39] Ibid., 2.3.35-50
[40] Ibid., 2.3.50.
[41] Ibid., 2.3.52.

to demonstrate that these men[42] are not only most unjust to human beings, but also most impious to the gods" (καὶ τοῦτο μὲν, ἔφη, μὰ τοὺς θεοὺς οὐκ ἀγνοῶ, ὅτι οὐδέν μοι ἀρκέσει ὅδε ὁ βωμός, ἀλλὰ βούλομαι καὶ τοῦτο ἐπιδεῖξαι, ὅτι οὗτοι οὐ μόνον εἰσὶ περὶ ἀνθρώπους ἀδικώτατοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ θεοὺς ἀσεβέστατοι).[43] The word I translated as "impious" there, ἀσεβής, can also be translated as "godless."[44] This does not guarantee that Theramenes (or Xenophon through Theramenes) was accusing Critias of being an atheist. What it does mean is that Critias was perceived by his own contemporaries as having no reverence for the divine, and this is important because it suggests that he ended up on lists of atheists not merely as a way to discredit him and his ideology, but as a result of the sacrilegious actions he took.

Xenophon's description of Critias leaves the impression of a man who cares nothing for the gods and is consumed with the acquisition and maintenance of power at any cost, a man whose restraint while a student of Socrates is not at all a credit to his own character but rather wholly due to the virtue of the philosopher he spent his time with. As Xenophon greatly admired Socrates and blamed Critias for his death, his account should be taken with a grain of salt. That being said, it is probably more true than not, since his initial audience would have likely witnessed or been involved in much of what he writes about.

Far more removed from these events, and therefore having less of a personal stake in discrediting Critias, is the second-to-third century C.E. biographer Philostratus. He warns that Critias cannot be considered evil just because he "destroyed the democracy of

[42] i.e., Critias and the rest of the Thirty
[43] Xenophon, *Hell.* 2.3.53.
[44] LS, s.v. "ἀσεβής."

Athens" (εἰ μὲν κατέλυσε τὸν ᾽Αθηναίων δῆμον, οὔπω κακός), since the democracy, as stirred up (ἐπηρμένος) as it had become, likely would have destroyed itself anyway.[45] Nevertheless, because Critias' crimes go far beyond being anti-democratic,[46] Philostratus, like Xenophon, calls him the "worst" of all infamous evildoers (κάκιστος ἀνθρώπων ἔμοιγε φαίνεται ξυμπάντων, ὧν ἐπὶ κακίᾳ ὄνομα).[47] There is additionally an implication of impiety—as with Theramenes' accusation in Xenophon, calling this a charge of atheism might be a stretch, but it certainly is a comment on Critias' lack of reverence for the divine—in his accusation that Critias "betrayed the temples [to the enemy]" (προυδίδου δὲ τὰ ἱερά).[48] On the other hand, Philostratus does recognize Critias as a well-educated and rhetorically-skilled man even as he denounces him for his atrocities; indeed, for Philostratus, this recognition is crucial to his criticism of the tyrant, making Critias' crimes all the more heinous because he should have known better by virtue of his education and especially his association with Socrates.[49] Instead, Critias used his rhetorical abilities for his own gain when, for instance, he "corrupted the Thessalians" (Κριτίας…εἶτα Θετταλοὺς διεφθορὼς) and "made the oligarchies more oppressive" (βαρυτέρας δ' αὐτοῖς ἐποίει τὰς ὀλιγαρχίας) to the people there in order to spark a revolution and increase his own power.[50]

[45] *Vitae sophistarum* 1.16.
[46] Ibid. Among Philostratus' litany of further accusations are that Critias not only betrayed Athens to Sparta, but that he also went out of his way to make exiled Athenians live in constant fear, to the point that he "exceeded [the rest of] the Thirty in cruelty and bloodthirstiness" (ὠμότητι δὲ καὶ μιαφονίᾳ τοὺς τριάκοντα ὑπερεβάλλετο).
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.; cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.24, which claims that the Thessalians corrupted Critias rather than the other way around.

Philostratus' disapproval of how Critias used his rhetoric does not prevent him from praising its style, which he likens to rays of sunlight (ἀκτίνων αὐγαὶ) shining through his speeches[51] and calls "sweet and smooth, like the breeze of the west wind" (ἡδὺ δὲ καὶ λεῖον, ὥσπερ τοῦ Ζεφύρου ἡ αὔρα).[52] Had Critias put on a show of his rhetorical talent, he writes, the Thessalians "would have turned to writing like Critias[53]" (μετέβαλον δ' ἂν καὶ ἐς τὸ κριτιάζειν) instead of Gorgias, who was one of the most influential rhetoricians of the age.[54] That is high praise indeed. The Critias of Philostratus is therefore just as violent, impious, and ambitious as Xenophon's, but far more persuasive[55] and explicitly more talented.

3.2 Critias' Own Works

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Critias was quite a prolific author, having written political elegies, hexameter in praise of Anacreon, tragedies and the Sisyphus fragment (possibly), *Aphorisms* and *Homilies* (both prose works), and prefaces to assembly speeches.[56] What has survived is only fragmentary. The Critias that comes through in his own works—leaving aside the Sisyphus fragment for now—is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the bloodthirsty tyrant depicted by Xenophon and Philostratus. Much of what he said could hardly have been more at odds with what he purportedly

[51] *Vitae sophistarum* 1.16. This is in reference to Critias' moderate use of Atticisms, which Philostratus views as far preferable to the "barbarous" practice overabundant or inappropriate Atticizing.
[52] Ibid.
[53] literally, "Critias-izing"
[54] *Vitae sophistarum* 1.16.
[55] Recall that Xenophon's Critias failed to convince the Council to kill Theramenes and instead had to circumvent their authority; Philostratus' Critias persuades the Thessalian oligarchs to become more oppressive so he could get the revolution he wanted.
[56] Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, trans. James Willis and Cornelis de Heer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 358.

did.[57] For example, Critias seems to think that moderation and patience are admirable qualities when he quotes a Spartan, Chilon, and calls him wise for saying, "nothing in excess; everything good is added in due time" (ἦν Λακεδαιμόνιος Χίλων σοφός, ὃς τάδ' ἔλεξε· / "μηδὲν ἄγαν· καιρῶι πάντα πρόσεστι καλά").[58] "Patient" and "moderate" are two of the least apt descriptors one could apply to the historical depictions of Critias recounted above. Lust and violence, on the other hand, which seemed ever-present companions of Xenophon's and Philostratus' Critias, are now shameful.[59] In another fragment, Critias cautions people against treating friends in a manner that benefits only themselves, because doing so turns friends into enemies.[60] That is exactly the opposite of how Critias actually dealt with his former ally Theramenes (though, to be fair, he did not let him live to be his enemy for very long).

There are nevertheless identifiable pieces of the Critias depicted by others in his own works. One such point of agreement is Critias' admiration for the Spartans. He wrote both poetry and prose about the Spartan way of life,[61] praising their moderation in drinking,[62] their fitness,[63] and their superior shoes, cloaks, and mugs.[64] I pointed out previously that Philostratus viewed Critias as an accomplished and persuasive speaker; in

[57] cf. Phil. *Vitae sophistarum* 1.16, "εἰ γὰρ μὴ ὁμολογήσει ὁ λόγος τῷ ἤθει, ἀλλατορίᾳ τῇ γλώττῃ δόξομεν φθέγγεθαι."

[58] DK 88 B 7. For further endorsement of moderation, see also DK 88 B 6, in which Critias refers to moderation as τὴν Εὐσεβίης γείτονα, "the neighbor of piety." This expression, reminiscent of our own aphorism, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," suggests that Critias did at one time value piety, despite his later ἀσεβής.

[59] DK 88 B 44, in which Critias calls the lust and violence of Archilochus disgraceful.

[60] DK 88 B 27.

[61] Guthrie (1971), 302.

[62] DK 88 B 6; see also B 33.

[63] DK 88 B 32.

[64] DK 88 B 34. Apparently, the Spartan κώθων (mug) was not only backpack-friendly but also both made dirty water less visibly noticeable and somewhat filtered it, all useful things for soldiers on the march.

a fragment from his elegies, Critias claims to have gotten the motion to bring Alcibiades back from exile passed.[65] A sort of aristocratic snobbishness in keeping with Critias' pedigree is evident in his criticism of Archilochus' verse, not for any stylistic shortcomings, but rather for revealing its author's low birth and descent into poverty.[66] Finally, a fragment from *Pirithous*[67] notes the ease with which a skilled orator can twist the law.[68] The implication that laws are subject to "the able individual,"[69] rather than the other way around, is in keeping with Critias' own upheaval of Athenian government and will be relevant again in the upcoming discussion of the Sisyphus fragment itself.

3.3 Plato's Dialogues

Much like over the authorship of the Sisyphus fragment, there is disagreement among scholars over who the Critias in Plato's dialogues is meant to be. Is this Critias the tyrant, or his homonymous grandfather?[70] Critias is introduced in the *Protagoras* as the son of Callaeschrus and enters the scene alongside Alcibiades;[71] one can hardly take this Critias to be any other than the tyrant of the late fifth-century, despite his sensible—moderate, even—recommendation later in the dialogue that no one be too hasty to

[65] in Plut. *Alc.* 33.1: γνώμη δ' ἥ σε κατήγαγ', ἐγὼ ταύτην ἐν ἅπασιν / εἶπον, καὶ γράψας τοῦργον ἔδρασα τόδε.
[66] DK 88 B 44.
[67] This is one of the three tragedies which *Vita Eur.* calls spurious and attributes to Critias instead. See Lesky (1996), 358; Ian C. Storey and Arlene Allen, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 154. See also *Ath.* 496b.
[68] DK 88 B 22.
[69] Lesky (1996), 358.
[70] Warman Welliver, *Character, Plot, and Thought in Plato's Timaeus-Critias*, in *Philosophia Antiqua: A Series of Monographs on Ancient Philosophy*, vol. XXXII, ed. W. J. Verdenius and J. C. M. van Winden (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), 50.
[71] Plat. *Protag.* 316a.

support either Socrates or Protagoras until their debate is concluded.[72] In the *Charmides*, Critias is again referred to as the son of Callaeschrus[73] and goes on to mention his relation to Glaucon and Charmides, though he does contradict Diogenes Laërtius' reconstruction of his family tree by calling Glaucon his uncle (τοῦ ἡμετέρου θείου) rather than his brother and Charmides his cousin (ἐμὸν δὲ ἀνετιόν) rather than nephew.[74] That is a small quibble, however, which speaks less about the identity of this Critias than the difficulty of establishing someone's family tree centuries after their death, and the Critias in the *Charmides* is clearly the same as in the *Protagoras*, i.e., the oligarch.

The *Charmides* is concerned with defining σωφροσύνη, or restraint.[75] This is not a concept one would conceive of Xenophon's Critias as being at all interested in (recall his lust for violence as well as his pig-like lust for Euthydemus), but the understanding Critias apparently has of this virtue can actually be interpreted as characteristic of his later actions. For when Charmides defines restraint as minding one's own business (τὸ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν), Socrates recognizes this as a definition heard from Critias.[76] Plato (via Socrates) arrives at that very same definition (τὸ τὰ αὑτοῦ πράττειν) as the meaning of justice in the *Republic*[77] and elaborates on what minding one's own business entails: "each man must make it his business [to do] one thing of those concerning the

[72] Ibid., 336e-337a.
[73] Plat., *Charm.* 153c.
[74] Ibid., 154b. Note that the word for cousin can also mean nephew, but as Critias appends it to a description of Charmides as Glaucon his uncle's son, cousin is more appropriate.
[75] also "temperance," "moderation," or "self-control" (see LS, s.v."σωφροσύνη"
[76] Plat., *Charm.* 161b. Socrates reaffirms this at 162c: "For it seems to me that the whole of what I suspected was especially true, that Charmides heard this answer concerning restraint from Critias" (δοκεῖ γάρ μοι παντὸς μᾶλλον ἀληθὲς εἶναι, ὃ ἐγὼ ὑπέλαβον, τοῦ Κριτίου ἀκηκοέναι τὸν Χαρμίδην ταύτην τὴν ἀπόκρισιν περὶ τῆς σωφροσύνης).
[77] Plat., *Rep.* 433b.

city, that thing for which his nature is most suited" (ὅτι ἕνα ἕκαστον ἓν δέοι ἐπιτηδεύειν τῶν περὶ τὴν πόλινμ εἰς ὅ αὐτοῦ ἡ φύσις ἐπιτηδειστάτη πεφυκυῖα εἴη).[78] It follows that if Critias saw overthrowing the democracy, betraying Athens, and killing indiscriminately to be fulfilling his natural predisposition, then he might very well have considered his actions to be exemplary of both σωφροσύνη and justice, at least as defined by himself (and later his cousin/great-nephew).

Though Critias quickly and emphatically denies being the source of this definition of restraint—"Certainly not from me!" (οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἐμοῦ γε)[79]— Charmides seems to confirm Socrates' suspicions by laughing and looking at Critias after saying that the man he heard it from might not have even known what he was talking about, intending, according to Socrates, to goad Critias into taking up the discussion in his place.[80] It works, and a hint of the future tyrant bleeds through when Critias ironically shows a lack of the very restraint they are discussing by growing angry (ὀργισθῆναι) at Charmides.[81] In the same way the Critias of Xenophon and Philostratus is visible in Critias' quick temper here, the prideful Critias of his own writings[82] appears soon after. When he does not understand what Socrates is asking him, Critias is ashamed at his failure to live up to his distinguished aristocratic reputation, so he tries to conceal his ἀπορία[83] to "save face," as it were.[84]

[78] Ibid., 433a.
[79] Plat., *Charm*. 161c.
[80] Ibid., 162b-d.
[81] Ibid., 162d.
[82] cf. DK 88 B 44, in which Critias looks down on Archilochus for his low birth and poverty
[83] the state of being at a loss
[84] Plat., *Charm*. 169c-d.

More contentious is the identity of Critias in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*. In antiquity, there appears to have been little doubt that this Critias was the tyrant.[85] This view prevailed until the early twentieth century, when the character was instead identified as the grandfather of that Critias.[86] There has been no definitive resolution of this uncertainty, which arose because the grandfather-Critias that the speaker-Critias refers to could not have known Solon if the speaker-Critias is indeed Critias of the Thirty, whereas if the speaker-Critias is actually *the grandfather of* the tyrant Critias, the grandfather-Critias (now the great-grandfather of Critias the tyrant) could have been a contemporary of Solon.[87] Many scholars have thus supported the identification of the speaker-Critias as the grandfather of Critias the oligarch,[88] but others maintain that the speaker-Critias is the oligarch himself.[89] The latter position is my own; while it is true that Critias the tyrant's grandfather would probably not have heard Solon's story of Atlantis directly from the mouth of Solon, Critias never claims that he did. Instead, Critias reports that Solon told the tale to "his kinsman and very dear friend Great-Grandpa Dropides" (οἰκεῖος καὶ σφόδρα πίλος ἡμῖν Δρωπίδου προπάππου), who then told Grandpa Critias, who in

[85] See Proclus, *The Commentaries of Proclus on the* Timaeus *of Plato in Five Books; Containing a Treasury of Pythagoric and Platonic Physiology*, vol. I, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: A. J. Valpy, 1820), 59.
[86] John Burnet, *Greek Philosophy Part I: Thales to Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 338.
[87] See Welliver (1977), 50-51. Solon lived from about 630 to 558 B.C.E., while the grandfather of Critias the tyrant "could hardly have been born before about 540."
[88] See for example A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 23; Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 106-7; Kathryn A. Morgan, "Designer History: Plato's Atlantis Story and Fourth-Century Ideology," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118 (1998): 101
[89] See for example Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "The Family of Critias," *American Journal of Philology* 70, no. 4 (1949): 404-410; Jean-François Mattéi, *Plato et le miroir: De l'âge d'or à l'Atlantide* (Paris: PUF, 1996), 253.

turn told Critias himself.[90] Perhaps it is still a stretch for there to be so few generations between Critias the tyrant and Dropides[91]—maybe Plato skipped a generation or two for simplicity's sake[92]—but regardless I think it is clear that Plato intended the speaker-Critias to be understood as the tyrant.

Having established that the Critias featured as an interlocutor in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* is indeed the tyrant, as in the *Protagoras* and the *Charmides*, let us consider how he is portrayed in the former two dialogues. Socrates says of him, "We all know that Critias is no amateur in anything that we are saying" (Κριτίαν δέ που πάντες οἱ τῆδε ἴσμεν οὐδενὸς ἰδιώτην ὄντα ὧν λέγομεν),[93] that is, Critias is not ignorant about what makes an ideal city, which is what Socrates et al. had been discussing on the previous day[94] and reviewing at the beginning of this dialogue.[95] Critias, then, is interested in and capable of philosophizing about the political order, justice, human nature, and all the

[90] Plat., *Tim.* 20e; cf. 25d-e, which similarly traces the path of the story from Solon to Critias' grandfather but does not imply Grandpa Critias heard it directly from Solon: "You have heard, Socrates, the things spoken by Critias the Elder according to the report of Solon (τὰ μὲν δὴ ῥηθέντα, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὑπὸ τοῦ παλαιοῦ Κριτίου κατ' ἀκοήν τὴν Σόλωνος…ἀκήκοας). See also W. R. M. Lamb's translation, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925): "Now Solon…was a relative and very dear friend of our great-grandfather Dropides; and Dropides told our grandfather Critias as the old man, in turn, related to us…"

[91] Allowing for approximately thirty years between generations, and working backwards from Critias' birth ca. 460 B.C.E., Callaeschrus would have been born ca. 490, Critias the Elder ca. 520, and Dropides ca. 550. Solon died ca. 558. While these dates do not allow Dropides and Solon to have been contemporaries, they are approximations, and the margin of error could thus be such that the two were alive at the same time for long enough that they became good friends.

[92] There certainly could have been more than one individual named Critias in the interval between Dropides and Critias the tyrant, and, as more than two Critiases in one dialogue would only have added to the confusion, Plato could have condensed the Critias who heard Solon's tale from Dropides and the Critias who told it to Critias the tyrant into one. It is not unlikely, as was proposed by J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families, 600-300 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971). This has no effect on the identity of the speaker-Critias, however; he remains the oligarch.

[93] Plat., *Tim*. 20a.; cf. Schol. Plat. *Tim.* 20a, where Critias is called "an amateur among philosophers, a philosopher among amateurs" (ἰδιώτης μὲν ἐν φιλοσόφοις, φιλόσοφος δ' ἐν ἰδιώταις).

[94] See Plat., *Rep.*

[95] Plat., *Tim.* 17c.

various other themes of the *Republic*. He is also skeptical (at the least) about the gods. It is far easier to persuade people about the gods than about mortals, he says, since "inexperience and excessive ignorance of those listening" (ἡ γὰρ ἀπειρία καὶ σφόδρα ἄγνοια τῶν ἀκουόντων) about certain matters enables someone to easily speak about such things, "and we know how we feel about the gods" (περὶ δὲ δὲ θεῶν ἴσμεν ὡς ἔχομεν).[96] In other words, Critias and at least one other participant in the conversation are apparently ignorant about or unsure of the gods.

The Critias of Plato is as complex a character as the one portrayed by Xenophon and Philostratus and revealed in Critias' own works. Proud, a bit volatile, skeptical of the gods, sometimes dishonest, aware of the power of speech to persuade, and an advocate for "minding one's own business" (read: following one's nature), but at the same time an apparently respected philosopher who is capable of moderation and recognized by Socrates as well-versed in contemplating what the ideal city might look like, the Critias that his younger, more fondly-remembered relative depicts is perhaps best described as ποικίλος[97]—clever and skillful, yet exactly the kind of man Plato does not want in his ideal city.[98]

[96] Plat., *Critias* 107a-b.

[97] LS, s.v. "ποικίλος": manifold, spotted, changeable.

[98] Plat., *Rep.* 397e: "A man for us is neither twofold nor manifold, since every man does one thing" (ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν διπλοῦς ἀνὴρ παρ' ἡμῖν οὐδὲ πολλαπλοῦς, ἐπειδὴ ἕκαστος ἓν πράττει); 398a: "Indeed, a man, as it seems, able by his cleverness to become manifold…if he should arrive in our city… we would say that there is no man such as this among us in the city nor is it right that one be born" (ἄνδρα δή, ὡς ἔοικε, δυνάμενον ὑπὸ σοφίας παντοδαπὸν γίγνεσθαι…εἰ ἡμῖν ἀφίκοιτο εἰς τὴν πόλιν αὐτός…εἴποιμεν δ' ἂν ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν τοιοῦτος ἀνὴρ ἐν τῇ πόλει παρ' ἡμῖν οὔτε θέμις ἐγγενέσθαι).

3.4 Critias in the Sisyphus Fragment

From the above accounts, it is clear that Critias had the literary τεχνή[99] and philosophical inclination to have written the Sisyphus fragment. If we consider the philosophical views implied in the fragment, it reveals itself to be in line with Critias' character, even when leaving aside the atheism argument. In the fragment, Sisyphus posits that some shrewd man invented the gods and introduced them to mortals in such a way that men would especially fear them, so that men would refrain from doing evil in secret. Essentially, the fragment describes the origin of religion as a form of social control for the masses, "a kind of religious Panopticon" that ensures the obedience of the citizenry by convincing them that the gods are always watching, that even their innermost thoughts are subject to scrutiny from above.[100] Critias had a vested interest in controlling the citizenry (and even his fellow oligarchs) as one of the Thirty, and he was also "no amateur" at thinking about the mechanisms that allow a city to function well; that he might have put some thought into how one might go about ensuring the obedience of the populace should not be surprising.

What is more, this lie is called ἥδιστον[101]—literally, "most sweet," but here it has the sense of "beguiling,"[102] like the words of Hesiod's Muses, who "know how to speak many false things like the truth" (ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα).[103] More importantly, this beguiling lie is similar to the rhetoric of the Sophists, who

[99] LS, s.v. "τεχνή": art, skill, cunning
[100] Whitmarsh (2015), 96.
[101] In. 25; cf. Phil. *Vitae sophistarum* 1.16, where Critias' style is called ἡδύς.
[102] Whitmarsh (2014): 117.
[103] Hesiod, *Theogony* 1.27.

famously were accused of seeking to make the weaker argument into the stronger.[104] Though Critias was not a Sophist in the strictest sense, as he did not travel around teaching rhetoric and philosophy for pay—recall that Philostratus says he did not teach rhetoric,[105] and the scholiast on the *Timaeus* calls him an amateur among philosophers[106]—he nevertheless had sophistic ideas and behaved in a manner consistent with sophistic thought,[107] to the point that Philostratus saw fit to include him in his *Lives of the Sophists*. Further, Critias' own awareness of the ease with which one can persuade mortals about the gods is reflected in the fragment's shrewd man, who does seem to speak well about the gods to his audience and, additionally, does so by locating the gods in the heavens, another area concerning which human knowledge was relatively uncertain at the time.

Though the shrewd man referred to in the fragment is not shown to gain anything from such a falsehood, and the imposition of religion is framed as a positive thing for mankind, working in conjunction with laws to elevate humanity from its previous state of beastly violence,[108] there is some indication in the language used that this apparent victory for justice is not as straightforward as it appears on the surface. In particular, I am

[104] Aristotle accuses Protagoras (and Sophists in general) of making the inferior argument stronger (τὸ τὸν ἥττω δὲ λόγον κρείττω ποιεῖν), *Rhetoric* 1402a23-25; Plato reports that this same accusation (τὸν ἥττω λόγον κρείττω ποιῶν) was leveled at Socrates during his trial, *Apol.* 19b-c.

[105] *Vitae sophistarum* 1.16

[106] See n. 92.

[107] Critias used his persuasive rhetoric for his own gain, e.g., convincing the Thessalians to revolt or the Athenians to recall Alcibiades, both arguments which could be considered "weaker" than their opposite positions. His own power appeared to be the *summum bonum* according to which he operated, as he abandoned Socrates and his teachings to pursue politics even though being in Socrates' company had kept him somewhat in check and thus a "better person." He also favored following one's nature, which was a notably sophistic belief. See also Guthrie (1971), 243; Lesky (1996), 357.

[108] cf. Plato's "noble lie," *Rep.* 414b-415d, which is a similarly false but beneficial story that is to be presented as truth.

referring to line 6, in which Sisyphus calls Justice a tyrant. The idea that justice is the subjugation of others falls very much in line with the anti-democratic actions of the tyrant Critias, who, as outlined previously, helped topple the Athenian democracy and later circumvented the Council to ensure the death of his political opponent Theramenes. For Critias, Theramenes' death *was* justice because it eliminated a threat and increased his own power—and this was achieved by acting in a tyrannical manner. Justice is a tyrant, and the threat of punishment from the gods is "for the subject, to ensure his obedience, not for the enlightened ruler."[109] Though the fragment's shrewd man is not explicitly depicted as ruling over his fellow man—he is not called a king, or a tyrant, or anything of the sort—he does rule over them in that do what he wants (i.e., submit to the laws), and he is also superior in the sense that he does not live in fear of the gods like the other mortals do. Critias, once the Thirty were established, would have had nothing to fear from violating the laws nor even from contradicting his fellow oligarchs;[110] he also seemed to have no certainty about the existence of the gods and no fear of divine retribution for his actions,[111] much like the speaker and shrewd man in the Sisyphus fragment.

The portrait that Xenophon and Philostratus paint of Critias is an ambitious, intelligent, but ultimately cutthroat man who acted without regard for the law, the gods, or his fellow citizens. Critias' own works, if we leave aside the Sisyphus fragment and tragic trilogy for now, affirm his intelligence and suggest a more moderate, though visibly pro-Spartan, thinker, as do Plato's dialogues; both do, however, hint at the Critias

[109] Guthrie (1971): 301.
[110] See the incident with Theramenes for an example of Critias' supremacy even within the Thirty.
[111] Again, see the Theramenes episode.

of Xenophon and Philostratus. These many facets of Critias are exhibited in the Sisyphus fragment, an atheistic and sophistic piece of literature concerned with the nature of mankind, the origin of civilized society, and the nature's superiority over the law. Because the character of Critias is evident in the philosophical content of the fragment as well as its existence (that is, its literary and intellectual nature is consistent with the education and skill as an author that Critias possessed), the attribution to Critias by Sextus Empiricus is well-supported. At the very least, even if Euripides wrote the fragment, the degree to which the fragment is consistent with the character of Critias suggests that he was likely entertaining some of the same ideas.

On a final note, against the objection that the views inherent in a piece of literature do not necessarily match those of its author, especially when those views are espoused by the villain of the piece, publicly expressing atheistic sentiments was risky in fifth-century Athens and beyond. Anaxagoras, Euripides, Diagoras of Melos, and Socrates were all tried for ἀσέβεια,[112] or godlessness/impiety, not even necessarily outright atheism.[113] Putting these ideas about the fabrication of the gods to paper, then, would have been very risky indeed, especially for a man like Critias who was going into politics, as his opponents would have used it against him in the same way they tried him for the mutilation of the herms (which he was acquitted of). But having Sisyphus, a character punished in Tartarus for eternity, speak about the falsehood of the gods' existence provides the perfect form of plausible deniability, as the author could claim he was only making a case against atheism, portraying the full depravity of the character, or

[112] Whitmarsh (2015), 106-7.
[113] The noun form of ἀσέβης, which is what Xenophon accuses Critias and Alcibiades of being (*Hell.* 2.3.53). See n. 42 and 43.

any other such argument. Indeed, recall that this is just what Aëtius claims was going on, though he of course says the views were Euripides'.[114] The fragment thus can be read as a covert expression of Critias' political philosophy and impiety and should be interpreted as a justification for his actions and policies.

[114] *Plac.* 1.7.2 = [Plut.] *Mor.* 880e-f

CHAPTER IV

THE FRAGMENT IN CONTEXT

4.1 Solon

While the Sisyphus fragment is certainly an expression of many of Critias' views and should be interpreted as a justification for his tyranny, it was not written in a vacuum and thus can be better understood in the context of other philosophical thought both preceding and following the life of its author. Generations earlier, Critias' ancestor Solon wrote about a political order in many ways similar to that of the Sisyphus fragment, yet strikingly different in regards to justice and the gods.[115] Solon fixates on "Good Order" (Εὐνομίη) as the foundation of lawfulness.[116] That's what makes a city and a government good and allows Justice to flourish, for:

> "Good Order renders all things orderly and fitting
> and often puts fetters 'round the unjust;
> she smooths jagged things, puts an end to greed, dims hubris,
> and wilts the sprouting bloom of madness,
> and she straightens crooked judgments and softens proud
> deeds, and she stops deeds of sedition,
> and she stops the wrath of painful strife, and by her all is
> fitting and prudent for mankind."[117]

[115] fr.4W
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., ln. 32-9: (Εὐνομίη δ' εὔκοσμα καὶ ἄρτια πάντ' ἀποφαίνει / καὶ θαμὰ τοῖς ἀδίκοις ἀμφιτίθησι πέδας· / τραχέα λειάνει, παύει κόρον, ὕβριν ἀμαυροῖ, / αὐαίνει δ' ἄτης ἄνθεα

Critias, too, values order in the Sisyphus fragment; the state of mankind that the speaker negatively contrasts to his own, more civilized age is characterized by disorder.[118] Moreover, Solon's Justice "knows what happens and what happened before" (σύνοιδε τὰ γιγνόμενα πρό τ' ἐόντα),[119] functioning in much the same way as the Sisyphus fragment's invented divinities.

Despite these superficial similarities, the Sisyphus fragment provides an implicit political theory opposite Solon's. Solon's Justice is just as omniscient as Critias' invented deities, but whereas she has "holy foundations" (σεμνὰ Δίκης θέμεθλα),[120] the Justice brought about by the laws and fear of the gods in the Sisyphus fragment is wholly a product of human invention. Further, the Good Order associated with Solon's Justice puts an end to injustice firmly[121] but gently,[122] as opposed to Critias' tyrannical Justice that holds violence in check as her slave[123] and rules through fear.[124] Both the society portrayed by Solon and the society portrayed by Critias have citizens who follow the law, but Solon's citizens do so out of a harmonious, moral impulse brought about by an actual divinity—Good Order—while Critias' citizens only obey out of a fear of punishment brought about by the lies of a shrewd man and the all-encompassing tyranny of Justice, which is subjugation, not symbiosis. Critias' political order is thus better understood when framed as a perversion of his ancestor Solon's.

φυόμενα, / εὐθύνει δὲ δίκας σκολιὰς ὑπερήφανά τ' ἔργα / πραΰνει, παύει δ' ἔργα διχοστασίης, / παύει δ' ἀργαλέης ἔριδος χόλον, ἔστι δ' ὑπ' αὐτῆς / πάντα κατ' ἀνθρώπους ἄρτια καὶ πινυτά).

[118] DK 88 B25, ἄτακτος (ln. 1) and τὴν ἀνομίαν (ln.40).

[119] Solon, fr. 4W, ln. 15.

[120] Ibid., ln. 14.

[121] e.g., she chains the unjust, ibid., ln. 33.

[122] e.g., "she smooths jagged things," "dims hubris," and "softens proud deeds," ibid., ln. 34, 36-7.

[123] DK 88 B25, ln. 6-7

[124] Ibid., ln. 40.

4.2 Thucydides

On the subject of the antithetical juxtaposition of Justice and tyranny found in the Sisyphus fragment is the idea that altering the meaning of a word to the point that Critias does by calling Justice a tyrant renders language itself meaningless. Thucydides, when providing an account of the revolution of Corcyra, notes that one of the many deleterious effects of said revolution was that "the customary meaning of words exchanged what is right for the matters [they were applied to]" (καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει).[125] Perhaps the revolution of the Thirty hinged on redefining Justice as tyranny. As discussed previously, Critias seemed to view restraint as following one's own nature, which would mean subjugating others if one's nature was superior; it is hardly a stretch to imagine that he might have rationalized overthrowing the democracy as taking back control from the tyranny of a Justice that imposed itself on the natural state of man and prevented the strong from rightfully ruling over the weak.

4.3 Plato

Plato says many things that are relevant to this fragment. Chief among them are the persuasive power he ascribes to poetry and the famous "noble lie" he decides is necessary to maintain justice in his city. It has already been established that Plato's definition of justice might have grown out of Critias' definition of restraint (minding

[125] *Hist.*, 3.82.4.

one's own business); it is possible that a further similarity exists between Plato's philosopher-king and the shrewd man of Critias' Sisyphus fragment. Each of these "rulers" (again, the shrewd man is not explicitly shown to rule, but he is not subject to the fear of the gods and thus is freer and more powerful than the people he deceives) controls the narrative through a false myth.

The shrewd man of the Sisyphus fragment appear to persuade his audience in much the same way that Plato describes poetry operating on those who hear it. For Plato, a large part of the persuasive power of poetry lies in its ability to enchant the audience, making them feel as if they are actually "among the deeds either in Ithaca or Troy or wherever the epic is [set]" (παρὰ τοῖς πράγμασιν…ἢ ἐν Ἰθάκῃ οὖσιν ἢ ὅπως ἂν καὶ τὰ ἔπη ἔχῃ).[126] The listeners, "astounded by the things being said" (συνθαμβοῦντας τοῖς λεγομένοις),[127] are susceptible to the rhapsode or poet making them believe things that are not actually true, much like the people who listen to the shrewd man's sweet, beguiling words in the Sisyphus fragment are especially astounded and believe his lie.

While the ideal city should treat the truth as invaluable, according to Plato,[128] he also says that "for the rulers of the city…it is fitting to lie…for the benefit of the city" (τοῖς ἄρχουσιν δὴ τῆς πόλεως…προσήκει ψεύδεσθαι…ἕνεκα ἐπ' ὠφελίᾳ τῆς πόλεως).[129] The Sisyphus fragment's lie about the existence of the gods is presented as beneficial for mortals, as it raises them one step higher above the animalistic existence they lived in prior to the invention of the gods, preventing people from doing evil deeds

[126] Plato, *Ion* 535c.
[127] Ibid., 535e.
[128] *Rep.*, 389b: ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ ἀλήθειάν γε περὶ πολλοῦ ποιητέον.
[129] Ibid.

in secret. According to the above Platonic criteria for the acceptability of a lie—that it must be told by a ruler and provide some benefit for the city—the invention of the gods is perfectly acceptable. It is consistent, too, with Plato's assertion that a lie that prevents wrongdoing is "useful" (κρήσιμον).[130]

Plato's own ideal city has a parallel lie to the one told by the shrewd man in the Sisyphus fragment. In the just city, all the citizens mind their own business,[131] or do what they are most suited for according to their nature.[132] In order that each of Plato's three classes of citizens might be content with their lot and perform the duties that nature has made them most suited for, "a contrivance of opportune lies" (μηχανὴ…τῶν ψευδῶν τῶν ἐν δέοντι γιγνομένων) about their origins must be concocted and disseminated among the citizenry[133]—this is the so-called "noble lie" that is necessary for justice to prevail in Plato's city. Just so, the political philosophy inherent in Critias' Sisyphus fragment claims that another "noble lie"—that divine retribution awaits any misdeed or wayward thought—is necessary for the maintenance of justice. Therefore, despite the vastly different perceptions of Critias and Plato, both today and in antiquity, the two seem to have shared some philosophy as well as blood.

[130] Ibid., 282c.
[131] Ibid., 433b.
[132] Ibid., 433a.
[133] Ibid., 414b-15d.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This is all to say that the question of the Sisyphus fragment's attribution, though it cannot be resolved for certain, is most likely answered by saying that Critias is the author, and, furthermore, even if he is not, the fact that so many ancient and modern sources believed him to be the author is more important than whether or not he actually wrote the fragment. While Euripides was undoubtedly interested in exploring atheism and other sophistic ideas, the philosophic implications of the fragment so align with Critias' violent and self-serving actions as one of the Thirty Tyrants, and his own reputation for atheism and sophistic rhetoric, that it is reasonable to take Sextus Empiricus' attribution as correct. At the very least, it follows that the similarity of thought between Critias and the fragment—both products of fifth-century Athenian ideas—is significant enough that this play is the sort of thing he might have written, and the man and the fragment are thus inextricable. Therefore, the fragment should be interpreted as a philosophical justification for the coup and subsequent tyrannical reign of Critias. Furthermore, taking Critias to be the author of the Sisyphus fragment cements him as an important figure not only in Athens' political history but also in her philosophical history, as the ideas in the fragment

benefit from being read as products of previous political philosophy as well as hints of the direction that Plato ultimately takes his own philosophy.

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