

The Bribing of Ismenias

In Plato's *Meno* there is a brief reference to the Theban politician Ismenias. Part of my aim here will be to discuss and explain that reference, and in doing so I will reconsider the account of it given by J. S. Morrison (1942), which was later adopted by R. S. Bluck (1961, pp. 345-7), and hence gained fairly wide acceptance among scholars. Like Morrison, I will use the investigation of this small puzzle as an excuse for examining some of the larger issues, but with a different approach. Morrison began from the idea that Plato is very careful about his dates, and undertook a detailed investigation of the historical circumstances of Meno's visit to Athens, with the aim of dating the dialogue (and hence also the reference to Ismenias) with great exactness. I believe that Plato is not careful about his dates, and do not find Morrison's arguments remotely plausible. I will aim instead to examine the wider political and social prejudices and particular political debates that lie behind the reference to Ismenias, and will also try to put together such information as we have about the man himself.

The reference comes in a passage in which Socrates is paying ironic compliments to Anytus and his father Anthemion that gently convey Plato's contempt for both men. This is what he says:

Anytus here, for a start, is the son of a wealthy and intelligent man, Anthemion; and Anthemion didn't get rich by fluke, or through someone gifting him his money (not like Ismenias the Theban, who just recently took Polycrates' bribe). No, he made his fortune by his own brains and his own efforts; and in general he isn't thought of as being an uppity sort of citizen, or conceited and tiresome, but as a moderate and unpretentious man. What's more, he did a very fine job of bringing up and educating Anytus here, in the view of the Athenian public [the *plethos*] — at any rate, they keep electing him to their highest public offices.

Socrates praises Anthemion for being a self-made man. Hiding in that compliment is the implication that he is *nouveau riche*; ‘new money’; a vulgar upstart. Connected with that is Plato’s feeling that such men should not have access to political power in the first place, and that it is only under democracy that they are regrettably able to gain influence. Hence the barbed remark about Anytus being elected to public office by the *plethos*. The subtext of that remark is something like this: ‘Anytus is the kind of man who is popular with the ignorant rabble, who thanks to our lamentable constitution are able to appoint him to political office.’ We can be quite sure of the subtext, given the abundant, clear statements of his contempt for public elections that Plato makes in other dialogues, most notably the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*. In the *Gorgias* he says that holding public elections is like letting little boys vote for whoever offers them the most candy. In the *Republic*, he compares public debate to a chaotic struggle among rowdy passengers for control of the helm of a ship. The passengers have no idea what to do when they seize the helm and obviously should have left the task to the trained helmsman. What he means is that democracy’s central flaw is that it raises to power men of no education and hence no understanding of the art of government — men like Anthemion and Anytus. It would be astonishing, then, if in the *Meno* Plato has decided that public elections are an excellent political institution after all, and that electoral success is a mark of true merit, as his compliment implies. Besides, we know that he has an extremely low regard for Anytus, the prosecutor of Socrates, and thinks of him as the opposite of an (ethically) ‘well brought up’ man.

So there is no doubt that the remarks about Anytus, at any rate, are ironic. But perhaps his praise of Anthemion is genuine? Commentators have suggested that Socrates wishes to criticize Anytus precisely by comparing him to his impressive and admirable father.¹ The meritocratic view that Socrates expresses on the surface

¹ E.g. Canto-Sperber (1993), 294: En parlant d’Anthémion, au lieu de parler d’Anytus, Socrate veut sans doute dévaloriser ce dernier, le message implicite étant qu’ Anytus n’a

here — that Anthemion is to be admired for attaining wealth *through his own efforts* — is so much more prevalent in our own time that we might easily take these remarks at face value. But they are just as cutting and ironic as the others. The irony relies on the social prejudices and attitudes of the time, not just on Plato's mistrust of democracy. Anthemion, according to Xenophon, had made his money as a leather-tanner, and Anytus had continued the family business. Plato does not mention that detail, but it is what Socrates is alluding to, and there is no doubt that the allusion is intended as an *insult*.² We must begin by remembering that for most elite Athenians all forms of labour, trade, and wage-earning were socially embarrassing. The people who engaged in them were looked down upon by those who didn't need to. This idea of the shame of menial labour, and the 'vulgarity' of trade and the paid professions arises in any society with a land-owning aristocracy, and especially in those societies that have slaves or virtual slaves. Such conditions always generate snobbery. It was widespread in a very

pas les qualités qu'avait son père, mais qu'il a tous les défauts que celui-là n'avait pas. Bluck (1961), 344: [T]he concentration on the father suggest that we are really meant to contrast the father with the son, and to see here yet another example of the truth...that even the best of fathers cannot pass on their virtue to their sons. Likewise Sharples (1985), 169, Thompson 171, Klein 237.

² Cf. Xenophon, *Apologia Socratis*, 29.1: Xenophon implies that Socrates annoyed Anytus by suggesting that it was inappropriate for a statesman to be connected with such a 'lowly', mechanical profession.) Cf. also the scholiast on Plato's *Apology*: 'Anytus became rich from leather-tanning and was mocked for that by Socrates, and consequently persuaded Meletus to bring the impiety charge against Socrates. This is mentioned by Lysias in his *Defense of Socrates*, and by Xenophon, and by Aristoxenus in his *Life of Socrates*.' This indicates three different sources for the story that Socrates had teased Anytus over his social background. It is probably apocryphal; but it reveals the attitudes of the authors themselves, and the fact that the reference to his leather-tanning background was an instance of snobbery and an insult.

similar form in the ante-bellum South, for example, and in Victorian England. In societies where almost all actual (physical) work is done by rigidly defined lower classes or by slaves, people who hold or aspire to higher social status take great pains to emphasize the fact that they do not work.

In Athens, a man could be demeaned merely by having to earn a wage. That is why, in the *Protagoras*, the young Hippocrates blushes at the suggestion that he might be planning to become a sophist himself, even though, intellectually, he idolizes Protagoras. What embarrasses him is the idea of being a professional; *of needing to earn money*. A gentleman (a *kalos k'agathos*) is *not* a professional. A gentleman has an income (preferably a very large one) generated by his estates, but he certainly does not earn wages. That is also why, throughout that dialogue, and in others, sophists are teased and sometimes openly rebuked for the mere fact that they earn wages. Even more shocking to Plato was the fact that the better they were, the more they earned. He appears to be disgusted by the fact that men like Protagoras, Hippias and Gorgias became very rich as a result of their intellectual talents, and he presents this as something that marks the sophists out as inferior to Socrates and other 'true philosophers' who seek no payment for their pursuit of truth or for their teaching. For Plato the idea seems to be that payment corrupts a philosopher rather in the way that bribery corrupts a politician. In a slave-owning and still partly aristocratic society, it isn't surprising that even intellectual and academic wage-earning was stigmatized in that way. Far more surprising is the degree to which modern readers of Plato accept and even defend his contempt for sophists — professional intellectuals — even though the attitudes that lie behind it have vanished. How many of us now would dismiss or insult the work of a modern philosopher or scientist purely on the grounds that he receives wages?

In all the societies I mentioned, people commonly strove for a kind of aristocratic ideal; a life in which an inherited country estate, managed by slaves,

discreetly provided the basis of a life of gentlemanly leisure. Those who could not live the ideal would try to get as close to it as they could. A very vivid contemporary example of this is given us in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Strepsiades, a simple farmer, marries an aristocratic wife (daughter of Megacles son of Megacles). Their son wants to spend all his time (and all his father's money) on chariot racing — that is, mimicking the lifestyle of the aristocracy — even to the point of bankrupting the family. This sort of desperate social climbing was apparently widespread, or Aristophanes would not have been able to satirize it.

In Athens it was the long-established aristocratic families that exemplified the dream of this effortless superiority, so to be 'noble' or 'well-born' was a very important addition to one's social prestige. Old money, in such societies, is always much more prestigious than new money. For that reason, a man could also be mocked if he came from a more humble origin, however wealthy and leisured he may subsequently have become. Anthemion and Anytus are being insulted in that way in this passage³.

We may assume that democracy worked against aristocratic prejudices, and that not everyone shared them. It allowed men of humble origin to attain the prestige of wealth and political office; and no doubt it partially removed the stigma from labour and wage-earning, by granting the dignity of political consultation and genuine political influence, through suffrage, to Athens' labourers, craftsmen, and

³ The insult seems unusual now, but would be quite at home in, say, an Oscar Wilde play. Consider this joke from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *Lady Bracknell*: Do you smoke? *Jack*: Yes, I must admit I smoke. *Lady Bracknell*: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind.' The joke works because the audience know that the aristocratic view is that no respectable member of the upper classes should have a *real* occupation. The difference is that Wilde is making fun of that attitude, whereas Socrates' ironic insults require us to have some sympathy for it, and to share the feeling (as Lady Bracknell would) that there is something deeply disgraceful about being a leather-tanner, or the son of a leather tanner.

traders. Thucydides' Pericles, in the famous funeral speech, says that in Athens no one is ashamed of poverty, only of making no effort to work himself out of it. This is a strikingly egalitarian sentiment, and part of the newer, democratic outlook, and almost certainly rejected by aristocratic Athenians. The aristocratic view is, roughly, that members of the labouring classes deserve their position and are assigned it as part of the natural order of things, and *have no right to rise above it*; also, that poverty is very shaming indeed, but not quite as shameful as having to work for one's bread because of it. Pericles represents what is now a much more familiar attitude. He celebrates the self-made man made possible by democracy. (He would say that Protagoras, his friend, has no need to blush just because he earns a wage.) In the same speech, he also makes clear that this increasing dignity of the lower classes is directly linked to the sharing of political power. In Athens, he says, an obscure background does not prevent a man from holding public office and making a contribution to his city if he can. He implies that social mobility and democracy go hand in hand, and that both are required by social justice.

For Plato social mobility was a political catastrophe, and it is clear that he hated the idea of men like Anthemion and Anytus rising up from the mercantile and mechanical classes and attaining political office. In the *Republic* he bases his ideal constitution around a first principle that the different social classes must very strictly and rigidly *stick to their place*; indeed, he goes so far as to define political *injustice* as the encroachment by the laboring and mercantile classes onto the business of ruling. Shoemakers shall make shoes, tailors shall make clothes, farmers shall farm, and rulers shall rule — *and there shall be no mingling of the tasks or of the personnel*. To Plato's mind, in that ideal world Anthemion and Anytus would have been legally compelled to stick to their leather-tanning; as it is they are upstarts and meddlers, failing to 'mind their own business.'

Given the heavy irony of the first part of the passage, what Socrates probably

means in the next part of the opening sentence is that Anthemion *is* uppity, conceited, and tiresome, and *not* modest or unpretentious. Beneath his sarcasm lie the insults typically directed at ‘upstart’ politicians. To Plato’s mind such people had no business aspiring to power in the first place, so they inevitably seemed ‘uppity’ and ‘conceited’. This is very similar to the way, in the United States, ex-slaves, and by extension African-Americans quite generally, would be branded impertinent and presumptuous merely if they aspired to an education, or wealth, or the right to vote; and especially if they attained political office. It is also reminiscent of Victorian aristocratic horror at the growing ‘uppishness’ of their servants, towards the end of the nineteenth century (a period when social equality steadily increased).

Since these populist Athenian politicians were generally men whose influence came partly from their self-made wealth, because even in Athens a full political career still required money, they tended to be successful businessmen who therefore seemed ‘vulgar’ and ostentatious to the old-money aristocratic families. The point was that to aristocrats it seemed that these men did not deserve their wealth, and lacked the ‘good taste’ of people who had known it all their lives. The best known example of this sort of new money politician in Athens, from the generation before Anytus, was Cleon son of Cleainetus, who just like Anthemion had made a fortune as a leather-tanner before his political career, and who seems to have been loathed by the conservatives who dominate the historical record (especially Thucydides and Aristophanes). For Aristophanes, Cleon’s background as businessman is an endless source of jibes: he usually refers to him as ‘the hide-seller’ or the ‘hide-tanner’. He also often calls him ‘the Paphlagonian’ implying that one of his ancestors was a slave, which for similar reasons was a cutting insult at the time. Anytus was teased on the stage in exactly the same manner and for the same reasons. Theopompus (in *The Soldier Women*) apparently called him ‘Boots’ (a reference to his father’s trade) and Archippus (in *The Fish*) likewise teased him for

being a cobbler.⁴ Plato's treatment here of Anthemion and Anytus here is more subtle, but the underlying attitudes are the same, and the sarcasm relies on the same prejudices. The idea, then, that Plato actually meant to *compliment* Anthemion, and to hold him up as superior to his son, gets things exactly backwards. Plato only mentions Anthemion because it is the father's social origins that are the real source of embarrassment. "Your father was a lowly leather-tanner, and we all know what that says about *you*."

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These social attitudes, as well as Plato's interest in the debate over the merits of democracy, should form the rough background against which we may try to understand Plato's reference to Ismenias, the Theban. Our question is this: why does Plato take a swipe at Ismenias in the middle of insulting Anytus? Perhaps he mentioned Ismenias for no reason other than the one that the dramatic context implies: Socrates needs an example of someone who acquired wealth by dubious means (by bribery, as it happens). But this seems very unlikely. The reference to Ismenias is dramatically very clumsy. It may even be a later addition, perhaps inserted after the recent death of Ismenias in 382. Notice that the passage would read much more smoothly without it. It is also out of character for Socrates, who is normally so friendly and good-humoured, to snap at someone so meanly. It is as if Socrates is suddenly speaking with Plato's voice. So it seems far more likely that Plato has non-dramatic reasons for inserting the reference; and it is worth asking what those reasons might be. We might hope to explain why Plato associates the two men; why his resentment of Anytus leads him to his evident disdain for Ismenias; and why he disliked Ismenias in the first place.

Ismenias, Like Anytus, was (according to some sources) a pro-democratic politician. He supported the Athenian democrats when the 'thirty tyrants' drove them into exile, in 403. He helped restore the democracy, by allowing the exiles to take refuge in Thebes, and to launch a military campaign against Athens from

⁴ Cf. The Scholiast on Plato's *Apology*, at 18b.

Theban territory. He gave them money and weapons and passed legislation in their favour, in spite of threats from Sparta. These details can be found in Plutarch (see below), and I assume some of his sources are early and his information fairly reliable. He implies that Ismenias supported the exiles for *ideological* reasons; that is, from enthusiasm for the restoration of the democracy. None of this is surprising, since he was one of the two main leaders of party in Thebes that opposed the pro-Spartan, oligarchic party. So he had very good reason to want to see the overthrow of the thirty tyrants, a puppet oligarchy funded by Spartan cash and propped up by Spartan troops. Quite apart from his support for democracy itself (which is a matter of debate) there is the fact that democratic Athens, by being automatically anti-Spartan, had been his political ally and greatly strengthened his position in Thebes, whereas Athens under the thirty, on the doorstep of Boeotia, had become a powerful political threat.

So that is the first connection between Ismenias and Anytus. Anytus was one of the two leaders of the Athenian democratic exiles (along with Thrasybulus) who took refuge in Thebes, and then, in a campaign launched from Thebes, fought in the battles at Phylë and the Piraeus to restore the democracy. Throughout that period he and Ismenias must have been close political allies and probably friends. Anytus' role in the restoration may be just as important to Plato's treatment of him in the *Meno* as his much more famous prosecution of Socrates. The two events are in any case closely related. For Plato it was as much the restored democracy with its 'vulgar', litigious demagogues and its uneducated public juries that brought about the death of Socrates as it was any particular prosecutor. Apart from his feeling that public juries are ignorant, chaotic and arbitrary, there is the fact that the prosecutors were acting, as they saw it, in defence of the democracy. They were apparently motivated by the idea that Socrates had influenced some of the most effective enemies of the *demos*, especially Critias, the hated leader of the tyrants. Anytus thus stands for the 'vulgar' democratic politician in general, and that is the way Plato explicitly introduces him in the passage we are examining.

Recall also that the restoration of the democracy, that is, the overthrow of the tyrants, must have been just as sensitive a subject for Plato as the death of Socrates, for purely personal reasons. Whatever exactly his view of them as rulers, he must have had mixed feelings about the death of his uncle Critias. Another uncle, Charmides, fought alongside Critias for the oligarchs against the democrats. Plato was fond enough of these uncles to portray them in several dialogues, including two that bear their names in what appears to be an affectionate tribute. Both died in the battle in the Piraeus. Anytus and Thrasybulus were responsible for their deaths; but so was Ismenias, since he had supported and funded the democrats' campaign.

Here is the second connection between Ismenias and Anytus: Ismenias, like Anytus' and his father Anthemion, was very wealthy. In addition to Plato's remark here, and another reference to his great wealth in the *Republic* (336a) Plutarch shows that Ismenias' wealth was proverbial.⁵ And given his political affiliations, and the fact that Plato evidently disliked him, it is probable that like Anytus he was a self-made man — another 'upstart'. It is a general rule of the ancient world that men are not criticised for *being* wealthy (by inheritance); only for *acquiring* great wealth in some un-aristocratic way. So although nothing much hangs on this point, it is in my view a safe bet that there is a social dimension to Plato's distaste for Ismenias.

This gives us at least a rough outline of why Plato's glancing criticism of Ismenias should occur in a text in which he is attacking a similar Athenian democratic politician. What we seem to have here is a politically and perhaps personally motivated jab at a contemporary. Such things are rare (but not unknown) in Plato. Ismenias, it is true, was probably dead by the time Plato wrote the *Meno* (he was arrested and killed by the Spartans in 383); so Plato is not insulting him to his face. But even so, his reference to him must be understood as being aimed at a contemporary — a man whose political career he lived through

⁵ *De Tranquillitate Animi*, 472d, *De Cupiditate Divitiarum* 527b.

and witnessed at close hand — and at the advocates of his political views. It must be understood as a product of the ongoing debate between the partisans of two basic political outlooks of the time: the oligarchic and the democratic. It thus fits naturally into this section of the *Meno*, which likewise is a text that arises straight out of that debate. The discussion between Socrates and Anytus, who is carefully introduced as a man favoured by the *plethos*, is presented as a critique of the democratic views that he expresses, especially the view that ethical competence is very widespread among ordinary Athenian citizens and does not require special training. Implicitly, it is an attack on the whole political system which to Plato's mind was responsible for raising men like Anytus to power, and hence for the death of Socrates, to which this section of the dialogue repeatedly alludes.

The 'Bribing' of Ismenias

Our next question is this: what does Plato mean when he says that Ismenias made his money by 'just recently taking Polycrates' bribe'? My translation shows that I take it for granted that this does indeed refer to a bribe. The phrase *chremata lambanein* literally means 'to take money', but so frequently means 'to take a bribe' that if it is supposed to mean something else here (without any help from the context) Plato would be guilty of extremely clumsy writing. The earlier claim that someone 'gave him [his money]' also implies bribery: *didomi* is the usual verb for offering a bribe. Some scholars have thought that this Polycrates may be Polycrates the sixth century tyrant of Samos and that "Polycrates' money" was a stock phrase meaning 'a vast fortune'. So Plato would be simply saying that 'someone gave Ismenias a vast fortune'. Alternatively, we might read the proverb but not rule out the reference to bribery: perhaps Ismenias took a bribe that equalled the wealth of Polycrates. But Plato does not say that Ismenias 'took a bribe that made him as rich as Polycrates'; he says that he 'took Polycrates' bribe',

and the latter cannot be twisted into the former. Either way, there is no evidence for any such proverb in any case, and the resulting quip would be far too obscure, since we would then have no idea who gave Ismenias this vast fortune, or how he came by it.

According to some accounts, Ismenias did take a large bribe from a man called Timocrates of Rhodes, who was acting for the Persian general Tithraustes. The money was a payment in advance for stirring up war against the Spartans, so as to force the recall of the army of Agesilaus, the Spartan king, from Asia. This is reported in some detail by Xenophon, and discussed by the author of the fragmentary *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia* and later mentioned several times by both Plutarch and Pausanias. It seems highly likely that this very famous bribe has at least something to do with whatever Plato is talking about in the *Meno*. Let's start with what Xenophon says:

Tithraustes ... sent Timocrates of Rhodes to Greece with gold to the value of fifty talents, and told him to try to get the leaders of the other Greek city-states to undertake to stir up war against the Spartans, in return for the gold. He went to Greece and gave the money, in Thebes, to Androclidas and Ismenias and Galaxidorus, and in Corinth to Timolaus and Polyanthes, and in Argos to Cylon and his followers. ... The men who received the money began slandering the Spartans in their various home cities. (*Hellenica*, 3.5)

The story is referred to, with some further details (indicating an independent source), by the Oxyrhynchus historian (henceforth OH), and by Plutarch (*Artaxerxes*, 20.4) and other late sources. It seems that it was a widespread view that this large payment to the anti-Spartan (i.e., democratic) parties throughout Greece was one of the principal causes of the wars against Sparta, which led eventually to end of Spartan power. Ismenias and Androclidas in particular are accused of whipping up the dispute between the Phocians and Locrians, which led

to the first conflict.

We should not accept these claims at face value. Xenophon is extremely pro-Spartan (perhaps the most pro-Spartan of all Athenian writers) and the bribery story suits a pro-Spartan view. The idea here is that the Greek city-states had no good reason to resent the new Spartan hegemony, and that they only went to war with Sparta when they were hoodwinked by mercenary, warmongering demagogues who had been bribed by dastardly foreigners. If the same events had been reported by Ismenias, or any other of the democratic leaders, the story would have been different. They might have argued that the Spartan influence over Greece after the defeat of democratic Athens was oppressive and reactionary. In Athens itself, after all, they had dismantled the democracy and set up a brutal oligarchic dictatorship that had set about banishing, robbing, and murdering its own citizens. They were imposing similar autocratic and reactionary regimes throughout Greece [quote the thebans in Xenophon]. Their influence needed to be checked, and if the Persians were willing to help, then so much the better. This wasn't a matter of *bribery*, but of an anti-Spartan *deal*, no different from the anti-Athenian deal the Spartans had made with the Persians towards the end of the war with Athens, just a few years earlier, or the countless other times Greek cities had accepted Persian aid against common opponents.

This more democratic version of the alleged 'bribing' of Ismenias is, I suspect, much closer to the truth. It is very likely that Theban democrats were politically motivated, not driven by crude avarice or love of war for its own sake, and that the Persians' hostility to Sparta (and Persian cash) was a bonus, not a bribe. A bribe is something that gives you a financial incentive to do something *that you otherwise have no reason to do*. Thus, the accusation of bribery carries the implication that the democratic partis had no good reason to oppose Sparta. But on the contrary, Greek democratic parties had abundant reason to oppose the Spartans. So we might guess that Xenophon was giving us a biased account, even if his were the

only testimony we had. But as it happens, the author of the fragmentary *Hellenica*, though himself clearly anti-democratic in overall outlook, nevertheless gives a different version of the story, and helps us to see the pro-Spartan spin in Xenophon's 'bribery' story:

Androclidas and Ismenias and their followers were very eager for Thebes to go to war against Sparta. They wanted to break Sparta's power, because they were afraid the Spartans would have them killed, through the pro-Spartan party in Thebes; and they thought could easily achieve their goal, since they now understood that the Persians would provide them with funds, as promised by the king's envoy [Timocrates], and that the Argives and Athenians would come into the war on their side.

Here OH states that Ismenias wanted to undermine the power of Sparta *before* he received any money from Timocrates, and that the Persian gold was not a bribe. It was money provided by an ally to help achieve a common goal — much as we might have predicted. In that respect this author is probably being more objective than Xenophon. Notice, though, that his only explanation of why Ismenias and his party wanted to topple Sparta was that they were afraid they might be murdered by pro-Spartan partisans in Thebes. He seems to be saying that they were only motivated by party rivalry. It only takes a moment's reflection to see that the explanation is circular. *Why* would pro-Spartan oligarchs in Thebes wish to eliminate Ismenias and his party other than on account of their political opposition to Sparta? The writer is saying 'Ismenias opposed the Spartans because he was scared he might be killed — *for opposing the Spartans*'. What the explanation needs is an account of why Ismenias was anti-Spartan in the first place; and surely what the author has left out is the fact that Ismenias had political reasons for opposing them. If he had at least some leanings towards democracy (as Plutarch says he did, and as his support of the Athenian democrats suggests) then he would have been a natural anti-Spartan, and from there he would have reason to fear the Laconizers

in Thebes, and the Spartans themselves.

Elsewhere, while maintaining his cynical attitude to the democrats, O.H. nevertheless concedes that the money from Persia had nothing to do with starting the war, and even takes trouble to contradict the accusation made by Xenophon (and others):

[Epicrates and Cephalus, the Athenian democrats] were at that time the keenest on pushing the city into war [against Sparta]; they took that stance not because they'd spoken with Timocrates and taken his gold, but long before that. Yet there are *some people* who say that it was Timocrates' money that was the cause of these [democrats] and the ones in Thebes and the other city-states forming their alliance [against Sparta]. They don't realise that *all these people had been hostile to Sparta for a long time*, and had been waiting for a chance to push their cities into war. The Argives and Thebans, for example, hated the Spartans because the Spartans backed their political rivals, and the Athenians because they wanted to drag Athens out of peace and inactivity back into warfare and mischief-making, so that they'd be able to make money from all the resulting public spending.

The author's account here of the Athenians' motives is simplistic and partisan: 'the Athenian demagogues were only interested in skimming off public funds'. But that only makes his contradiction of Xenophon the more credible. He makes it clear that the Persian gold did not *create* the democrats' desire to overthrow Spartan domination. Over that probably accurate piece of information he still lays on his usual anti-democratic bias: he again implies that the Theban democrats were motivated only by the fight against their local political opponents. The author is again trying to avoid stating the unacceptable idea that Ismenias might have opposed the Spartans for any sort of principled reason: because he opposed oligarchy, for instance. On the other hand, *given* his political views and his actions as a leader, Ismenias had good reason to fear the Spartans and his Theban political

opponents. At the invitation of those opponents a Spartan army entered Thebes in 384 in a surprise attack. They arrested and murdered Ismenias and purged the city of his main supporters.

As it happens, a more flattering portrayal of Ismenias' opposition to Sparta survives in Plutarch's life of Pelopidas. It provides us with something to set against the anti-democratic versions of Xenophon and Oxyrhynchus. Included here is what Plutarch has to say about the death of Ismenias and the Spartan seizure of Thebes, after which we will compare it with Xenophon's account of the same events.

After [the battle of Mantinea] the Spartans still treated the Thebans, nominally, as friends and allies; but in fact they were suspicious of the power and pride of Thebes, and they especially hated the party of Ismenias and Androclidas, which seemed to them to be freedom-loving and pro-democratic. It was at this point that Archias, Leontidas and Philippus, three rich oligarchs, and political extremists, urged Phoibidas the Spartan, who was then passing through Theban territory with an army, to seize the Cadmeia, drive out their political opponents, and set up an oligarchic constitution that would be subservient to Sparta. Phoibidas was persuaded: he attacked the Thebans when they were off-guard (during a religious festival) and took control of the acropolis. Ismenias was arrested and taken to Sparta and shortly afterwards killed. (*Pelopidas*, 5.1)

So at the invitation of Theban oligarchs the Spartans occupied Thebes and expelled or murdered Theban politicians who opposed their influence. (About three hundred fled to Athens; Ismenias' co-leader, Androclidas, was later assassinated in Athens by spies sent by Leontidas.) It seems Leontidas' party was not getting as much support in Thebes as he might have liked; so he resorted to the time-honoured method of killing his political opponents and cancelling the constitution. Xenophon tries very hard to excuse the Spartans. In his account, Leontides explains to Phoibidas the various benefits of a Spartan occupation of Thebes. Xenophon even invites the reader to infer that Thebans were generally

pleased at the Spartan take-over.⁶ (Plutarch, by contrast, says that Thebans saw the new government as a form of tyranny and enslavement.⁷) Leontides then denounces Ismenias as a ‘warmonger’ in the Theban council and triumphantly call for his arrest.⁸ Xenophon recognises that the Spartans in this case were in the wrong, but he is still determined to offer various excuses. He describes the general Phoibidas as keen on achieving glory, but rather dim-witted, and implies that he was manipulated by Leontidas. He also insists that Phoibidas was not acting on orders from Sparta.

But most striking of all is his bizarrely one-sided treatment of the judicial murder of Ismenias. It seems that Ismenias was subjected to a show trial, which he reports as follows:

When the Spartan [authorities] heard the news [of the seizure of Thebes], they decided to hold the acropolis, now that it had been taken, and to put Ismenias on trial. So then they sent three judges from Sparta⁹, and one from each of the allied city-states regardless of size. Once the court was in session, they accused Ismenias of collaborating with the Persians: they said that he had conspired with the Persian enemy against the greater good of Greece, and that he had taken a cut of the king’s bribe-money, and that he and Androclidas were the two men most to blame for all the present turmoil in Greece. Ismenias defended himself against all the charges; but he didn’t persuade anyone that he wasn’t an ambitious troublemaker. He was found guilty and put to death. (*Hellenica*, 5.2.35)

Here Xenophon scarcely makes a pretence of objectivity. In his description of the

⁶ *Hellenica* 5.2.27: He says that once Ismenias’ party is removed, large numbers of Thebans will gladly fight on the Spartan side against Olynthia.

⁷ *Pelopidas*, 5.3.21

⁸ *Hellenica* 5.2.30.

⁹ Xenophon thus implies that the trial took place in Thebes. Plutarch says that Ismenias was taken to Sparta, and executed there.

Spartan kangaroo court he cannot bring himself even to misrepresent any part of Ismenias' self-defence, even though the details of that defence are of great historical interest. Instead he replaces it with an insult, as if he were writing a pro-Spartan diatribe. He does not hide his pleasure at the death of Ismenias, and we can surely see here that he not only disagreed with him politically, but also disliked him personally. That is not to say that he had extra reasons for disliking him, beyond whatever it was that Ismenias did and said as an anti-Spartan political leader. Rather, it seems that Ismenias must have been one of those leaders who arouses very strong feelings in his opponents; and it is those strong feelings that probably lie behind Plato's insulting reference to him in the *Meno*. It would be too much of a coincidence for Xenophon and Plato, who were broadly similar in their political views and both great admirers of Sparta, to dislike the same political figure for different reasons. (To give a modern parallel: if you discovered that two southern politicians both disliked Abraham Lincoln in 1859, it would be a very safe bet that they disliked him for the same reasons.)

Notice that the passage from Plutarch that I just quoted gives us a different view of the causes of the war between Thebes and Sparta. Plutarch is saying that the Spartans were growing jealous of Thebes militarily, and also hated its growing democratic and egalitarian tendencies under Ismenias. That seems plausible, and it is very different from the account given by Xenophon, who says that the main cause of the war was Timocrates' bribing of Ismenias and others, which initiated a campaign of fictitious accusations against the Spartans. Ismenias and his co-leader Androclidas, according to him, were 'the two men most to blame for all the turmoil'. Clearly what we have here are the two opposing political views with their respective accounts of the war. The alleged bribing of the democratic leaders is at the centre of that politically motivated debate over how the war started. On one view, these vulgar, greedy and corrupt 'demagogues' started everything, and Ismenias was a 'power-hungry troublemaker'; on the other view, there never was any such bribe, and Ismenias was a 'freedom-loving friend of democracy,' and the

war was caused by Sparta's paranoid and heavy-handed suppression of political freedom in the other city-states.

Plutarch mentions the Persian gold, and the idea that it had a role in starting the war; but he presents that view as an allegation, without declaring its accuracy. He has several sources available to him, from both sides of the political spectrum, and as usual he is trying to strike a balance. As a result, his account alone gives us the democratic view. Another area in which we can see this is the matter of Ismenias' support for Athens, ten years earlier, during the rule of the thirty tyrants. Plutarch discusses the Theban democrats' role at some length, and says that it had infuriated Lysander, the main sponsor of the tyrants, and was a major reason for the subsequent war:

But [Lysander was angry with the Thebans] most of all because they had instigated the Athenians' overthrow of the thirty tyrants. The tyrants had originally been set in place by Lysander personally, and the Spartans had then tried to increase their power, and terrify their opponents, by decreeing that all the Athenian democratic exiles were "to be extradited from every city, and that anyone who obstructed any attempt to arrest them would be treated as the enemy". In response, the Thebans [i.e., Ismenias] had issued a counter-decree, a decree that stands comparison with the great deeds of Heracles and Dionysus: that "every home and every city in Boeotia is open to any Athenian who asks for aid; and every Theban must defend every Athenian against any attempt to extradite him, or face a fine of one talent; and if anyone wishes to convey arms through Theban territory to Athens against the Tyrants, every Theban shall turn a blind eye and a deaf ear." And it wasn't just that they issued this patriotic and humanitarian decree but then failed to do anything to follow up on their promises. Thrasybulus and his followers did in fact launch their campaign from Thebes; the Thebans [i.e., Ismenias] had given them money and arms, and had kept their plans secret, and let them use Thebes as a base of operations. Lysander held all this against the Thebans. (*Lysander* 27.2)

Ismenias' support for the exiles was clearly very substantial, and in this passage

Plutarch describes it, perhaps a little dramatically, as truly heroic. At any rate it seems that Ismenias very publicly defied the Spartans, and was famous — and no doubt extremely popular in Athens, and unpopular with oligarchs — for having done so. And Plutarch is saying here that this was the one of the main reasons that Lysander took Sparta into war against Thebes. We do not know who his sources are for this more democratic and much more favourable view of Ismenias. Xenophon, whose fascinating account of the rise and failure of the thirty tyrants (taking up most of his *Hellenica* book 2) not only fails to mention Ismenias by name, but almost manages to leave out the role of Thebes entirely. He reduces the Theban aid to the tiny detail that Thrasybulus launched his attack on Phylë from Thebes. It is clear that he wishes to avoid praising Ismenias, and to play down the fact that the Spartans were enraged by Theban support for the *demos*.

So here is what we can infer, roughly, from these various texts. Ismenias was apparently much hated by oligarchs. He was a combative and effective leader (probably of democratic or populist leanings), who led a party that campaigned against Spartan influence (and hence against oligarchy) in Boeotia. He was a friend of democratic Athens and played a crucial role in the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants. His energetic anti-Spartan policies so angered the Spartans that they invaded Thebes in time of peace and had him murdered on trumped-up charges of collaboration with Persia. His political career seems then to have been argued over by democrats and oligarchs, as part of their debate over the merits of their political views. He was a hero to democrats, but was demonised by oligarchs. His role in fomenting the wars between the Spartans and their democratic opponents seems to have been hotly disputed, in what was essentially a political controversy. The matter of Ismenias being ‘bribed’ by the Persians, in particular, seems to be a central part of this political wrangle.

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With all this in view, we may now return to the *Meno*. I suspect that there is a

rather simple explanation for the obscure reference to the ‘bribe of Polycrates’ in our text. Surely ‘Polycrates’ is just a manuscript corruption of ‘Timocrates’. That would seem to make good sense politically, textually, and paleographically. This is certainly not a new theory. Indeed, it was apparently taken for granted until quite recently.

Consider the political implications first. On this view, reading ‘Timocrates’, Plato’s insult is part of the anti-democratic line that we see in Xenophon, motivated by the same strong dislike for Ismenias in particular. His remark would be the same allegation, that Ismenias (along with other democrats) *only opposed the Spartans because he had taken a Persian bribe*, and it is, as we have seen, a highly subjective and politically charged description of the events. In other words, we would have excellent precedents for his accusation, and it is exactly what we would expect to find in an obviously cutting reference to a prominent pro-democratic politician by someone with Plato’s political views, and such the remark would exactly suit this context in the *Meno*, for the reasons explained above.

As we have seen, no such bribing had really taken place. The bribery story is oligarchic spin. Ismenias had been motivated by his (very well-attested) political opposition to Sparta and his (reasonably well-attested) support for democracy, and had received Persian support. That more democratic take on his anti-Spartan policies is the one that oligarchs like Xenophon did not accept and took great trouble to misrepresent (sometimes to the point of obvious distortion and suppression of the facts); and if we restore the text of the *Meno* as I propose, then we would have Plato denying it here in the same way, for the same reasons. That would give the remark a definite purpose and a much broader significance.

Textually this makes good sense too. The reference is brief and dense, and it seems quite obvious that Plato is referring to a well-known event. He expects his readers to know what he is talking about in spite of giving so few details. If he was referring to the ‘bribing’ of Ismenias by Timocrates, then he was alluding to what

was, at the time, a famous and much discussed political controversy, exactly as we would predict. On any other reading at all the obscurity of the reference is a serious problem.

Paleographically, the corruption from Timocrates to Polycrates is trivially easy. The two names are so similar that that fact alone, given the famous bribing of Ismenias by Timocrates, makes another bribe by some Polycrates or other seem rather suspicious. Wouldn't it be a bizarre coincidence that Ismenias should have been famously bribed twice, by two men with *nearly the same name*, without anyone (other than Plato) ever mentioning the other 'famous' bribe? Names in Greek manuscripts can be corrupted with great ease when there is nothing in the context to help the scribe. If a name is mentioned only once in a text (as here), and if the person named is an obscure figure in later centuries (like Timocrates), and if the name is close to some other, much more famous name (like Polycrates), then the corruption is very simple. There are thousands of good precedents for a slight corruption of a name under these conditions. Timocrates himself is called Timocrates by Xenophon and the author the *Hellenica*, but the manuscripts of Plutarch call him *Hermocrates*.

The Bluck-Morrison Theory

R. S. Bluck, closely following J. S. Morrison, proposes that Plato is in fact referring to an earlier bribing of Ismenias by Polycrates the speechwriter and author of the *Accusation of Socrates* (which does not survive). There is no other reference to a bribing of Ismenias by any Polycrates, but on the strength of Plato's phrase they infer that a bribing by some Polycrates or other must have taken place, and pick that Polycrates as the most likely candidate. The theory is doubly speculative: this Polycrates may be responsible (but there is no other evidence that he is) for an event that may have taken place (but there is no other evidence that it did).

Morrison thinks that Plato could not be referring to the bribery by Timocrates, because it took place in 395, and the *Meno* is clearly set around 402, and '[i]t is hardly possible that anyone could credit Plato with such insensitivity to anachronism as to allow the mention of an event which took place after all the participants were dead'. But the anachronism is simply not a problem. Plato's texts contain many such anachronisms. There is an impressive collection of them in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus, who lists them as a way of his illustrating his claim that philosophers have no sense of history.¹⁰ Bluck and Morrison have argued in the wrong direction. They are certain, for no good reason, that the *Meno* could not contain an anachronism, and infer that Plato is not referring to the famous 'bribing' of 395. It makes much more sense to assume that Plato *is* referring to that famous event and infer that the *Meno* contains a minor anachronism, just like the several other anachronisms in other dialogues.

Even if we Plato were referring to an earlier event, the theory Morrison proposes is extremely implausible. The idea is that the Athenian Polycrates (a man who held no political office, and had no involvement in politics at all, that we know of) may have bribed Ismenias some time around 404. The purpose of the bribe was to get Ismenias to support the Athenian democrats at some later date, for reasons that had not yet emerged. Ismenias, on this theory, had no *political* interest in helping the democrats when the tyrants drove them out, and would only have supported them if he had been paid to do so. That is to say, Morrison

¹⁰ One that strikes him as especially strange is the reference by Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, to 'Pericles, who died just recently', even though other details in the *Gorgias* show that it must be set at least twenty years after the death of Pericles. Another is the reference in the *Protagoras* to 'the play that Pherecrates put on at the Lenaia just last year', which refers to a play that was put on in 421. Athenaeus thinks this is absurd, given that in 420 some of the people present at the dialogue could not possibly have been in Athens, on account of the Peloponnesian war. (In fact it is the reference to the play that is out of place; the dialogue has a clear pre-war setting.) *Pace* Morrison, these are good parallels for a seven-year anachronism in the *Meno*. The fact that Socrates says the bribing occurred 'just recently' is of no importance. The two other anachronisms I just mentioned are likewise introduced with spurious chronological exactness. This is just a dramatist's trick.

wishes to infer merely from the fact that Ismenias did in fact support the exiles that he *must* have taken a bribe sometime beforehand. But there is no reason to think that Ismenias needed to be bribed, and good reasons for thinking that he did not. Plutarch, as we have seen, provides strong evidence that Ismenias *wanted* to help the Athenian democrats. He compares Ismenias' actions to the heroic philanthropy of Heracles and Dionysus. Even the anti-democratic author of the *Hellenica* provides further good evidence that Ismenias had political reasons for supporting the exiles. The text is fragmentary at the crucial point. But it seems clear that Oxyrhynchus is alleging that Ismenias did not really "care about" the Athenian democrats (whatever exactly that means) but gave his support to the exiles because he judged that his own party would somehow gain politically from doing so. No plausible reconstruction is compatible with Morrison's bribery allegation. It seems most likely, in the light of several other claims in the H.O., that Oxyrhynchus alleged that Ismenias' support for the exiles was part of his anti-Spartan policies. In particular, he elsewhere claims (1) that Ismenias' party consistently aimed to foment a general anti-Spartan war, and (2) that the democrats in Athens were much more likely to take part in a war. Oxyrhynchus elsewhere shows himself to be cynical in treatment of democrats. Here too, by comparison with Plutarch, he seems rather cynical: 'Ismenias enthusiastically helped the democratic exiles. Some Thebans said this was because he had turned pro-Athenian; but in fact it was just because he wanted [to bring down the Spartans].' Note that he is also informing us that some people, even in Thebes itself, were saying that Ismenias *was* pro-Athenian. Their reported testimony should also count. So all in all, this text gives excellent reasons to think that no bribery took place.

The only other evidence that Bluck and Morrison give for the bribing by Polycrates is, ironically, the fact that Ismenias took the bribe from Timocrates. That makes it likely that he took *another* bribe. Again, this seems harsh. As we have seen from our closer examination of the texts, even that other bribe was only a bribe

from the oligarchic or Spartan point of view. And now Ismenias stands accused of taking a second bribe on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence — a single obscure phrase that was very probably a reference to the other, one and only, ‘bribe’. On that basis, we should accuse Ismenias of accepting *three* bribes. Recall that the manuscripts of Plutarch mention a bribing of Ismenias by *Hermocrates*. Perhaps that is no scribal error. Perhaps Ismenias took bribes from Timocrates, Polycrates, and from someone called Hermocrates. Perhaps he had fondness for taking bribes from men whose names ended in *-crates*.

Leave aside all these problems. There is still the fact that nothing recommends Polycrates the speechwriter as the briber of Ismenias except the fact that he has the right name. That in itself makes him no more likely to be the agent of the (phantom) bribing than any other man of the same name, and in other respects he seems unsuitable. He was poor, having suffered a ‘change of circumstances’, according to Isocrates, and made a modest living teaching philosophy in Cyprus. That makes it hugely unlikely that he was able to bribe one of Greece’s most famous political leaders with a sum so vast that it made him a wealthy man. But for Morrison this wraps up his case: Polycrates was poor *because he had given all his money to Ismenias*. This seems an absurd misuse of the available evidence.

The older view, that ‘Polycrates’ is just a corruption for ‘Timocrates’ avoids wilder speculations and sticks to what really is plausible, rather than merely possible. The argument can be summarised as follows. Plato is probably referring to a well-known event. The tone of the remark suggests that he is accusing Ismenias of something. He is also almost certainly referring to a bribe, and apparently the ‘money of Polycrates’. We know that Ismenias was famously alleged to have taken the ‘money of *Timocrates*’. That accusation was politically motivated. It was more an insinuation than a statement of fact, and closely connected with the anti-democratic view of events. It is therefore well suited to this context, given both the implication of insult and Plato’s well-known anti-democratic tendencies,

which he makes plain in this passage, and in this whole section of the dialogue. The textual corruption that the theory requires is simple, and the resulting anachronism unexceptional. Finally, there is no other evidence at all of any other bribing of Ismenias, either by any Polycrates or by any anyone else at all, and it would be a fantastic coincidence that a second, unmentioned bribing should have occurred at nearly the same time, involving a man with a very similar name.

I said earlier that the remark feels dramatically awkward. We can now see more easily just how clumsy it is. Notice what it would mean for Socrates to make an accusation of this kind in 402, *right after the restoration of the democracy*, which Ismenias helped to make possible. At this time, Ismenias must have been very popular with ordinary Athenians. In which case, for Socrates to snipe at him like this, and what's more in front of Anytus, the leader of the democratic exiles and presumably a close associate of Ismenias, amounts to bizarre implication that he resented the overthrow of the tyrants. This is another reason for seeing that the worries about anachronism are irrelevant. The criticism of Ismenias is a glaring anachronism anyway, entirely regardless of the identity of Polycrates. It is a remark that makes sense in 380, when people were arguing over the merits and achievements of Ismenias after his execution by the Spartans, but which is totally out of place in Athens in 402.