

Resolving Hermotimus' Paradox: Reading Lucian's *Hermotimus* in Light of Plato's *Republic*

Matthew Sharpe

"Meeting such a one, call him a good man, a true and an honest [man]; nay, call him philosopher, if you will; to my mind, the name is his or no one's..." (Lucian, *Hermotimus*, §75)

This paper argues that Lucian's *Hermotimus* is less a critical attack on philosophy, than a defence of a critical mode of philosophising awake to how readily this pursuit can devolve into a hybridic sectarianisms, in which pupils identify uncritically with instructors who do not match their fine words with noble deeds. In part i, we examine the metaphilosophical framing of the *Hermotimus*'s exchange between the eponymous hero, aged about 60 (§48) and Lucian's favored interlocutor, Lycinus. We show that Lucian accepts that philosophy is intended to be an elevated way of life cultivating wisdom and virtue. In part ii., we address the central elenchus and the action of the *Hermotimus*, the patient work by Lycinus to undermine Hermotimus' dogmatic self-conceit, by refuting the different solutions he offers to the paradox involved in his having chosen a particular philosophical orientation, Stoicism, as a novice without philosophical training. Part iii. excavates the positive vision of philosophy that the action of the dialogue shows, highlighting the five key places in *Hermotimus* wherein Lycinus offers us entirely unironic visions of what philosophy at it best could be, in contrast to what it has become in Hermotimus or his teachers: or, as Lycinus heralds it, a kind of Ariadne's thread out of the maze of Hermotimus' paradox (§68).

We know that to philosophize, etymologically, is to seek wisdom, as a lover seeks their beloved. Socrates is depicted in the Platonic *Symposium* as a near-daemonic figure, like *erôs* himself, born of *penia*, "deficiency" or even "poverty", as well as *poros*, plenty (Plato, *Symp.* 203b-204a). This paper argues that Lucian of Samosata, in his dialogue *Hermotimus*¹, presents a searching, too-often overlooked examination of the challenges and risks associated with this zetetic, inquiring calling of philosophy. These challenges and risks include what might be called ironically today the 'startup problem': namely, how does anyone who is not yet wise or instructed choose a philosophical orientation, at the very start (§§25-29)? If she were already wise, she would have no need to choose or do any philosophy. But, if she is as yet unwise, as

¹ Lucian, *Hermotimus*, translation by K. Kilburn, in *Lucian* vol. VI (London: Harvard University Press, 1959). In what follows we will use references to the standardized sections. In some cases, translations have been amended by the author.

we all begin by being, how can she know which philosophical orientation shows the path to wisdom? With a nod to Plato's *Meno* 80d-e, this 'startup problem' might also be called 'Hermostimus' paradox'.

The *Hermostimus*, and its dialogical addressing of this paradox, arguably deserves a good deal more scholarly consideration than it has received. Lucian has often been treated as a representative of the Second Sophistic, a "sophist's sophist" who wished to subordinate philosophy to rhetoric.² He has been charged with presenting an inconsistent understanding of philosophy and philosophers, or else as being a "nihilistic" sceptic or Cynic wholly hostile to philosophy and its charms.³ In English-language scholarship, several monographs on Lucian's *oeuvre* give *Hermostimus* some consideration, but focus upon its literary and historical values, treating Lucian as a literary artist.⁴ There are several critical articles on the text, which likewise give *Hermostimus* short shrift *qua* philosophy, as against a piece of literature whose metaphors merit more attention than its arguments.⁵ In a piece in *L'antiquité classique* on "Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy", we are told that, on top of being "tedious":

In Lucian's longest dialogue, the *Hermostimus*, his mouthpiece Lycinus evinces little interest in the dogmas of the schools, which he dismisses with the comprehensive sophistry that one cannot judge of any before acquiring a thorough mastery of all (see esp. §§25-70).⁶

² Bryan Reardon, *Courants littéraires grecs des IIe et IIIe siècles après J.-C.* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1971), 39; Emily Jane Putnam, "Lucian the Sophist", *Classical Philology* 4, no. 2 (1909): 162-177; Matthew Keil, "Rhetorical and Philosophical *Paideia* in Lucian", *J. Humanities (Zomba)* 26 (2018), esp. 1-2, 8-13; Graham Anderson, "Lucian: A Sophist's Sophist", *YCIS* 27 (1982): 61-99; Alice Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian* (Diss. Fordham. New York, 1990): 75, 149; Karin Schlapbach, "The *logoi* of Philosophers in Lucian of Samosata", *Classical Antiquity* 29, no. 2 (October 2010): 251-252.

³ Jennifer Hall, *Lucian's Satire* (New York: Arno Press, 1981), 151-93; R. Bracht Branham, *Unruly Eloquence: Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 13, 24-25, 52, 55; cf. Jonas Grethlein, "Lucian and the Spell of Philosophy", in *The Ancient Rhetoric of Deception: the Ethics of Enchantment from Gorgias to Heliodorus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 166-198.

⁴ See for example Jacques Bompaigne, *Lucien écrivain, imitation et création* (Paris, E. de Boccard, 1958); Hall, *Lucian's Satire*; and Richard Hunter, *Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature: The Silent Stream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Branham, *Unruly Eloquence*, esp. "The Rhetoric of Laughter".

⁵ Cf. Mark Edwards, "Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy: The *Hermostimus*", *L'antiquité classique* 62 (1993): 195-202; cf. Grethlein, "Lucian and the Spell of Philosophy", 189-195.

⁶ Edwards, "Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy", 195. George Brague's "The Market for Philosophers: An Interpretation of Lucian's Satire on Philosophy", *The Independent Review* 9, no. 2 (2004): 227-251, likewise stands against taking Lucian's text to be philosophically serious. Brague applies behavioral economics to Lucian's text. This positions *Hermostimus* as a reflection upon philosophy's status in the later ancient world as "a risky investment in human capital with high information costs. In making such investments, consumers irrationally take excessive risk" (Brague 2004, 229). The question which Brague prejudices is whether Lucian thinks that some forms of philosophy may involve more than such "investments" in "human capital" but attempts to seek wisdom.

Our contention here is that such approaches to Lucian's *Hermotimus* miss the reverence for philosophy in this Lucianic text, so different in form from the other satires in which philosophers are lampooned.⁷ Lucian's *Hermotimus*, despite its first appearances of being a merely skeptical, even sophisticated discrediting of philosophy⁸, is better read as a protreptic defense of the endeavor.⁹ To be sure, the central sections of the dialogue's elenchus stage Lycinus' successive refutations of Hermotimus' proposed justifications for his opting for Stoicism: hence, it is easy to read the dialogue as wholly a skeptical, even anti-philosophical performance. However, just as in several ancient protreptic texts, led by Cicero's *Hortensius*, present their exhortations to philosophy exactly in response to staged "apotreptic" arguments against it¹⁰, we should not miss the no less than *five* key moments within the *Hermotimus* proffer a post-Socratic vision of philosophy as a form of zetetic inquiry which both resolves Hermotimus' paradox, and has enduring worth (§24, §§29-30, §§64-65, §§68-69, §75). In line with Lucian's self-defenses in *The Fisherman* (§§32-37) and *The Double Indictment* (§§7-8, 32-33), that is, we read the *Hermotimus* as aiming to "expose and distinguish" false from true forms of philosophizing, and to both stage and affirm the possibility of the latter, rather than collapsing philosophy into sophistry.¹¹

In support of this contention, the paper will highlight how Lucian, from start to finish, pointedly positions the *Hermotimus* within the lineage of Plato's dialogues¹²: and not simply the *Phaedrus*, as has often been noted¹³, but preeminently the famous pedagogical books of the *Republic*, VI and VII. The *Hermotimus*' distinguishing of true from false forms of philosophizing demonstrably recurs to the central Platonic distinction from *Republic* VI between mathematical *dianoia*, which cannot critically assess its own hypotheses, and

⁷ Cf. Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian*, 55-57; cf. Keil, "Rhetorical and Philosophical", 12.

⁸ Edwards, "Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy", 195; cf. Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian*, 56-57.

⁹ Cf. the more positive assessments of Lucian's relationship to philosophy at Maurice Croiset, *Essai sur la vie et les oeuvres de Lucian* (Paris: Librairie Hachet & Co., 1882), 8-12; Branham, *Unruly Eloquence*, 33, 36-37, 112; Keil, "Rhetorical and Philosophical", 12; and with particular reference to Jacques Derrida's conception of philosophy, R.G.T. Silva, "Luciano leitor de Derrida", *Clássica* 35, no. 1 (2022): 1-16.

¹⁰ Douglas S. Hutchinson & Monte Ransome Johnstone, "Protreptic and Apotreptic: Aristotle's Dialogue *Protrepticus*", in O. Alieva et al eds., *When Wisdom Calls: Philosophical Protreptic in Antiquity* (Brussels: Brepols, 2018): 113-118.

¹¹ Cf. Graham Anderson, *Lucian: Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 68-84.

¹² Cf. for Lucian's frequent use of Platonic intertexts and literary practices (notably, personae), Karen Mheallaigh, "'Plato Alone Was Not There ...': Platonic Presences in Lucian", *Hermathena* 179 (2005): 89-103.

¹³ Hunter, *Silent Stream*, 1-3.

philosophical dialectic, which sets out to do just this (*Rep.* 509c-511e).¹⁴ Students like Hermotimus, who accept the hypotheses presented them by the masters of dogmatic schools on trust, are like the mathematicians of the central books of the *Republic* (§§74-75; Plato, *Rep.* 526c-527c). Philosophy proper, as instantiated by Lycinus in the *Hermotimus*, is by contrast characterized by the dialectical ability to call such assumptions critically and reflectively into question, striving cautiously towards a reasoned, more comprehensive vision considering all available evidences.

To make these arguments, the paper involves three parts. In part i, we examine the metaphilosophical framing of the *Hermotimus*'s exchange between the eponymous hero, aged about 60 (§48) and Lucian's favored interlocutor, Lycinus. We show that Lucian accepts that philosophy is intended to be an elevated way of life cultivating wisdom and virtue, at the same time as he is concerned at how readily this pursuit can devolve into a hybristic, sectarian endeavor, in which pupils identify uncritically with instructors who do not match their words with their deeds. In part ii., we address the central elenchus and the action of the *Hermotimus*, the patient work by Lycinus to undermine Hermotimus' dogmatic self-conceit, by refuting the different solutions he offers to the paradox involved in his having chosen a particular philosophical orientation, Stoicism, as a novice without philosophical training. Part iii. excavates the positive vision of philosophy that the action of the dialogue shows, highlighting the five key places in *Hermotimus* wherein Lycinus offers us entirely unironic visions of what philosophy at it best could be, in contrast to what it has become in Hermotimus or his teachers: or, as Lycinus heralds it, a kind of Ariadne's thread out of the maze of Hermotimus' paradox (§68).

i. *Metaphilosophical beginnings: the frame and the goal*

When we first meet him, Hermotimus is a member of the Stoic school, a *prokopton* making his way over the course of some decades, with significant monetary cost (§§1-2; cf. 9-10), towards wisdom as conceived on the Porch. As commentators led by Richard Hunter have noted¹⁵, Hermotimus is initially framed for us by Lycinus, his interlocutor (and, seemingly here,

¹⁴ Cf. William H. F. Altman, *Plato the Teacher: The Crisis of the Republic* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012) & iii. below.

¹⁵ Hunter, *Silent Stream*, 1-3.

Lucian's avatar¹⁶) in a close verbal parallel to the opening depiction of Phaedrus in Plato's dialogue bearing that youth's name:

To judge from your book, Hermotimus, and the speed of your walk, you seem to be hurrying to your teacher. You were certainly thinking something over as you went along; you were twitching your lips and muttering quietly, waving your hand this way and that as though you were arranging a speech to yourself, composing one of your crooked problems or thinking out some sophistical question; even when you are walking along you must not take it easy, but be always busy with some serious matter which is likely to help your studies ... (§1)

But whereas Phaedrus in the Platonic text is coming from his teacher, Hermotimus is on his way to class. Whereas Phaedrus has left the city in search of peace, which could be read as metaphorical for philosophy's questioning distance from established conventions, Hermotimus is clearly rushing around, probably in town. This intertextual recourse to Plato thus not only announces a Platonic intellectual lineage for reading the dialogue, but sets up its central preoccupation:

The dialogue's broader argument that problematic students such as Hermotimus are the result of the institutionalization of philosophy, which no longer allows for the kind of serious interrogation of societal assumptions and conventions that Socrates once demanded, and that Plato's dialogues dramatized ...¹⁷

Nevertheless, Hermotimus is aiming as high as any student in earlier or later generations of philosophers has aimed. If *ars longis, vita brevis* (*brachês men ô bios, makrê de ê technê*) is a proverbial thought applied to medicine, he tells us, philosophy is a far more difficult and elevated craft again (§1).¹⁸ Hermotimus has taken at least this much from his Stoic teacher of twenty years: the Socratic notion of philosophy as a way of life¹⁹; one in which, presumably, philosophers would match elevated words to elevated actions, and might be

¹⁶ I will not insist on this, noting that Lucian's relationship to his characters is a subject of scholarly dispute. Lucian uses his own name only three times (*The Passing of Peregrinus*, *Alexander the False Prophet* and *Nigrinus*) and flags his authorship in the *True History*, when the narrator inscribes 'Loukianos' on a plaque in Hades (2.28). See Karen N. Mheallaigh, "'Plato alone ...'".

¹⁷ Anna Peterson, "Pushing Forty: The Platonic Significance of References to Age in Lucian's *Double Indictment* and *Hermotimus*." *The Classical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2018), [online first doi:10.1017/S0009838818000587]: 12. See Hunter, *Silent Stream*, 1-3.

¹⁸ Noting the standard therapeutic metaphor for philosophy in antiquity, see Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire* (), 1994.

¹⁹ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Ilsetraut Hadot, *Sénèque: direction spirituelle et pratique de la philosophie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2014); John Sellars, "What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?", *Parrhesia* 28 (2017): 40-56; Grimm & Cohoe, "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life? Why Philosophy as a Way of Life?" *European Journal of Philosophy* (2020): 1-16; Matthew Sharpe & Michael Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: History, Dimensions, Directions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Branham, *Unruly Eloquence*, 112; Keil, "Rhetorical and Philosophical", 12.

judged on this basis.²⁰ Indeed, just as in the Stoic teaching, philosophy is a way of life which promises to deliver its votary the very highest things:

the stake is so tremendous, too—whether to perish miserably with the vulgar herd (*tô pollô tôn idiotôn surphetô*), or be counted among philosophers and reach Happiness... I am only just beginning to get an inkling of the right way. Very far off dwells Virtue, as Hesiod says, and long (*makros*) and steep (*orthios*) and rough (*trêchus*) is the way thither, and travelers must bedew it with sweat. (§2-3)

Along with Hesiod, we hence immediately encounter a second important Platonic intertext in *Hermostimus* §2, then again at §3²¹, which we want to argue is indeed determinative for fully understanding the text. This is the rough ascent (*tracheias tês anabaseôs*) of Plato's *Republic VII* (515e), that attends the philosopher's climb towards true Ideas (cf. *Thea.* 175b-c).²²

Nevertheless, with Hermostimus' "perishing" with "the vulgar herd", the opening sections of *Hermostimus* introduce a scornful tone towards non-philosophers which, not always absent in Plato, is foregrounded in Lucian's text. This suggests a second Lucianic concern of the dialogue: the propensity of certain ways of philosophizing to fill all but their most self-aware votaries with a pride, even a false sense of their own nigh divinity, which can verge into a blithe, anti-demotic scorn.²³ It is Lycinus who introduces the theme, which looms large of course in Lucian's other texts, comparing Hermostimus' master with Zeus himself:

Well, your master can give you that; from his station on the summit, like Zeus in Homer with his golden cord, he can let you down his discourse, and therewith haul and heave you up to himself and to the Virtue which he has himself attained this long time ... (§3)

Many ancient texts of course contain passages which suggest the apotheosis of the philosopher, and his eventual state as akin to that of living in the blessed isles (Plato, *Rep.* 540b-c; Aristotle, *NE X*, 7). Yet Lycinus's mock-naïve irony in his comparison of his teacher

²⁰ Marcel Caster, *Lucien et la pensée religieuse de son temps* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1938), 373-376.

²¹ Hermostimus laments he is still in the foothills, in his philosophical ascent. "It is slippery and rough (*tracheia*), and it needs a hand to help." One can almost see the representations of Plato's cave (esp. 515e).

²² One should also mention in this connection the significance of Hermostimus' "almost forty" years (§48): this would be the age that Plato specifies his beginning of philosophy in the Seventh Letter (Peterson, "Pushing Forty", 3) and which Lucian himself specifies as the age he began to learn philosophy in *The Double Indictment* (§29; cf. Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian*, 73-74; Anderson, *Lucian: Theme and Variations*, 81; Hall, *Lucian's Satire*, 35-36). It would also place Hermostimus, in the educational scheme of the *Republic*, at that age when he should have been back down in the city, toiling for the public good, not still scurrying to philosophy classes with his head buried in his books (cf. *Rep.* 537a-539e).

²³ Cf. Branham, *Unruly Eloquence*, 42.

with Zeus is lost on the star-struck Hermotimus. In reply, the latter can only think “bid up” Lycinus’ divine parallel for philosophy, placing its goal, theoretical wisdom, far above even the political conquests of Alexander the Great: “there is no resemblance, Lycinus; this is not a thing, as you conceive it, to be won and captured in a short time, though myriad Alexanders were to assault it. Many would climb it, if it could [be so conquered].” (§5) It is this great contemplative elevation that Hermotimus evidently hopes to achieve that explains his fidelity to his master, who has frankly advised him that even two Olympiads is far too short a time to achieve such a goal (§4). Once attained, a heroic, godlike happiness will be delivered to the aspirant, as Hermotimus explains with passion:

Wisdom, courage, true beauty, justice, full and firm knowledge of all things as they are; but wealth and glory and pleasure and all bodily things—these a man strips off and abandons before he mounts up, like Heracles burning on Mount Oeta before deification; he too cast off whatever of the human he had from his mother, and soared up to the Gods with his divine part pure and unalloyed, sifted by the fire. Even so those I speak of are purged by the philosophic fire of all that deluded men count admirable, and reaching the summit have Happiness with never a thought of wealth and glory and pleasure—except to smile at any who count them more than phantoms. (§7)

From such a height, the philosopher can “look down ... upon the ants which are the rest of mankind” (§5). This is a Lucianic recitation of the ancient philosophical theme of the view from above which French scholar Pierre Hadot has highlighted, and which of course is central to the *Icaromenippus*.²⁴ Lycinus, however, is clearly concerned in the *Hermotimus* that this elevation may be too much for mortals to hope for.²⁵ As he comments, with a concern which is again lost on his interlocutor: “[d]ear me, what tiny things you make us out—not so big as the Pygmies even, but positively groveling on the face of the earth” (§5).²⁶ In another clear echo of the cave *eikon* in Plato’s *Republic*, Lycinus next asks how exactly such a heroic, divine philosopher could ever be expected to engage with his miserable fellows, or to go back down (*katabainô*) into the worldly cave he has transcended, as Socrates advises that his philosopher-guardians must (Plato, *Rep.* 519c-520e, 539e; Lucian, *Herm.* §8). But Hermotimus’ Stoic syllabus clearly has not included the Platonic *Politeia*. For he has not a moment’s doubt:

²⁴ Cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 238-250; Anderson, *Lucian, Theme and Variation*, 16.

²⁵ Cf. Grethlein, “Lucian and the Spell”, 193.

²⁶ Further on, at §13, the concern is underscored, when Lycinus expresses his wish to become Stoic like Hermotimus and receives the impassioned reply that: “If only you would, Lycinus! You will soon find out how much you are superior to the rest of men. I do assure you; you will think them all children, you will be so much wiser ...”

Lycinus. By Heracles²⁷ (and his death on Oeta), you tell a brave and manly tale about them [philosophers]. But there is one thing I should like to know: are they allowed to come down (*katerchontai*) from their elevation sometimes, and have a taste of what they left behind them? Or when they have once got up, must they stay there, conversing with Virtue, and smiling at wealth and glory and pleasure?

Hermotimus. The latter, assuredly; more than that, a man once admitted of Virtue's company will never be subject to wrath or fear or desire anymore; no, nor can he feel pain, nor any such sensation. (§8)

However, from near the beginning, Lucian goes out of his way to indicate more and more clearly the hilarious gap that exists between this exciting philosophical ideal, and the actual conduct of Hermotimus' own heroized *didaskalos* or teacher.²⁸ The central discussion of Hermotimus' paradox, to which we will come momentarily, is in fact framed on both sides by portraits of Hermotimus' teacher behaving in all-too-human ways, despite his god-like discourse (§§9-10).²⁹ It seems that Hermotimus' teacher lacks self-control, when it comes to both avarice and anger management. At §§9-10, we learn of him acting up when a student has not paid his fees. Lycinus alerts him to the problem here. "Not so fast," he interjects to Hermotimus' defense of his master, referring to the earlier Heracleian parallel, "does it matter to him [if the students do not pay up], when he is now already purified by philosophy, and no longer needs what he left behind on Oeta?" (§10)

To the teacher's irascibility and greed, intemperance and an eristic desire for argumentative glory must be added (cf. *Dial.* §20).³⁰ We next hear from Lycinus of a drunken brawl (a favorite Lucianic vignette of philosophers (cf. Lucian, *Symp.* §§43-47)) with an Aristotelian about "the old Peripatetic objections to the Porch":

His long vocal exertions (for it was midnight before they broke up) gave him a bad headache, with violent perspiration. I fancy he had also drunk a little too much, toasts being the order of the day, and eaten more than an old man should... [His rival, Euthydemus] was pretentious, insisted on proving his point, would not give in, and proved a hard nut to crack; so your excellent professor, who had a goblet as big as Nestor's in his hand, brought this down on him as he lay within easy reach, and the victory was his. (§12)³¹

²⁷ Lucian highlights his point by making the student whom Hermotimus' teacher thrashes for not paying his bills on time come from "Heraclea".

²⁸ Cf. Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian*, 56-57.

²⁹ It is above all the *ad hominem* depictions of his teacher's seemingly-very-apparent vices that finally overthrow Hermotimus and allow Lycinus to direct him to "reconcile yourself now to living like an ordinary man" (§86). See below.

³⁰ Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, "Philosophers and *Philotimia* in Lucian's Perspective", in G. Roskam, M. De Pourcq & L. Van der Stockdt eds., *The Lash of Ambition: Plutarch, Imperial Greek Literature and the Dynamics of Philotimia* (Louvain: Éditions Peeters/Société des études classiques 2012), 153-68.

³¹ Nesselrath, "Philosophers and *Philotimia* in Lucian's Perspective", 158-159.

On the other side of Lucian's ring construction in the *Hermotimus*, at the end of the dialogue (§§79-82), a further pedagogical episode of anger at a student for not paying his tuition fees is presented. This time, we also learn that this student's morals have not been improved by his extensive philosophical education: for in addition to not paying his fees, "he carried off my neighbor's Echebrates' daughter, and raped her" (cf. Lucian, *Symp.* 46-47)³² as well as, echoing Aristophanes' *Clouds*, that he "thrashed his own mother" when she caught him stealing (§81)! For Lycinus, as for Lucian his creator elsewhere, there seems to be a basic mismatch between the ethical goal philosophy promises, and the means that it provides to achieve it, certainly when it comes to the imperial-era Stoics. We stress therefore that Lucian's Stoicism is not that of Musonius, Epictetus, or his contemporary, the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius. It is the philosophy of the Imperial school, wherein one learns to resolve frivolous paradoxes, "how to find and compose your wretched texts and syllogisms and problems" (§79, cf. *Lives*, §§22-23; §§81-82).³³ Such means cannot inculcate virtue, as Hermotimus' teacher and his student prove in the flesh, and as we can also find acknowledged in both Seneca and Epictetus (Seneca, *Letters* 1.1-4, 45.8, 48.9, 48.12, 88.2, 88.7, 108.24-28; Epictetus, *Disc.* I.4.4-14; III.21).³⁴

Certainly, readers can find no extensive dogmatic expositions of any philosophical system in Lucian's *Hermotimus*.³⁵ Yet, we can hardly infer from this premise that Lucian cared or knew nothing of the systematic teachings of the different schools of his day. Instead, his concern in this dialogue, as the repeated intertextual references to the Platonic *Republic* make clear, is with questions of pedagogy, as against dogmatics: of how one can teach, and learn, to be a true philosopher, as against a *philologos* or acolyte of some master whose morals would remain untouched, or even be worsened by, one's false 'philosophy'. The problem with presupposing that to be a philosopher is to know a complex theoretical system, and then to identify with this system or one's master, is the problem of the Hermotimus paradox, towards which we now must turn in due detail.

³² One might suppose an intended, pointed reference here to Plato's *Phaedo*, wherein Echebrates is the Pythagorean philosopher who asks the eponymous Phaedo to recount the last hours and death of Socrates. Cf. Mheallaigh, "Plato alone ...", 95-96.

³³ Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian*, 127-130.

³⁴ Cf. Robert Wagoner, "Seneca on Moral Theory and Moral Improvement". *Classical Philology* 109, no. 3 (2014): 241-26; Matthew Sharpe, "How it's not the Chrysippus you Read: On Cooper, Hadot, Epictetus, and Stoicism as a Way of Life", *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 3 (2014): 367-392.

³⁵ Edwards, "Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy", 195.

ii. *The elenchus and the action of the dialogue: the humbling of Hermotimus' self-conceit*

We are now ready to turn directly to the *Hermotimus'* core paradox, and the failed attempts of the eponymous, hapless hero of Lucian's dialogue to resolve it. To cite Lycinus' clear statement of the issues:

Lycinus. Then, as you love me, answer this: when you first went in pursuit of philosophy, you found many gates wide open; what induced you to pass the others by, and go in at the Stoic gate? Why did you assume that that was the only true one, which would set you on the straight road to Virtue, while the rest all opened on blind alleys? What was the test you applied then? ... this must be my first lesson from you—how one can decide out of hand which is the best and the true philosophy to be taken, leaving aside the others (§15-16).

The paradox, also explored in ancient skeptical literature, is that such an initial choice seems to presuppose a wisdom that could only be achieved at (and as) the end of a person's philosophizing. We seem to need to already be wise, to know which dogmatic approach to philosophy could lead us to wisdom (§§25-29)—but then, we would hardly need philosophy at such a point at all. In the *Hermotimus'* framing of this paradox, the key Platonic intertext is evidently the *Meno* (80d-e), as we have commented. Far from being dated or affected, Lycinus (we would contend) poses in this passage a real, hard and continuing problem we all face, firstly as students, if we are sufficiently self-aware to not just uncritically accept what sanctioned authorities teach us as being authoritative or true; and secondly, as teachers, whose task it is to convey the inherited knowledges of established texts and authorities to our students, at the same time as we presumably hope that this process will intellectually and normatively benefit them.

Hermotimus is doubtlessly not the most astute of inquirers. But he has a rustic honesty (see §77) which allows Lucian to stage directly what are the principal, mundane motivators students have for adopting a philosophical system before they have had anything like the time or education to make a well-informed choice. Firstly, Hermotimus says that it was the popularity of the Porch that attracted him (§16). Next, when Lucian Socratically gets him to admit that not all popular beliefs are true, Hermotimus recurs to hearsay (§§16-17). He had heard that Stoicism was the best philosophy, although his stress on the received idea that the school could make students "the only king, the only rich man, the only wise man, and everything rolled into one" gently suggests further doubts as to his starting motives, and the place of vanity within them (§16). Yet, if he had been exposed by his teacher to the Stoics' hero, Socrates, Hermotimus would have known that Lycinus is not about to accept any appeal

to hearsay. For, as Hermotimus should have agreed based on his haughty disdain for most people (cf. i. above), most non-philosophers are unwise:

Lycinus. There you are again, cheating me with your irony; you take me for a blockhead, who will believe that an intelligent person like Hermotimus, at the age of forty, would accept the word of laymen about philosophy and philosophers, and make his own selection on the strength of what they said (§§17-18).

Thirdly, Hermotimus tries telling Lycinus that he was attracted to the Porch due to the outwardly noble appearance of the Stoics, topped off with a further recourse to “what everyone admits”:

I saw the Stoics going about with dignity, decently dressed and groomed, ever with a thoughtful air and a manly countenance, as far from effeminacy as from the utter repulsive negligence of the Cynics, bearing themselves, in fact, like moderate men; and everyone admits that moderation is right (§18).

The evident Socratic objection is once more that such outer appearances are hardly a dependable guide to actual virtue or wisdom, as the facts we learn about Hermotimus’ teacher of course underline. To be wise, one needs more than to have grown a beard or shaved one’s head, and donned a khiton or black skivvy, etc. (§18).³⁶

At this point of the *Hermotimus*, §20, we get the first of five points where Hermotimus tries to shut the dialogue down, which are so redolent of like protests by Socrates’ interlocutors within the Platonic dialogues. The other episodes come in §50, §52, §61 and §71. Together, these episodes inscribe the arc of the principal dramatic action of the dialogue: the removal by Socratic elenchus of Hermotimus’ opening, dogmatic self-certainty and sense of arrogant superiority over the motley herd. To re-sound the echo of the *Republic* we noted above, this process of being refuted should be read as Hermotimus’ own “rough ascent”, or his philosophical purification by fire (cf. §7; iii below). It is just that here, as in some of Plato’s early dialogues³⁷, it is an ascent *out of* his dogmatic stance towards his own beliefs and supercilious sense of the wrong-headedness or inferiority of others.

³⁶ Intriguingly, Lycinus makes an aside at this point about the blind also being excluded, if appearances are the best guide to choosing a philosophy (§19). Hermotimus’ learned, affected arrogance is again evident, when he by contrast says “[m]y argument (*logos*) is not addressed to the blind, Lycinus; I have no interest in them” (§19). Lycinus’ larger point is again Socratic. Whatever wisdom is, it will be physically invisible, a quality of soul: “[i]t is not the way of such qualities to come out like that; they are hidden and secret; they are revealed only under long and patient observation, in talk and debate and the conduct they inspire” (§19).

³⁷ Again, we note that this notion of early-middle-late dialogues is the subject of scholarly debate. We refer to it only as accepted *endoxa*.

In Socratic fashion³⁸, Lycinus takes the lead of the inquiry from Hermotimus at §20. Without apparent irony, he presents the vision of the republic of sages as the goal of philosophy mentioned above (§§22-25; cf. iii below). This vision provides the occasion for a second reformulation of the Hermotimus paradox. Now the issue is how we might get to such a utopian republic, having not seen it ourselves, when there are many paths proposed towards it by the different philosophical schools:

Indeed, it is not one and the same road that appears, but they are many and various and most unlike one another. For one seems to lead to the west, another to the east, that to the north and this straight to the south; and one through meadows, gardens and shades, a way well-watered and sweet with neither obstacle nor difficulty, while another is rocky and harsh, proffering sun, thirst and fatigue (§25).

Moreover, there are no fewer teachers at the entrances of these different dogmatic paths, each of whom claims exclusive authority as the sole true guide (§26).³⁹ Nevertheless, each of these teachers too has only travelled their own paths, and not those of their competitors (§27, §29). Lycinus hence protests that the problem for anyone who has only been instructed within one philosophical school is akin to that of a person who has never travelled outside their own country. (Ethiopia is Lycinus' example, but one can also hear another Platonic cave echo (*Rep.* 515a-c)). Naturally, they will suppose that all human beings are like their own country-people, for lack of experience of anything else (§§31-32). If one protests that nevertheless a student within any one dogmatic sect can readily learn about other doctrines, Lycinus responds that instructors belonging within each school have many incentives to misrepresent the views of opponents, with whom they are competing for students' adulation and fees:

the business is too like the sand houses which children, having built them weak, have no difficulty in overturning, or, to change the figure, like people practicing archery; they make a straw target, hang it to a post, plant it a little way off, and then let fly at it; if they hit and get through the straw, they burst into a shout, as if it were a great triumph to have driven through the dry stuff (§33).

The dialogue hence reaches a further moment of *aporia* at §34. Hermotimus' motives for initially choosing Stoicism (popularity, hearsay, appearances) have been Socratically undermined. By now, it also seems clear that opting for any philosophical system pushes one inescapably towards theoretical parochialism. Hermotimus next volunteers bravely that the two of them should therefore inquire together, putting aside appeal to accepted authorities—which is an interesting advance in his intellectual position, compared to the opening, and

³⁸ Cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 152-54.

³⁹ Cf. Nesselrath, "Philosophers and *Philotimia*", 155-156.

arguably as far as he gets in the entire dialogue. At §35, in a way which we will see in iii. is significant, Hermotimus asks Lycinus to compare philosophy to mathematics, where there is one clear and decidable solution to problem (eg: $2+2=4$). Once this solution is found by any single approach, we have no need to look into other methods. Alas, Lycinus is not convinced that this is a sound analogy for philosophizing, whose questions and answers are less definable and decidable. Several other analogies are ventured by Hermotimus, which likewise fall down in the elenchus. If one sacred golden cup has been stolen from a Temple where only two people were present, we could know one of them must have stolen it, Hermotimus observes.⁴⁰ Likewise, if we found that one person, say a Stoic, has the treasure (wisdom), there would again be no need to question anyone else. The problem with this as an analogical defense for sticking to a single philosophical system, as Lycinus responds, is that when it comes to a search for wisdom:

It is not certain that the thing was a cup. And even if that is generally admitted, they [philosophers] do not all agree that it was gold; and if it is well known that a gold cup is missing, and you find a gold cup on your first man, even so you are not quit of searching the others; [for] it is not clear that this is the sacred cup; do you suppose there is only one gold cup in the world? (§38)

The only seeming way forwards, Lycinus hence famously proposes, would be to accumulate an encyclopaedic knowledge of all the disputing philosophical systems, before committing to any one perspective:

If I am to take any one's advice upon the right philosophy to choose, I insist upon his knowing what they all say; everyone else I disqualify; I will not trust him while there is one philosophy he is unacquainted with; that one may possibly be the best of all (§45).⁴¹

However, this proposition brings with it at least two other problems. First, there is what we might call the “inertial problem”. “When we once have committed ourselves and set sail, it is not easy to return” or to investigate competing philosophers, Hermotimus now acknowledges (§47).⁴² This is especially important: to become an expert in any complex theoretical system, or interpreting the work of any difficult textual authority, takes time and

⁴⁰ See Lucian, *Symposium*, §§46-47, where it is the rhetorician Dionydorus caught red-handed stealing a gilded drinking-vessel, when the lights come on.

⁴¹ Edwards, “Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy”, 195.

⁴² This has emerged earlier, at §28: “And as to the perils of blundering into one of the wrong roads instead of the right one, misled by a belief in the discretion of Fortune, here is an illustration:—it is no easy matter to turn back and get safe into port when you have once cast loose your moorings and committed yourself to the breeze; you are at the mercy of the sea, frightened, sick and sorry with your tossing about, most likely.”

energy. Having ‘sunk that cost’, as the economists say, then to reject this system, even for very good reasons, is psychologically and perhaps professionally damaging for the inquirer, especially when others have looked to them for direction—we will return to this issue in iii below.⁴³

Secondly, there is what we might call the “longevity problem”. Hermotimus admits that, given the state of theoretical contest even in the 2nd century CE, and assuming about twenty to thirty years to attain full mastery of any one philosophical school’s dogmata (§48), it would take far more than one human lifetime to examine all philosophical systems impartially, in order to make an informed choice between them (§§48-50). This *reductio ad absurdum* occasions Hermotimus’ second disgruntled moment at §50, which sees him launch an irritated *ad hominem* attack on Lycinus’ “detailed examination and unnecessary precision”, as well as his alleged “hatred” and “mockery” for the poor philosophers (§53).

Hermotimus’ final, increasingly fraught attempt to defend the rationality of his choice for Stoicism, despite what the elenchus is suggesting, once more proceeds by way of two arguments from analogy (§54-69). As Phidias could discern the size of a lion, having seen just its claw, so surely the student can discern the quality of a whole philosophical system from, say, an introductory lecture (§54). Yet, Lycinus retorts, if Phidias had never seen a complete lion before, he could never draw an entire lion from seeing only its claw. The problem remains precisely that no one has seemingly seen the final goal of philosophy, wisdom (§54). But is not hearing or reading a philosopher not like drinking a draft of wine, from which one is readily able to tell the quality of the whole cask (§58)? No, Lycinus retorts, for all we know, philosophical learning may be far more like a cask of asserted seeds, “on the top is wheat, next beans, then barley, below that lentils, then peas—and other kinds yet” (§59). So, when someone hears a particular philosophical proposition, just as if they were to take a scoop of seeds from the top of such a cask, they can tell little about the quality of the whole—just as, in an avowedly “blasphemous” nod to the *Phaedo*, Lycinus comments that one cannot tell the finally lethal effects of taking hemlock from only a small dose (§62).⁴⁴ We are compelled at

⁴³ As John Locke would write in *The Essay on Human Understanding* (IV, xx, 11): “Can anyone expect that he should be made to confess, that what he taught his scholars thirty years ago was all error and mistake; and that he sold them hard words and ignorance at a very dear rate. What probabilities, I say, are sufficient to prevail in such a case? ... All the arguments that can be used will be as little able to prevail, as the wind did with the traveller to part with his cloak, which he held only the faster.”

⁴⁴ Cf. Grethlein, “Lucian and the Spell”, 192-194.

this point to confront the final possibility that all extant philosophies may be false paths to truth, and that we have no sure way of deciding the matter:

Do you think it impossible they may all be deluded, and the truth be something which none of them has yet found? ... In the same way, all philosophers are investigating the nature of Happiness; they get different answers, one Pleasure, another Goodness, and so on through the list. It is probable that Happiness is one of these; but it is also not improbable that it is something else altogether ... (§66)

The dialectical argumentation of the *Hermotimus* concludes by showing that the problems cannot ostensibly be avoided if we reframe the paradox around the idea that it should be the choice of a good teacher, not a theoretical system, that could guarantee the path to the goal.⁴⁵ After one more *ad hominem* outburst from Hermotimus (“how unkindly you treat me!” (§71)), Lycinus is ready to return to his opening themes of the putative philosophers Hermotimus has idolised ‘speaking high but acting low’. This time, he openly presents the philosophical aspiration towards divinity as nothing more than a fond, hybristic fantasy:

At least your chagrin will be considerably lessened by the thought that you are not alone in your disappointment; practically all who pursue philosophy do no more than disquiet themselves in vain ... As to your present mood, it is that of the man who cries and curses his luck because he cannot climb the sky, or plunge into the depths of the sea at Sicily and come up at Cyprus, or soar on wings and fly within the day from Greece to India; what is responsible for his discontent is his basing of hopes on a dream-vision or his own wild fancy, without ever asking whether his aspirations were realizable or according to human nature (*kata tēn anthōpou phusin*). (§71)⁴⁶

At the end of the dialogue, as we mentioned above, Hermotimus is encouraged to accept the life of the ordinary man (*ô idiôtēs*) as better than that of the philosophising he has for so long pursued (§79, §84). We rejoin here the seemingly entirely anti-philosophical advice of Teirisias to Menippus in the *Icaromenippus* (§21), as commentators have observed.⁴⁷ But whether this conclusion of the exchange between Lycinus and Hermotimus, and assessment of the latter’s specific prospects, are to be taken as definitive of Lucian’s wider vision of philosophy is another question, to which we turn now.

⁴⁵ For one would then need to know how to decide which teacher is good; or else find some trustworthy second judge to certify the quality of the first teacher; which judge would in turn need to be certified by a yet third person, and so on *ad infinitum*.

⁴⁶ The action closes with Hermotimus finally admitting defeat. Far from reaching the pinnacle of Mount Oeta, Hermotimus ends in anguish at the time and money he has wasted and resolved to live an ordinary life. And “if in future I meet a philosopher while I am walking on the road, even by chance, I will turn around to get out of the way as if he were a mad dog (*hōsper tous luttōntos tōn kunōn*).” (§86)

⁴⁷ Reardon, *Courants littéraires grecs des IIe et IIIe siècles après J.-C.*, 39; Alexiou, *Philosophers in Lucian*, 75, 149; Schlappach, “The *logoi* of Philosophers”, 251-252.

iii. *From dianoia to dialectic, the true Lucianic philosopher*

It is very easy to see why any dialogue concerning the possibility of philosophy ending with such a terminus has been read as a wholly sceptical performance, and testimony to its author's anti-philosophical credentials. Faced with the growing prominence of students like Hermotimus in the imperial schools of his day—remembering that Marcus Aurelius had set about re-founding the four dogmatic schools in Athens—Lucian's goal was clearly to show that 'philosophy' in such institutionalised formats too often cannot be really distinguished from sophistry or close-minded sectarianism.⁴⁸ Its claim to wisdom, and to guiding students towards better lives, too often proves to be nothing more elevated than a prop for insecure young men's vanity and desire for distinction. Its epistemic bases, in the absence of certifiable rational grounding, rest on forms of uncritical faith in the authority of teachers and sanctified dogmata which are in no strong sense distinguishable from the most common superstitions or choosing a dogma by lot and then sticking to it (cf. §57).

However, to read the *Hermotimus* this way is to read it incompletely, we now want to contend. For there are clear moments in the dialogue which suggest, in line with Lucian's protestations in *The Fisherman* (§§32-33) and *Lives for Sale* (§§33-37), that what is at stake here is a purifying critique of established, fallen modes of philosophising, *within* the Socratic paradigm, not the complete skeptical undermining of philosophy as such. We might compare the logic here to Socrates' denunciation of false suitors for philosophy in *Republic VI*, which in no way prevent him from presenting an alternative model of true, admirable philosophers and philosophy (*Rep.* 495d-496d). Telling here is Lycinus' completely anironic description of the city of philosophy at *Hermotimus* §§24-25, which we have skirted several times (and one can wonder about the identity of the old man he narrates):

I remember hearing a description of it all once before from an old man, who urged me to go there with him. He would show me the way, enrol me when I got there, introduce me to his own circles, and promise me a share in the universal Happiness ... Among the noteworthy things he told me, I seem to remember these: all the citizens are aliens and foreigners, not a native among them; they include numbers of barbarians, slaves, cripples, dwarfs, and poor; in fact any one is admitted; for their law does not associate the franchise with income, with shape, size, or beauty, with old or brilliant ancestry; these things are not considered at all ... Such distinctions as superior and inferior, noble and common, bond and free, simply do not exist there, even in name. (§24)

⁴⁸ Peterson, "Pushing Forty", 12; Branham, *Unruly Eloquence*, 121.

When Hermotimus takes this as confirming the very elevated sense of philosophy's goal which he has been enthused by, however naively, Lycinus again replies without any of his characteristic irony:

Lycinus. Why, your desire (*erō*) is mine too; there is nothing I would sooner pray for. If the city had been near at hand and plain for all to see, be assured I would never have doubted, nor needed prompting; I would have gone thither and had my franchise long ago; but as you tell me—you and your bard Hesiod—that it is set exceeding far off, one must find out the way to it, and the best guide. (§25)

This highly Platonic exchange, early in the *Hermotimus*, should put us on our guard against supposing that Lycinus' ensuing undermining of Hermotimus' dogmatic stance is an attack on the worth of philosophising *per se*. Instead, it primes us to the possibility that the destructive elenctic work of the *Hermotimus* itself, despite appearances, represents its own small contribution to finding a way to the exceedingly distant pedagogical goal of true philosophy. To find this way, we must surely first remove ourselves from the false paths we almost certainly will find ourselves upon, as well as the conceited sense that we have already arrived at the goal, without need of any correction. A further Platonic text, the *Sophist's* famous depiction of the work of *elenchus* in the mouth of the Eleatic stranger is hence apposite to invoke here:

Str. But ... some appear to have arrived at the conclusion that all ignorance is involuntary, and that no one who thinks himself wise is willing to learn any of those things in which he thinks himself to be clever (*oioito peri deinos einai*), and that the admonitory sort of instruction gives much trouble and does little good.

Theaet. There they are quite right.

Str. Accordingly, they set to work to eradicate this conceit (*dozēs* [of cleverness-Fowler]) in another way ... They cross-examine a man's words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions; these they then collect by the dialectical process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another about the same things, in relation to the same things, and in the same respect. He, seeing this, is angry with himself, and grows gentle towards others, and thus is entirely delivered from great prejudices and harsh notions, in a way which is most amusing to the hearer, and produces the most lasting good effect on the person who is the subject of the operation. (Plato, *Soph.* 230b-d)

It would be difficult to find a better description for the humbling of Hermotimus' conceit in Lucian's *Hermotimus* than this account of the humanising effects of the elenchus from Plato's *Sophist*. Hermotimus is able by the end of our text to compare Lycinus to a Euripidean "god in the machine (*theos ek mêchanês*)", who has "come and pulled me out when I was being carried away by a rough (*tracheos*), turbid current, giving myself to it and going with the stream" (§86). In place of a supercilious would-be philosopher-deity looking down

from Olympian heights on antlike mortals, we arrive at Hermotimus as a repentant, in “anguish” at himself (*oduromai*) for “the time I have wasted like a fool” pursuing a single dogmatic approach (§83). His fate can hence be compared by Lucian now, for the first time, to the actual founder of the Stoics, Zeno of Kition, of whom he professes himself a follower: “I think I might well shave my head *like free men who are saved from shipwreck*, to give thanks for salvation today now that I have had so heavy a mist shaken off my eyes” (§86 [our italics]).⁴⁹

With this much said, let us now examine what we contend are no fewer than five openings, at §24, §§29-30, §64, §§68-69, and §§74-75, wherein Lycinus allows us to glimpse what he calls an “Ariadne’s thread” out of the labyrinths of competing closed dogmatisms in which Hermotimus has found himself lost within, resolving the Hermotimus paradox by reframing what philosophy is or ought to be (§68). The key, Socratic shift Lycinus prompts Hermotimus to consider is to transfer his focus from the goal of philosophy, wisdom, to *the ways* in which we could search for it. The republic of sages passage has alerted us to this shift, when it tells us before the major elenctic work of the dialogue has begun, that “anyone who would be a citizen needs only understanding (*sunesis*) and desire for noble things (*epithymian tôn kalôn*), energy, perseverance, fortitude and resolution *in facing all the trials of the road*; whoever proves his possession of these by persisting till he reaches the city is *ipso facto* a full citizen, regardless of his antecedents” (§24 [our italics]).

When Hermotimus, in frustration, defaults to a decisionistic assertion that, all quibbling aside, the Stoics are just *clearly* the best choice for a philosophical way of life at §29, Lycinus gives us a second positive recommendation as to how we might alternatively proceed, facing these “trials of the philosophical road.” It is a matter of what the sceptics called *epochê*:

Do you see, Hermotimus, how common (*koinon*) is that assertion you made? Plato’s fellow-traveller, Epicurus’ follower, and the rest of them would say the same, every one of them ... so I must either believe all of them or disbelieve impartially. The latter is much the safest, until we have found out the truth (§29).

By way of this suspension of judgment, the Lucianic philosopher who does not know which theoretical perspective is right in advance needs to expose themselves to as many competing perspectives as possible, as if she were a juror in a lawcourt:

These are not the instructions issued to juries, Lycinus; they are not to hear one party, and, refuse the other permission to say what he deems advisable; they are to hear both sides alike,

⁴⁹ Cf. Edwards, “Lucian and the Rhetoric of Philosophy”, 199-200; i.e. remembering that Zeno of Kition, the Stoic founder, was shipwrecked outside of Athens before turning to philosophy.

with a view to the better sifting of truth from falsehood by comparison of the arguments; if they fail in these duties, the law allows an appeal to another court (§30).⁵⁰

Philosophy in these passages is hence emerging not as a systematic dogmatic orientation or set of answers. It is as a way of assessing competing claims to truth; a way which presupposes no identification with any system, and which, as such, can begin to be taught and modelled even to novices. The third, much fuller positive description of the Lucianic true philosopher's epistemic virtues however comes in §64—after the breakdown of Hermotimus' proposed analogies for philosophical learning, of the lion's claw, the stolen cup, and the draft of wine (see ii. above). A “greatest thing (*tou megistou*)” is needed by the aspiring philosopher, even once one he has examined many views. And this greatest thing turns out to be a set of epistemic virtues to enable the skilful seeking out and assessing of the range of competing evidences, arguments, and perspectives before leaping to final judgment or sectarian identification:

Lycinus. Why (bear with me), a critical (*kritikês*) investigating (*ezetastikês*) faculty, mental acumen (*nou ozeos*), a precise (*akribous*) and impartial (*adekaston*) understanding (*dianoias*); without this, the completest inspection will be useless ... the owner of [these attributes] must further be allowed not a little time (*to toiouto chronon ouk oligon*); he will collect the rival candidates together, and make his choice with long, lingering, repeated deliberation; he will give no heed to the candidate's age, appearance, or repute for wisdom, but perform his functions like the Areopagites, who judge in the darkness of night, so that they must regard not the pleaders, but the pleadings. Then and not until then will you be able to make a sound choice and philosophise (*philosophhein*). (§64)

Hermotimus, unfortunately, entirely misses the significance of this decisive moment in Lycinus' discourse and its clear link, via the juridical model, back to the recommendations at §§29-30. In reply, he laments without cause (and perhaps in a further ironic aside to the *Phaedo*⁵¹) that such a practice of inquiry could only emerge “after death”. In case we missed it, in any event, Lucian has Lycinus at §§68-69 give us yet a fourth, confirming formulation concerning the epistemic virtues of a true philosopher, as against any dogmatic sectarians:

For the discovery of truth (*tên alêtheian*), your one and only sure or well-founded hope is the possession of this power: you must be able to judge (*krinein*) and separate (*chôrizein*) truth from falsehood; you must have the assayer's sense for sound and true or forged coin; if you could have come to your examination of doctrines equipped with a power (*dunamin*) and craft

⁵⁰ As Lycinus emphasises, somewhat later, when asked to depict the Ariadne's thread he has hinted must exist to resolve Hermotimus' paradox: “It is not original; I borrow it from one of the wise men: ‘Be sober and doubt all things,’ says he. If we do not believe everything we are told but behave like jurymen who suspend judgment till they have heard the other side, we may have no difficulty in getting out of the labyrinths.” (§68)

⁵¹ Cf. also §84, where an Aesopian fable is introduced, with *Phaedo*, 60c, and the significance of the name Echebrates, as above.

(*technên*) like that, I should have nothing to say; but without it there is nothing to prevent [others] severally leading you by the nose ... (§68)⁵²

The fifth and final passage in which Lucian lets us glimpse the attributes of the true philosopher comes at §74. The key background text here is again *Republic VI-VII*, but this time not the cave *eikon* (see i. above), but the division of intellectual powers pictured in the famous “divided line” (*Rep.* 509d-511e). In this famous image, we recall that philosophy and dialectic, as its distinctive Socratic-Platonic method, are situated as both ideally pedagogically conditioned by, and qualitatively beyond, the kind of understanding (*dianoia*) characteristic of mathematical studies like geometry (esp. *Rep.* 526c-527c).⁵³

The problem with the kind of systematising philosophy Hermotimus has long ago embarked upon, Lycinus tells us, is that it is like to a poetic mythology—and we might reflect on Hermotimus’ propensity for arguments from analogy at this point (cf. *Rep.* 510b-d). When the poet tells us that there is a three-headed, six-handed man, we take her word for it and read along for the sake of the story (§74).⁵⁴ The poet-author is in this way just like the Platonic geometer of *Republic VII*, who “make[s] use of the visible forms (*tois orômenois*)” to base their demonstrations (*Rep.* 510b, d-e), and reason about them, without ever calling these *hypotheseis* into question (*Rep.* 510c). If anyone doubts the validity of claiming a conscious Lucian intertextual nod to the *Republic* here⁵⁵, what follows gives its confirmation. “This is the way that wonderful (*thaumastê*) geometry proceeds”, Lycinus tells us:

it sets before beginners certain strange assumptions (*archê allokota tina*) and insists on their granting the existence of inconceivable things, such as points having no parts, lines without breadth, and so on, builds on these rotten foundations a superstructure equally rotten, and pretends to go on to a demonstration which is true, though it starts from premisses which are false. *Just so you, when you have*

⁵² What is required therefore is that the pupil finds a teacher “who understands demonstration (*apodeizeôs*) and the art of distinguishing (*diakriseôs*) matters in dispute (*tôn amphisbêtoumenôn*)”, who could teach these powers. If Hermotimus could find such a teacher, Lycinus now declares: “you would be quit of your troubles; the best and the true would straightway be revealed to you, at the bidding of this art of demonstration (*apodiktikê*), while falsehood would stand convicted; you would make your choice with confidence; judgment would be followed by philosophy; you would reach your long-desired Happiness, and live in its company, which sums up all good things.” (§§68-69)

⁵³ Cf. Lucian, *Nigrinus*, §2 and Putnam, “Lucian the Sophist”, 172.

⁵⁴ Significantly and amusingly, it is a heavily-“mathematicised” depiction of what we would next be asked to accept by this Lucianic poet: “six eyes, six ears, three voices coming from three mouths, and thirty fingers ... and if he had to go to war, three hands held three shields—light, oblong, and round [sic.]—and three brandished axe, spear, and sword.” Even the reference to war here can be read as a play upon Socrates’ attempt to “sell” mathematical studies to the thymotic Glaucon in *Republic VII* by advertising their uses in war (*Rep.* 522c-523b, 525b, 526c-d).

⁵⁵ And one notes the recourse of Hermotimus to a mathematical analogy, when he begins to think things through for himself, at §35 (see ii. above).

granted the principles of any school, believe in the deductions from them, and take their consistency, false as it is, for a guarantee of truth. (§§74-75 [italics mine])

Now, readers of Plato will know that geometry and the other mathematical subjects are stations on the pedagogic way in the education of the guardians. They are “helpmates” (*sunerithois*) to dialectic, which is the distinct method of philosophy (cf. *Rep.* 521c-531b, 532b-533d). Geometry, and the other mathematical pursuits, assist in training students to “employ pure thought (*noêsei*)” (*Rep.* 526b), with ideas separated from sensible materiality (*Rep.* 524c, 525a, 525c-d, 526b). However, dialectic transcends this kind of *dianoia*. For it, exactly, does not “leave the hypotheses which [it] use[s] unexamined, ... unable to give an account of them” (*Rep.* 533c). Dialectic involves a dimension of self-reflection about its own starting points which mathematical, hypothetical modes of inquiry cannot allow. As Lycinus protests: “it was there [with the first postulations] that you ought to have seen whether it [Stoic philosophy] was credible or acceptable ... once you admit the premises, the rest comes flooding in” (§74).⁵⁶ In this light, Lycinus’ continuation of his critique of dogmatic philosophising in the *Hermotimus*, which concerns exactly the incapacity of systems-building philosophers to call their basic assumptions into question, especially given the reputational costs of admitting they were wrong, is telling:

Then with some of you, hope travels through, and you die before you have seen the truth and detected your deceivers, while the rest, disillusioned too late, will not turn back for shame (*oknousin anastrephein aidoumenoi*): what, confess at their age that they have been abused with toys all this time? So, they hold on desperately, putting the best face upon it and making all the converts they can, to have the consolation of good company in their deception; they are well aware that to speak the truth means they will no longer be revered above the many as now (*ôsper nun kai uper tous pollous dozousin*) nor receive the same honour (*oude timêsontai omoiôs*). No, they would not be ready to speak the truth, knowing the heights from which they will fall to the state of ordinary mortals ... (§75)

In this way, a final, crowning philosophical virtue is enucleated by the end of Lucian’s *Hermotimus*, to be added to those other epistemic virtues we have seen that he repeatedly positively identifies with philosophy. At issue is indeed nothing less than the capacity to *anastrephein*, to be moved to turn one’s soul around, letting previously-held opinions go if the evidence suggest this; a capacity which we know is also a definitively Platonic or Socratic

⁵⁶ Cf. *Rep.* 533c: “[f]or where the starting point is something that the reasoner does not know, and the conclusion and all that intervenes is a tissue of things not really known, what possibility is there that assent in such cases can ever be converted into true knowledge or science?” ‘None,’ said he.” With Lucian, *Herm.* §28: “Your mistake was at the beginning: before leaving, you should have gone up to some high point, and observed whether the wind was in the right quarter, and of the right strength for a crossing to Corinth, not neglecting, by the way, to secure the very best pilot obtainable, and a seaworthy craft equal to so high a sea.”

concern, not simply in *Republic VII*, but including in the decisive cave *eikon*.⁵⁷ Unlike the sectarian, whose name is tied to a particular set of dogmata, the true Lucianic philosopher would be unafraid to admit critically that they were wrong, and reconsider their starting points and endpoints dialectically. Then, and perhaps only then, can we talk of a true philosopher, Lycinus stridently affirms:

Just a few are found with the courage to say they were deluded and warn other aspirants. Meeting such a one, call him a good man, a true and an honest; nay, call him philosopher, if you will; to my mind, the name is his or no one's; the rest either have no knowledge of the truth, though they think they have, or else have knowledge and hide it, shamefaced cowards clinging to reputation ... (§§75-76)

Conclusion

We have now argued that the widespread reading of Lucian's *Hermotimus* as a tendentious, if not sophistical, undermining of the possibility of true philosophy, is a partial, and finally erroneous assessment of this rich dialogue. In fact, Lucian's text is profoundly Socratic and post-Platonic, as the text's frequent echoes of Platonic dialogues, including centrally books VI-VII of the *Republic*, alert us. Lucian's target is not philosophising as such, as the search for wisdom, but the ways that philosophising tends to be carried out, through students' early adoption of dogmatic systems conveyed by charismatic teachers or masters. As *Hermotimus*' inability to provide any good answer as to why he chose to be a Stoic (popularity, hearsay, the appearance of wisdom of Stoics, admiration for his teacher) shows, Lucian recognises that too often we adopt philosophical systems on less than genuinely philosophical or rational grounds, before becoming reputation-bound to defend those systems from critical assessments and countervailing evidences.

Nevertheless, as we have now contended, this does not reflect a sceptical Lucianic denial of the possibility of any more genuine forms of philosophising, any more than Plato's refutations of the sophists would commit him to a radical scepticism about the life of the mind *per se*. In fact, laced in and out of the refutation and humbling of *Hermotimus* by Lycinus (see ii. above), we have seen that Lucian gives us in at least five places glimpses of a more positive, Socratic vision of philosophy—the same vision which is of course being played out in the dialogue itself (iii. Above). The philosopher who would be not become a sectarian will need

⁵⁷ See Pierre Hadot, "Conversio", in *Discours et mode de vie philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010), 133 on the significance of words derived from *strephein* in Plato. In our text, see §28: "For still to turn around (*anastrepsai*) and come back again in safety is no easy matter once a man casts himself to the wind ..."

to cultivate, as we saw, firstly, a “desire for noble things (*epithymian tón kalón*), energy, perseverance, fortitude and resolution in facing all the trials of the road” leading to the true city of philosophy (§24). Secondly, they will need by themselves and with the aid of a true teacher to foster in themselves a critical (*kritikês*) investigating ability (*ezetastikês*), sharp mental acumen (*nou ozeos*), a precise (*akribous*) and impartial (*adekaston*) understanding (*dianoias*) able to distinguish true from false (§64, §§68-69), and the open-minded patience to consider all sides of any issue, like a juror or judge facing competing testimony and disputed facts, before committing to judgment (§64, §69). Thirdly and above all, given the human propensity to pre-emptively identify with a dogmatic stance which Hermotimus personifies for us in the dialogue, the true philosopher will need to cultivate the intellectual humility and indifference to public reputation to be able to acknowledge, when the evidence warrants, that they have been mistaken, to be able to *anastrephein*, turn themselves around.

This is, it seems to us, a profoundly post-Socratic, post-Platonic vision of philosophy as an approach to seeking wisdom, rather than identification with any reified intellectual system or doctrine. And the implications of this vision are wide-ranging, not least when it comes to considering philosophical pedagogy. To the extent that we teach philosophy as a sequence of competing systems, headlined by status-conferring textual authorities, Hermotimus’ paradox will always apply. Or rather, students will continue to become doctrinaire followers of competing sects on bases which cannot be philosophically defended, but which reflect their pre-philosophical concerns for popularity, reputation, appearances, hearsay, and reverence for social and institutional authorities. It is only by following something like Lycinus’ metaphilosophical lead in the *Hermotimus*—that Ariadne’s thread he several times advertises, fruitlessly, to Hermotimus in the dialogue—and in doing so, teaching students to philosophise as an art or craft of thinking critically and independently, *before* they adopt some doctrinal identification, that Hermotimus’ paradox can be resolved or short-circuited.

Matthew Sharpe
Australian Catholic University

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