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THE SOCRATES TREATMENT

ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper examines the discursive procedure employed by Socrates to subvert common preconceptions of important socio-behavioral notions. The point of reference will be the concept of courage which is the main concern in Plato's *Laches*. The key characteristics of *paideia* can be exhibited by reconstructing the procedure common sense is subjected to in this example. The second section discusses the tremendous influence this pattern of inquiry has had on traditional philosophy. Particular attention is drawn to the way it confers superiority to philosophers in "pedagogical" discourse and to the fact that this privileged stance can by no means be taken for granted under present circumstances.

Keywords: Socrates, quest for essences, *paideia*, Goethe.

The designator "Socrates" refers to a more complicated philosophical figure than is usually acknowledged. Plato's version of the person's life and discursive strategies have had an irreversible impact on philosophy, quite independent from how the historical Socrates actually fitted into his contemporary Athenian surroundings. Aristophanes counted him among the so-called sophists, precisely the group of post-traditional, utilitarian intellectual trainers that Plato took so much care to distinguish Socrates from.[1] This paper will argue that Aristophanes was not completely wrong about the issue and that his portrayal of the philosopher should rather be taken as indication of an inherent tension, even contradiction, in the "Socratic" enterprise. Platonic *paideia*, usually presented as a blueprint for humanistic (self-)development should, consequently, be considered within the framework of the educational resources offering social and rhetorical skills intended to succeed in an increasingly multifaceted city-state like Athens.

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[1] For an overview of the relationship compare: Woodruff, P. 2006. "Socrates among the Sophists." In: *A Companion to Socrates.* Ahbel-Rappe, S., R.A. Kamtekar (Eds.). Oxford: Blackwell, 36–47.

The argument will focus on a celebrated Socratic move, a strategic device designed to startle his interlocutors and to confer an argumentative edge to the philosopher. Longstanding familiarity with this stratagem blinds us from noticing a certain trickery in posing one of the most venerable questions in philosophy, namely "What is the essence of X?" An attempt will be made to defamiliarize the story which has us admiring Socrates' skills in prompting self-assured citizens towards a more (pun intended) sophisticated assessment of basic philosophical concerns.

The first section of this paper will examine the discursive procedure employed by Socrates to subvert common preconceptions of important socio-behavioral notions. The point of reference will be the concept of courage which is the main concern in Plato's *Laches*. Key characteristics of *paideia* can be exhibited by reconstructing the procedure commonsense is subjected to in this example. The second section will discuss the tremendous influence this pattern of inquiry has had on traditional philosophy. Particular attention is drawn to the way it confers superiority to philosophers in "pedagogical" discourse and to the fact that this privileged stance can by no means be taken for granted under present circumstances.

COURAGEOUS

There is an internet site dedicated to give examples of often used terms, among them "courageous." As "courageous persons," it lists Anne Frank, Charles Lindbergh, Mother Teresa and Sir Edmund Hillary. Courageous actions are, according to this proposal:[2]

— Trying a food that you've never tried before.
— Asking someone out on a date.
— Standing up for a person who is being picked upon.
— Asking for a promotion or a raise at work.

It is straightforward to find fitting language uses for every item in the list. Comparing them to each other, however, raises some problems. What is it, precisely, that defending a person against an attacker and asking for a pay raise, or Anne Frank and Sir Edmund Hillary, share in common? The easy answer is that being courageous is quite regularly associated with such behavior or persons. But, come to think of it, there is any number of puzzling associations that we still find uncontroversial. "The courage of teddies" or "The courageous battle of small shops for survival" are phrases we have no trouble understanding, even though neither a teddy bear, nor a shop seems to qualify as an example of someone showing courage.

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[2] http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples/examples-of-courage.html. Accessed 2 July, 2014.

The quandary is, of course, an echo of the story Plato tells about Socrates' encounter with Laches, an Athenian general. Since bravery in war is commonly regarded as a good example of courage, Socrates—tongue in cheek—asks him for guidance about the use of the term. And when Laches points to one particular (his favorite) instance of courage, namely fearlessly attacking the enemy in open battle, Socrates springs the trap. What about cleverly retreating in order to lure the enemy into an ambush? It seems that such a ruse requires just as much courage. In other words, a list of examples of possible uses of a term does not provide justification for singling out any particular case as an exemplary one. We lack an easy answer to the question why Edmund Hillary's enterprise and physical fitness should be on a par with the tragic suffering of Anne Frank. Or, in Socratic jargon, we fail to understand what courage really is.

Now, conventional philosophical discourse is quick to take this lead and to make the formula "What is X" an entry point into the distinguished realm of "forms" or „essences." The Platonic Socrates is presented as someone inquiring about "the essentials" of several prominent language uses, mainly concerning the virtues. But we should, at this point, pause and notice that said formula itself is not immune from the sort of treatment Socrates applied to e.g. "courageous." Quite a number of different contexts come to mind.

— What is this about?
— What is missing?
— What is the point of that?
— What does it matter?

It is by no means clear how something missing is similar to some event at a particular place, let alone its meaning. Socrates' habit to ask embarrassing questions about non-obvious uses of certain terms can very well be turned against himself. In this case the legitimacy of asking about a unifying single factor underlying diverse episodes qualified as courageous would itself remain a matter of dispute.

Laches could, to put it differently, have remained unimpressed by Socrates' objections, rejecting the suggestion that searching for one paradigm of justice is even an acceptable procedure. In fact several of Socrates' interlocutors are on record as not understanding what he was driving at. His disciples have to be taught how to handle his quest. Its setup and direction is not self-explanatory and has to be regarded as a very special ploy, notwithstanding its philosophical appeal. The Socrates treatment is, as a matter of fact, the opening move of a type of argument that turned out to be indispensable throughout the history of Western philosophy. This should, however, not stop us from noticing its affinity to some more contentious rhetorical strategies. "What is awaiting you after you have died?" or "What will be the rewards for a life virtuously led?" Such questions work by attempting to explore a terrain unfamiliar to everyday pursuits. They are operating with a certain "shock value," stunning their addressees and

preparing them for non-standard answers, usually supplied by the person raising the question in the first place.

It is at this point that the Socratic dialogues share some features with sophist teachers. Diogenes Laertius reports the following discursive strategy employed by Protagoras: "Furthermore, in his dialectic he neglected the meaning in favor of verbal quibbling, and he was the father of the whole tribe of eristical disputants now so much in evidence."[3]

This description triggers a familiar, judgmental reaction to the effect that, in bracketing common sense the sophists prepared the way for artful, yet artificial casuistry. But one should recognize that Diogenes Laertius' description consists of two steps, (i) some disregard of established meanings and (ii) some second-order argumentative rearrangement of conversational items taken out of their original context and felt to be formalistic. Now, Socrates' famous *elenchus*[4] is built upon his ability to undermine unscrutinized assumptions and thus "shame" or "refute" his *agora* interlocutors. His outmaneuvering of everyday understanding, e.g. in the case of a general's notion of courage, is closely akin to bracketing commonsense. If we assume that this is a sophistic element in questions of the form "What is X" we are faced with an obvious consequence. Platonic essences are a product of this reductive methodology. They are a typical case of second-level meaning constructs. How can they escape the type of objections Diogenes Laertius raises against Protagoras?

The defense of the quest for "forms" (aka "ideas") cannot rest upon the first, negative move which disempowers conventional certainties. Sophistry gets its bad name from the backlash of common sense against acrobatic intellectual endeavors unleashed by discarding the s*ensus communis*. Plato's perennial accomplishment has been to provide a positive outlook for the second required step, namely a proposal of where to go once the familiar terrain is left behind. His ideas are dialectically linked to the first-level experiences that are downgraded by questions about essence. Plato's success has been to avoid the opposition directed against the sophists' exploitation of cognitive brilliance by proposing an attractive account of learning. It is built on the insight that a certain educational procedure by necessity starts as a disruptive development. While basic skills are acquired in a (more or less) natural way, more advanced competence and knowledge requires a rejection of the *status quo*, linked to a more worthwhile accomplishment, namely insight into the origin and causes of merely given facts.

It has to be noted, though, that the very terminology just used to describe Plato's position is prejudicial in his favor. Plato's parable of the cave is built

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[3] Diogenes Laertius. 1925. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Hicks, R. D. (Trans.). 1925. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. Book IX, Chapter VIII, 52.

[4] For a helpful collection of essays on this issue see: Scott, G. A. 2002. *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

upon the basic dichotomies between darkness and light, down and up, slavery and freedom, illusion and insight. Its frame of reference imposes a model of individual and social development of considerable conviction. Compared to being embedded into local custom, or else to be occupied with refined verbal subtleties it was well placed to become the doctrine of civilization, progress and enlightenment, whereas anti-Platonism failed to offer a similar "uplifting" narrative. Given the preceding analysis of the Platonic two-step procedure it is, however, tempting to offer an alternative assessment of the Socrates treatment. Klaus Heinrich, a German philosopher of religion, has put it quite bluntly.[5] Plato, according to him, is the most accomplished technocrat of antiquity. This is precisely for his synthesis of the counter-intuitive and hyper-intuitive moves. Because he strips away a signifier's familiar context in order to re-integrate it into a top-down schematization of the world. Platonic ideas serve as patterns of order imposed upon a confusing environment.

Learning, Plato's Socrates suggests, does not consist in acquiring *ad hoc* skills and information, but rather in overcoming the limits of localized knowledge in order to gain general insights into the forces determining empirical reality. The process has been advertised as truth-seeking and quest for personal fulfillment, but it may also be regarded as a magnificent piece of social engineering. Socrates' asking of "What is courage?" is a move to disqualify established "wisdom" to make place for a higher-order "form" of courage transcending as well as governing common preconceptions. Gorgias, another sophist, is reported to have mounted an Athenian stage and to have offered to answer any question whatsoever.[6] The Socrates treatment contains an element of this sophistic hubris. In positing one form to govern the understanding of its scattered instances he strives for unconditional mastery of the concepts use.

The procedural mechanics of *paideia* can be compared to the shifting of gears in a car. One has to disconnect from one level of transmission and switch to another—more powerful—one, the availability of which has been built into the device by its designers. The point is that one has to l o o s e traction to be able to regain it one level up and that this is a calculated loss, compensated for by the outcome of the successful operation. Bootstrapping, to mention another technical procedure, shows a similar logic. It is a bottom-up process and constructed so as to hand over control from lower to higher levels of a system. For these steps to work a structural hierarchy has to be in place. The power of Platonic ideas does not reside in some hyper-terrestrial realm but rather in their procedural function as part of a progressive dynamic. A dose of sophism is built into the engine powering much of Western (philosophy's) development.

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[5] Heinrich, K. 1986. *Anthropomorphe: Zum Problem des Anthropomorphismus in der Religionsphilosophie*. Frankfurt/Main: Stroemfeld, 168.

[6] Flavius Philostratos. 2014. *Vitae sophistarum*, "Preface." Accessed May 4, 2014. http://goo.gl/G2O18E

HERE I AM MAN

Paideia has been celebrated as *Bildung* in German idealism. Its critics like Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand,[7] have pointed at the destructive part of the Socratic endeavor. Martin Heidegger, a fierce opponent of German bourgeois culture, reads Plato's allegory of the cave as pretty much the beginning of technocracy, where reified hierarchical patterns take over from the unfathomable revelation of truth.[8] Rather than delve into his overarching story about the history of being we will discuss the Socrates stratagem with reference to a more recent critic, Bruno Latour. His account of the Platonic myth fits well into the diagnosis of abstraction and sublimation offered in the previous section. He notes that the myth is built around a double rupture. The first shift puts a distance between "the tyranny of social dimension, public life, politics, subjective feelings, popular agitation"[9] and the realm of truth, whereas the second shift, only implicit in our considerations up to now, opens a route back from the sublime to the ordinary existence without which the philosopher's (or, in Latour's version, the scientist's) accomplishments will be lost to his compatriots.

The initial rupture provides the transgressive force of progress, the second one ensures that this force remains bound to the resources it broke away from. Learning is i m p r o v i n g a capacity which presupposes possible comparisons between its stages. Progress would come to a halt if there was nothing that c o u l d b e p r o m p t e d to further progress. In Platonic parlance this is the problem of *methexis* or, expressed in terms of the parable, as inexplicable turning back of the erstwhile prisoner to enlighten the cave dwellers left behind. Latour is aware of the fact that, according to the original myth, this is risky business. But he points out that it has in fact become a mainstream for a particular type of actor:

> "Although the world of truth differs absolutely, not relatively, from the social world, the Scientist can go *back and forth* from one world to the other no matter what: the passageway closed to all others is open to him alone. [...] The narrow door has become a broad boulevard. In twenty-five centuries, however, not thing has not changed in the slightest: the double rupture, which the form of the allegory, endlessly repeated, manages to maintain as radically as ever." [10]

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[7] Cf. Hart, T. E. (Ed.). 2009. *Nietzsche, Culture and Education*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

[8] Heidegger, M. 1997. *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann.

[9] Latour, B. 2004. *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 10.

[10] Latour, B. 2004, op. cit., 11.

In drawing attention to this provision in Plato's fable Latour strengthens the case for a technocratic reading of the philosopher's design. If you start by taking away the traditional certitudes available to your interlocutor and sell him on a remedy provided by yourself, chances are that this will overrule the initial equilibrium. But is not the quest for ideas different from the sophist's training in pragmatic rhetoric proficiency? The question is prominent in Plato's writings and deserves a closer look.

The Platonist's claim is that there is a difference between putting aside local knowledge in order to improve argumentative impact and, on the other hand, to gain knowledge on a broader, more exalted scale. It is one thing to be a trainer of personal development (for money) and altogether another one to attempt to become clear about the governing principles of nature and social life. Granted that some affinities between Socrates and the sophists exist, philosophy has proven to be quite independent from professional lifestyle guidance and management counseling. It may on occasion be fashionable to quote Seneca, Spinoza or Sartre, yet this does not qualify as entering into a prolonged and exacting exploration of highly abstract issues having no direct bearing on everyday concerns. It is true that philosophers have to earn a living and are, therefore, dependent on some kind of income, hopefully provided by their philosophical activities. But there is a reasonably clear line to be drawn between promoting knowledge for a fee and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. It is not necessary, for the present purpose, to adhere to a strong version of this argument. Let us grant that it has a certain *prima facie* force, comparable to the widely respected distinction between editorial content and advertisements, or peer review as opposed to predatory publishing.[11] What are we to make of the firewall standard philosophy has erected between itself and the rule of money?

This is too big a question, obviously, to be broached on this occasion. We can only make an attempt to point into the direction of an answer and, since we are began with an illustrative story, we will offer another story, updating the former's intuitions. It starts, in fact, with a center piece of the German tradition of *Bildung*, which inherits and refines the Platonic blueprint. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* is a scholar who has gone through all available curricula and remained dissatisfied with what he learned. "What's worth knowing, I can't say."[12] He is isolated, sitting in his study and despairing of the world, a failed teacher: "I can't say what I should teach / To make men better or convert each." No Socratic confidence is left for this scholar. He is moments before killing himself as a heavenly choir rescues him just at the nip of time. It is Easter night and the *deus ex machina* voices celebrate Christ's resurrection. Bruno Latour's

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[11] Cf. http://qcc.libguides.com/predatorypublishing. Accessed May 4, 2014.

[12] Kline, A. S. 2003. *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Faust Parts I & II*. Electronic document http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Fausthome.htm Scene I, v. 373. Accessed May 4, 2014. (Goethe 2003. Kline 2003)

first rupture is represented starkly in this episode: no continuity exists between ordinary conduct, even including established scholarship, and a realm making superior sense of it.

Goethe's drama is built upon the premise that Faust's salvation comes about by means of his prolonged and messy dealings with pre-academic „real life." This is made obvious in the immediate sequel to the saving of Faust's life by the super-natural chorus, when he joins the townspeople on an Easter's walk in front of the city-gate. Goethe offers us a glimpse of the chatter of workmen, students, soldiers and bourgeois citizens, leaving no doubt about their Epicureian predilections.

> "Come to the Castle, you'll find there
> The prettiest girls, the finest beer,
> And the best place for a fight."[13]

This is down-to-earth stuff, precisely the kind of behaviour Faust rejected in favor of his study. Yet, as he mingles with the crowd, he exemplifies Latour's second rupture, which point into the opposite direction. Philosophers and scientists in general are supposed to re-enter ordinary circumstances easily. Their privilege consists precisely in their capacity to impose their authority, gained by knowledge, upon pedestrian pursuits.

Faust praises the awakening of nature and the consequent festive promenade of "the crowd, their feet / Crushing the gardens and meadows"14 and concludes his famous monologue with this line: "Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich sein." [Here I am Man: here dare to be.][15]

The speaker is putting this sentence into the mouth of the joyous crowd that hails him as its benefactor. Faust's self-doubts are still manifest but, for the moment alleviated by his participation in the spring ritual. The burden of the scholar is, in other words, framed by the custom of the land which grounds the claim of its inhabitants to "being human," i.e. to partake in humanity. Goethe is pointedly using solemn phrases to accentuate the condition of the crowd. "Überall regt sich Bildung und Streben." 16 Many English translations miss the subtle nuances of *Bildung* and *Streben* here. Kline renders it as "Change and growth are everywhere."[17] The scenario on Easter Sunday is, however, designed

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[13] Goethe, W. 2003. *Faust*. See Kline 2003. Scene 2, v. 814ff.

[14] Ibid., v. 930.

[15] Ibid, v. 940.

[16] Ibid., v. 912.

[17] Anna Swanwick has: "Everywhere growth and movement are rife." Accessed May 4, 2014. http://www.bartleby.com/19/1/2.html. Bayard Taylor comes closer to the Platonic subtext but his version is akwardly philosophical: "Everywhere form in development moveth." Accessed May 4, 2014. http://archive.org/stream/fausttragedy00goetuoft/fausttragedy00goetuoft_djvu.txt

to draw a parallel between the productive forces of nature and society, playing on the ambivalence of the German *Bildung* which can refer to formation (like in "the formation of a leave") or else to (humanistic) education. We are, in Goethe's scenery, offered a view of the prototypical tension between the quest for truth and the popular attainment of a satisfactory life, played out between a disgruntled sage and an audience basing its "humanity" on the accord between the natural environment and its cultural superstructure.

Our story, so far, shows the traditional pattern, but it takes a surprising turn when we add a contemporary observation. A slight twist of Goethe's line is used in an advertisement for a chain of drug supermarkets. "Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ichs sein" turns into: "Hier bin ich Mensch, hier kauf ich ein."[18]

It is just a clever idea of a certain p.r. campaign, but it may serve a more important purpose. An almost poetic shift dislodges the scenario of "scholar meets common man" and institutes a different paradigm: consumer society. Being human, according to this slogan, amounts to take part in the shopping experience. That does not sound implausible, even though the traditionally minded might well by disturbed by this suggestion. Now, if this pronouncement nevertheless touches on the current state of human self-understanding it follows that the status of proponents like Socrates and Faust drastically changes. Economic well-being is quite removed from the two kinds of rupture Latour has outlined. It offers a pragmatic continuum governed by market forces that are, to be sure, threatened by their own peculiar breakdowns, but do not thrive on transcending circumstances. Enlightenment, or struggling to achieve an equilibrium between the quest for humanity's highest goals and recognition of the modest degree to which it informs the life of ordinary citizens, is not on the agenda of *homo oeconomicus*.

These are well-known and widely discussed developments. They have been deplored as a loss of foundation of Western culture, or else welcomed as the attainment of an ever-increasing standard of life by mass-media consumerism. The question that has been raised at the beginning of this paper is the following one: Does this mean that the sophists win and that Socrates-like procedures have become obsolete? Should the philosopher stick to its former role as professor/confessor in the vein of Jacques Derrida[19], or should he rather turn to less ambitious tasks, e.g. playing a restricted part in multidisciplinary projects in the humanities or sciences? These are, admittedly, black-or-white questions that would need considerable refinement to enable serious discussion. Yet, one cannot deny that these stark alternatives are regularly raised in public discourse.

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[18] "Here I am Man: here do I buy." Accessed May 4, 2014. http://www.dm-drogeriemarkt.at/at_homepage/unternehmen/grundsaetze/

[19] Cohen, T. (Ed.). 2002. *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities. A Critical Reader*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 27–54.

(Think of a journalist asking about the importance of philosophy to contemporary society.) Here is an attempt to satisfy this demand.

We noted, in describing the Socrates treatment, that it is itself not entirely free of sophistry, even though Plato does his best to draw a strict line. Socrates springs surprises upon unsuspecting citizens in order to raise attention to his concerns and he assembles a number of followers taking his lead. He does not do this for money, yet the attention-grabbing procedure and the "technocratic" promise to deal with local issues in a more general, top-down way shows him to share an important strategic move with his opponents. Philosophical orthodoxy has taught for centuries that truth-seeking has to be rigorously distinguished from money-making[20] and, as a consequence, is scandalized if anyone proposes to question this dividing line. It seems that the essence of humanity collapses to business matters once this border is transgressed. But should not we question this all-or-nothing attitude?

Philosophy is, as we noted, often done for money, even though its usual aims—becoming clear about man's standing in a natural-cultural cosmos—do not lend themselves to payment. Questions of logic or epistemology cannot, in an important sense, be answered for a price. The present proposal is to regard this as a convention, widely shared and held useful by commonsense. Like the distinction between editorial content and advertisement mentioned earlier. Some critical feature of public opinion (and consequently of a democratic political system) depend on the "division of labor" between investigative journalism and propaganda leaflets. We do not, to give another example, have to be in possession of a rock-solid theory of justice to confidently hold on to the distinction between the executive and the judiciary. As both examples show, the lines are blurred in many cases, notwithstanding the usual rhetoric about „the free press" or "independent courts of law." Still, we have learned to work on the assumption that these are not distinctions one can (or should) easily discard. They contribute to the distinctive form "our" society has taken.

A similar argument can be made for the partly subversive, partly overbearing practice inherited from Socrates. It does not rest on a timeless division of realms of being. Its clear-cut dividing line is a paradigmatic distinction that can, in actual circumstances, become difficult to draw. And yet, this is no reason to discard the pattern. Radical anti-Platonism might be considered a response to the paradigm of the cave, albeit under a more restricted perspective, namely its status as t h e o n e meta-narrative presumably governing human progress. It is in the context of this presumption that attacks against Platonic truth want to altogether get rid of the picture, provoking the prestige wars known as "overcoming of metaphysics." If one is prepared to accept that there is an element of sophistry in Socrates' discursive strategy, the situation, however, may be de-

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[20] Hénaff, M. 2010. *The Price of Truth Gift, Money, and Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

scribed in less dramatic terms. We can come by without raising the prospect of cultural Armageddon, by either completely rejecting the parable of the cave, or else regarding the Socrates treatment as the last holdout against barbarism.

Truth, to sum up, does not have to be absolute in order to be binding; and a "sophistic" appeal to discursive brilliance and seemingly free-floating definitional detail can be beneficial for society as a whole. This is the lesson to learn from Socrates, once we picture him as a thought-provoking individual who failed to follow up his provocations with ready-set solutions. And do not forget: confounding common sense by pointing towards higher aims is just the kind of provocation you cannot buy to make you a Man.

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