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Making Sense of Socrates

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Studies in Plato's *Protagoras*

Evan Rodriguez, 2008

Table of Contents

A Dialogue of Contradictions: Socrates and the Sophists in Plato's *Protagoras*

Introduction (Socrates of Athens)	1
Protagoras of Abdera	5
Prodicus of Ceos	8
Hippias of Elis	11
Hippias and Socrates: A Middle Way?	13
Prodicus and Socrates: 'The Choice of Socrates'	15
Socrates and Protagoras: Negotiating Similarities, Differences	19
Socrates and Socrates: Resolving Contradictions through Dialog	25
Conclusions: A Socratic Discourse on Method	32
Bibliography	36

Making Sense of Socrates: *Protagoras* 348c ad finem

Introduction	38
Protagoras and the τέχνη Model of Virtue	40
Wisdom and Courage: Take One (349d-351b)	43
Hedonism: The Setup (351b-353b)	50
Hedonism: Controlling Pleasure and the μετρητικὴ τέχνη (353b-358a)	56
Wisdom and Courage: Take Two (358a-361a)	63
Conclusions	65
Bibliography	70

A Dialogue of Contradictions: Socrates and the Sophists in Plato's *Protagoras*¹

Introduction (Socrates of Athens)

"Socrates lived and—most importantly—he died in accordance with his philosophical principles. Plato's lively portrait makes it believable that such a life is possible. But since his principles are not always clear and we cannot be certain whether he himself knew exactly what they were, Socrates continues to constitute a mystery with which anyone interested in philosophy or in the writings of the Greeks must contend."

– Alexander Nehamas

Socrates of Athens, born around 469 BC, is an elusive character. He wrote nothing himself, yet had enough impact to inspire an entire genre of the 'Socratic Dialogue.'² Interpreters today are plagued with the 'Socratic Problem' of sorting out inconsistencies in the portrayals of Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato: he is accused by one of making the weaker argument the stronger, elevated by another as a defender of conventional morality, and presented as a radical critic of the status quo by the third. Yet the fact that he was a unique, intriguing, and sometimes frustrating personality is undeniable.³ The mystery mentioned by Nehamas permeates any portrayal of Socrates, but is particularly manifest in Plato's *Protagoras* where his portrayal is particularly controversial.

¹ A special thanks to professor Richard Hamilton, my classics advisor, whose enthusiasm and keen insight made the project both engaging and enjoyable. Thanks also to professor Deborah Roberts for her helpful comments.

² Aristotle *Poetics*, 1447^b.

³ This is one commonality in all of the ancient accounts. There are many anecdotes attesting to this fact. After the disaster at the battle of Arginusae Socrates was the only one to vote against trying all of the generals together as a group, and when asked to arrest an innocent citizen by the thirty tyrants he refused. He was known for his odd appearance and his tendency to stand outside, barefoot, for hours on end simply thinking. He was praised as a man of great courage and talked widely about the virtues and the good life, yet this doesn't seem to have stopped him from enjoying good food and company.

It is quite easy to see the *Protagoras* as primarily a confrontation between Socrates and the namesake of the dialogue. After all, the dialogue is named after its main interlocutor. Socrates is trying to set himself apart from the ‘sophists,’ and who better to challenge than Protagoras himself, father of the sophists and one of the most successful and famous practitioners of his art. Yet to cast the dialogue in this light is to ignore the rich complexity of its wide array of characters, and to act as if it was manifestly clear what exactly characterizes a ‘sophist’ or who counts among their infamous intellectual ranks. Socrates finds himself in the company of a number of eccentric characters considered to be sophists: Prodicus of Ceos, the incessant quibbler; Hippias of Elis, the sober polymath; and Protagoras of Abdera, pioneer of the sophistic movement.⁴ In a dialogue where Socrates himself is mistaken for a sophist⁵ the distinctions between them are anything but clear.

What is clear is that Socrates is interested in exploring the question of sophistry. In his conversation with Hippocrates, Socrates asks him to describe what exactly a sophist *is*, stressing the importance of considering these issues beforehand in matters as important as education and the nurture of the soul.⁶ Socrates himself defines sophistry

⁴ It is clear that at least Socrates considers all three characters to be sophists. Hippocrates identifies Protagoras as a sophist at 311e, and Protagoras himself embraces the label in his speech at 317b. At 314c Socrates plays with the term by referring to both Hippias and Prodicus as well as many others there as ‘wise men’ (σοφοί), and the fact that Callias’ house is filled with such men is reinforced just afterwards by Socrates’ supposition that the eunuch porter was annoyed with the number of sophists in the house. Most importantly, at 356e Socrates singles out Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus specifically as ‘sophists’ to whom parents send their sons to be taught.

⁵ 314d.

⁶ 311b-314c. The concept of ‘forethought’ (προμηθής) is a recurring one throughout the dialogue and is an essential quality for both Socrates and Protagoras. This theme is figured metaphorically by the character of Prometheus (Προμηθεύς) in Protagoras’ myth, which Socrates draws attention to at the end of the dialogue (361d). Towards the

towards the end of the conversation as a “sort of merchant or pedlar of goods for the nourishment of the soul” (ἐμπορός τις ἢ κάπηλος τῶν ἀγωγίμων, ἀφ’ ὧν ψυχὴ τρέφεται) which consist primarily in ‘learning’ (μαθήμασιν).⁷ He again stresses the importance of their inquiry into the proper method of education and suggests that they consult Protagoras and others as well, specifically mentioning both Hippias and Prodicus.⁸ A detailed discussion of the array of methods and characters is surprisingly absent in the secondary literature⁹ but, as we have seen, the rich variety of viewpoints present is emphasized from the very beginning.

Interpreters have been justifiably confused over where the work belongs among Plato’s other dialogues, and thus usually deem it a ‘transitional’ work between his early and middle period. Pinning down exactly what the dialogue is about is equally difficult: education, sophistry, the teachability of virtue, the unity of virtue, the role of wisdom in the good life, or all of the above. In many ways the *Protagoras* is a dialogue of contradictions, and Socrates seems to be the main architect of these absurdities. He embarrasses Hippocrates for apparently wanting to become a sophist and then is mistaken for a sophist himself; he praises Prodicus as his mentor then utterly dismisses him; he criticizes Protagoras for his long-winded speeches and immediately goes on to give a lengthy and patently ridiculous interpretation of a Simonides poem. At the end of the

beginning, Praises Socrates for having this very quality: “ὀρθῶς, ἔφη, προμηθεῖ, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ” (316c5).

⁷ 313c, trans. Taylor.

⁸ 314b-c. Note that this is before Socrates and Hippias arrive at Callias’ house where the sophists are congregating. Socrates’ mention of Protagoras, Prodicus, and Hippias together reinforces the association of all three as sophists and prefigures their prominent roles in the dialogue.

⁹ While many interpretations do stress both dramatic and historical elements in the dialogue, none deal with the characters of Prodicus and Hippias as they relate to the dialogue as a whole.

dialogue he points out that his very argument has contradicted itself since his argument for the unity of virtue under wisdom suggests that virtue can be taught, while his initial position was that it can't be. What does it mean for Socrates to adopt and to reject such extremes?

It is easy to speak about the lessons that can be gained from Socratic elenchus in general terms. His arguments are effective in that they reveal inconsistent beliefs, show where we can go wrong in our own thinking, and perhaps even suggest a possible alternative that might solve those difficulties. But often he does so in a manner as polemical, obtrusive, and fallacious as those he argues against, and, in a dialogue where the negative aspects of his method are emphasized, any positive lessons remain obscure. What, then, characterizes Socratic method in the *Protagoras*, and how does it differ from (or conform with) sophistry? If Socrates disagrees with his interlocutors how does he show that disagreement, and if he has his own opinions to share how can they be identified? In the end, does Socrates himself benefit at all from his lengthy conversations?

By taking a closer look at the main characters of the dialogue we can better understand what exactly Socrates is up against and, by analyzing Socrates' reaction to each, we can gain insight into what makes Socratic method so provocative and unique. While some of these questions are perhaps ultimately unanswerable, asking them will help us appreciate the rich complexity and subtle nuance of this literary and philosophical masterpiece—a masterpiece as attributable to Socrates, the main narrator of the dialogue, as it is to Plato himself.

When speaking of this ‘Socrates,’ however, we must be careful not to confuse the historical figure with his portrayal in any given author. Thus far I have mentioned the elusiveness of the historical Socrates, the Socrates of the *Protagoras*, and the dialogue *Protagoras* itself, all three of which are equally difficult to pin down. While not identical, the three problems are related. In this paper I limit myself primarily to understanding the Socrates of the *Protagoras* and show that dramatic, historical, and philosophical elements all help us in building a consistent interpretation of this slippery character. On this interpretation I argue that the dialogue as a whole is a dialogue about method, and is particularly well suited for asking these questions. While any claims about Plato or the historical Socrates are at best speculative, I would like to suggest that the *Protagoras* is Plato’s most honest portrayal of his famous teacher, and that the difficulties we encounter in making sense of Plato’s portrayal give us insight into the related problems of giving a consistent account of his historical counterpart.

Protagoras of Abdera

Father of the sophists, and the center of the day’s questioning, the dialogue is aptly named after Protagoras. He is arguably *the* intellectual all-star of 5th century Greece and is the main attraction of the present gathering at the house of Callias. Not only is he the father of the sophists, he is also old enough to be the father of everyone present and exercises a great command over the room.¹⁰ Protagoras is a man who fascinated the

¹⁰ *Protagoras* 317c. This puts estimates for his birth at no later than 490 BC. As well as being the oldest of the crowd, Diogenes Laertius credits Protagoras with many ‘firsts’: first to charge a large fee, first to distinguish tenses of a verb, first to emphasize the right moment, first to use dialectical attacks on any thesis and, most interestingly, first to use ‘Socratic method’ (*Lives of the Philosophers* IX 51-53).

people of his time, and partly due to the relative abundance of his testimonia continues to fascinate modern readers.

Like Socrates, Protagoras lived to be about 70 years old, dying in the 420s in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War. He had a close relationship with Pericles that supposedly began with a day long discussion about a javelin accident that killed a man. Was the thrower, the authorities, or the javelin itself responsible for the man's death?¹¹ Pericles then invited him back for the founding of a new pan-Hellenic colony at Thurii, for which Protagoras helped draft a new constitution. Among his known works were the *Antilogiae* or contrary arguments; *On the Gods* where he argues that we can never know anything about the gods or even whether or not they exist; and perhaps most famously *Truth*, where he opens with his famous doctrine that 'man is the measure of all things, of those which are, that they are, and of those which are not, that they are not' (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν).¹²

In the *Protagoras* he appears as a man of common sense with a penetrating understanding of conventional wisdom. He argues for the importance of the virtues and their teachability in his Great Speech and displays a distinct capacity for complex explanation.¹³ His hermeneutic impulse is primarily centrifugal; a capacity that complements his lengthy and rhetorically stunning exhibitions. When responding to Socrates' argument that wisdom is courage he begins with a logical distinction: that the courageous (ἀνδρείους) are confident (θαρραλέους) but not all the confident are

¹¹ Plutarch, *Pericles* 36.

¹² As appears in *Theaetetus* 152a. trans. Dillon and Gergel.

¹³ *Protagoras* 320d-328d. see "Protagoras and Socrates" below for a more detailed discussion of the Great Speech.

courageous.¹⁴ He then continues with an analysis of the analogous case of capability (du/namin) and strength (i0sxu/n) and gives a complete genealogy of each concept: capability comes from knowledge (ἐπιστήμης), madness (μανίας), or anger (θυμοῦ); confidence from skill (τέχνης), madness, or anger; strength from a good natural condition and nurture of the body (ἀπὸ φύσεως καὶ εὐτροφίας τῶν σωμάτων); and courage from a good natural condition and nurture of the soul (ἀπὸ φύσεως καὶ εὐτροφίας τῶν ψυχῶν). We will see later on why Socrates might have a problem with this type of explanation.

Nonetheless, the sympathetic portrayal of Protagoras in the dialogue is one of its most remarkable elements. As Guthrie notes:

“The respect with which [Plato] treats his views is all the more impressive for his profound disagreement with him. In the dramatic setting which is one of the chief charms of the dialogue *Protagoras*, the great Sophist is certainly portrayed as fully conscious of his own merits, with a harmless vanity and love of admiration which amused Socrates and tempted him to a little good-tempered leg-pulling; but in the discussion he remains consistently urbane in the face of considerable provocation, including fallacious and unscrupulous argument, on the part of Socrates, displaying at the end, as Vlastos well expresses it, a magnanimity which is ‘self-conscious but not insincere’. His own contributions to the discussion are on a consistently high level both intellectually and morally, and leave no doubt of the high esteem in which Plato held him.”¹⁵

Protagoras could have been easily portrayed similarly to an explosive Thrasymachus or a detached Gorgias. While at times frustrated, he is unique in his ability to stay cool in the face of Socrates’ incessant questioning without completely detaching himself from the discussion. Surprisingly he goes along with Socrates’ desire to investigate moral

¹⁴ 350c. As it turns out, Protagoras is mistaken in his interpretation of Socrates’ argument. For a more detailed discussion of this passage see section three of “Making Sense of Socrates” *Wisdom and Courage: Take One*.

¹⁵ Guthrie, 265.

questions without falling back into a typical exposition of his ontological subjectivism.¹⁶ His arguments concerning the nature and teachability of virtue are intuitive yet persuasive; if nothing else they provide a worthy challenge for anyone who might wish to provide an alternate account.

Prodicus of Ceos

The basic facts about Prodicus are few but tend to be consistent across different sources. His exact dates are quite uncertain but he is thought to have been born between 470 and 460 BC,¹⁷ and must have lived until at least 399 since Plato mentions him in the *Apology*. Both Plato and Aristotle mention his famous ‘fifty drachma lecture (ἐπίδειξις),’ which was supposedly a particularly engaging display. The only evidence of Prodicus’ actual writing is thought to be a portion of his *Horai*, mentioned in a scholion to Aristophanes’ *Clouds* and recounted by Socrates in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*. This is the well-known ‘Choice of Heracles’ where, presented with hard road to virtue and the temptations of vice, Heracles takes the noble path.¹⁸ The most distinctive feature of Prodicus’ work (and the most frequently noted) is his subtle feel for language and his skill in distinguishing between the meanings of near-synonyms. Unfortunately, other than this we have very little evidence about whom and what

¹⁶ Vlastos, in his 1956 introduction to the dialogue, suggests that Socrates purposefully steers Protagoras away from a discussion of ontology. What Protagoras discusses instead is his *moral* subjectivism, which Vlastos thinks is implied by his *ontological* subjectivism. What is so remarkable is that Protagoras never falls back on his more familiar ontological trump cards.

¹⁷ Diels-Kranz, *The Older Sophists*.

¹⁸ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21-34 (as cited in Dillon and Gergel, *The Greek Sophists*).

Prodicus actually taught or why he found the distinctions between similar words so important.

One common thread that does appear throughout the testimonia is Prodicus' association with Socrates. While a native of Ceos he seems to have spent a fair amount of time in Athens, perhaps as an official diplomat. Aristophanes mentions him multiple times throughout the *Clouds*, suggesting that he was associated with Socrates in the mind of the public. There is even a report of his being put to death by hemlock for corrupting the youth that, while evidently spurious, testifies to the connection. Plato's Socrates seems quite familiar with Prodicus as well, and he mentions Prodicus as his personal teacher in both the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*.¹⁹

In light of this close association between the two figures, Prodicus' portrayal in the *Protagoras* seems quite curious. In a way Prodicus becomes Socrates' comic relief throughout the dialogue, raising the question of what exactly Socrates thinks of his contemporary. In the bustling scene of sophists in Callias' basement Socrates describes Prodicus as lazing under a pile of blankets in an old storeroom, and continues to pun off of his famous precision with language by noting his deep yet indiscernible voice: "I was very eager to hear Prodicus—for I think that he is a wonderful man, and very learned—but his deep voice made such a booming noise in the room that the words themselves were indistinct" (καίπερ λιπαρῶς ἔχων ἀκούειν τοῦ Προδίκου—πάσσοφος γάρ μοι δοκεῖ ἄνηρ εἶναι καὶ θεῖος—ἀλλὰ διὰ τὴν

¹⁹ Socrates calls himself Prodicus' pupil at *Protagoras* 341a and mentions him as a friend or teacher in *Meno*, *Charmides*, and *Hippias Major*. See Guthrie, 275-276: "There is no doubt that Socrates had close personal relations with [Prodicus], attended his lectures on the importance of using words precisely, and (I should say) felt a certain affection for his doonish gullibility."

βαρύτητα τῆς φωνῆς βόμβος τις ἐν τῷ οἰκίματι γιγνόμενος ἀσαφῆ ἔποιει τὰ λεγόμενα).²⁰

Prodicus' distinctions often connect in subtle ways to other features of the dialogue. Prodicus explains, for instance, the difference between that which brings pleasure (ἡδεσθαι), a base satisfaction involving the body, and that which brings enjoyment (εὐφραίνεσθαι), which comes about through learning and the exercise of the mind. While Taylor points out this actually has very little basis in common Greek usage,²¹ this is exactly the sense in which pleasure is discussed during the hedonism passage, and surprisingly Prodicus himself jumps right on board with Socrates' 'hedonic measuring craft' at the end of the dialogue.²²

While Prodicus' distinctions are sharp and impressive, he himself doesn't seem to understand their real significance. In the discussion of the Simonides poem, Socrates solicits Prodicus' help in understanding Simonides' vocabulary and encourages him to make a number of distinctions. Protagoras swiftly rejects the interpretation as ridiculous. Socrates stays on his toes and plays it off as a simple joke to buy himself time, but there is no evidence that Prodicus didn't think he was being serious.²³ At the end of the hedonism passage Socrates intercepts the distinction that he sees coming about types of pleasure by asking Prodicus to simply go along with "what I mean" (πρὸς ὃ βούλομαι).²⁴ Similarly when Prodicus tries to explain the difference between fear

²⁰ 315e-316a, trans. Taylor.

²¹ Plato, *Protagoras*, 136-140 (Taylor's commentary).

²² I cannot help but borrow the term 'hedonic measuring craft' from Terrence Irwin in his book *Plato's Ethics*.

²³ 339e-341e.

²⁴ 358b.

(φόβος) and apprehension (δέος) Socrates dismisses the distinction as irrelevant.²⁵ In fact, Socrates explicitly uses words that Prodicus had distinguished ‘incorrectly’ without the slightest objection.²⁶ One would think that if Prodicus had developed such a fine-tuned skill with language he would be able to defend the importance of his distinctions. Perhaps he simply lacks Socrates’ philosophical nuance; in the *Theaetetus* Socrates mentions sending any pupils that he thought weren’t philosophically ripe off to Prodicus, whose lessons he thought they would find more enjoyable.

While one can see how Socrates would be naturally inclined towards Prodicus’ distinction between words, the caricatured portrayal of his gullible, quibbling colleague is surely not simply a sign of affection. Furthermore, the sincerity of Socrates’ praise is at best doubtful; when the conversation breaks down later on and Prodicus gives his advice on how they should proceed, he himself distinguishes between genuine esteem and empty praise: “for esteem (εὐδοκιμεῖν) is something genuine in the minds of one’s hearers, while praise (ἐπαίνεῖσθαι) is often mere deceitful words contrary to their real opinion.”²⁷

Hippias of Elis

Hippias figures much less prominently in the dialogue yet surely is equally well known. Two complete dialogues attributed to Plato have come down to us bearing his name, and while he may not say much in the *Protagoras* his presence is still felt throughout. Generally considered one of the younger sophists and a contemporary of Socrates, the only evidence we have for his age are statements in the *Protagoras* and

²⁵ 358e.

²⁶ See Sansone, “Heracles at the Y” p. 140.

²⁷ 337b, trans. Taylor.

Hippias Major that claim he was much younger than Protagoras.²⁸ His mention in Plato's *Apology* suggests that he outlived Socrates, but the exact date of his death is unknown. Evidence of his writing is equally scarce. There is mention of his writing an elegy, a list of Olympic victors, and a *Trojan Dialogue* (interestingly reminiscent of Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles*), where a young Neoptolemus asks Nestor about what noble deeds one must do to gain a good reputation. He was also an avid reader and collected selections from his extensive research in the *Synagoge*.²⁹

While Hippias lacked the dynamic personality of Protagoras he was quite skilled in a range of subjects. He had great powers of memory and is portrayed in the dialogues as having taught a wide variety of sciences, including mathematics, music, astronomy, linguistic science, literature, handcrafts and mnemonics.³⁰ A telling anecdote recounts him arriving at *Olympia* boasting of having made everything on his person including his clothing, a ring, an oil-flask, and a strigil.³¹ He seems to have thought quite highly of himself and famously claimed to have never lost a verbal contest at the *Olympics*. This sober-minded polymath may have taken himself a bit too seriously; at *Protagoras* 347a he offers to give his own interpretation of the Simonides poem but is completely ignored. Yet, as Guthrie points out, this doesn't mean that he wasn't respected by his contemporaries: "[Hippias] was in fact a somewhat bombastic, humourless and thick-skinned character. He is given to breath-taking remarks like 'I have never found any man

²⁸ *Protagoras* 317c, *Hippias Major* 282d-e.

²⁹ Dillon and Gergel, *The Greek Sophists*.

³⁰ This is alluded to in the *Protagoras* when Protagoras criticizes some sophists for forcing their pupils into a variety of subjects and gives Hippias a sly look (*Protagoras* 318e).

³¹ *Hippias Minor* 368b-d. A strigil is an instrument used to scrape dirt and sweat from the skin.

who was my superior in anything’, and the unsuspecting innocence with which he laps up the most blatantly ironic flattery from Socrates is almost attractive. Certainly he is a man with whom it would be difficult to be angry.”³² Interestingly, his peripheral position in the discussion contrasts with his physical position at the center of the group. Hippias already has a large group of students gathered around him when Socrates and Protagoras decide they want to speak in public; thus they order Alcibiades and Critias to arrange the rest of the benches around Hippias so they may undertake their conversation there. Despite being the youngest and least outspoken in the dialogue, Hippias’ encyclopedic knowledge serves as an appropriate metaphorical gathering place for their debate on wisdom, education, and excellence.

Hippias and Socrates: A Middle Way?

When Socrates’ conversation breaks down in the middle of the *Protagoras*, what at first appears to be a familiar moment of *aporia* turns into fascinating display of a range of characters’ views on method. Hippias gets the final word, ultimately convincing both Protagoras and Socrates to continue for another 20 pages:

“ἔγω μὲν οὖν καὶ δέομαι καὶ συμβουλεύω, ὦ Πρωταγόρα τε καὶ Σώκρατες, συβῆναι ὑμᾶς ὥσπερ ὑπὸ διαιτητῶν ἡμῶν συμβιβαζόντων εἰς τὸ μέσον, καὶ μήτε σὲ τὸ ἀκριβὲς τοῦτο εἶδος τῶν διαλόγων ζητεῖν τὸ κατὰ βραχὺ λίαν, εἰ μὴ ἡδὺ Πρωταγόρα, ἀλλ’ ἐφείναι καὶ χαλάσαι τὰς ἡνίας τοῖς λόγοις, ἵνα μεγαλοπρεπέστεροι καὶ εὐσχημονέστεροι ἡμῖν φαίνωνται, μήτ’ αὖ Πρωταγόραν πάντα κάλων ἐκτείναντα, οὐρίᾳ ἐφέντα, φεύγειν εἰς τὸ πέλαγος τῶν λόγων ἀποκρύψαντα γῆν, ἀλλὰ μέσον τι ἀμφοτέρους τεμεῖν.”

(338a)

³² Guthrie, *The Sophists*.

“I beg and council you then, Protagoras and Socrates, to regard us as arbitrators and come to an agreement. For your part, Socrates, I advise you not to seek that sort of precision in the discussion which involves excessive brevity, if that is not agreeable to Protagoras, but to let go and slacken the reins of the discourse, so as to give it more dignity and elegance. And on the other hand I advise Protagoras not to crowd on all sail and run before the wind into a sea of words out of sight of land; both of you should take a middle course.”

(trans. Taylor)

Socrates disagrees with some of Hippias’ specific recommendations but does indeed suggest his own version of a compromise. Can the dialogue be seen as an exploration of this ‘middle course’ of Hippias?

The dialogue is less a sharp contrast between two directly opposed methods of Socrates and Protagoras than a more nuanced exploration of something like this ‘middle course’ between multiple different paths mapped in the conversation. Socrates distances himself just as much from Prodicus’ excessive quibbling over words as he does from Protagoras’ detailed and longwinded expositions. While Hippias’ own specific solutions might be somewhat flat-footed, perhaps Socrates does take this idea of a middle course seriously.³³ By taking a closer look at the tensions between Socrates and his main interlocutors we can better understand how Socrates reacts to each of their positions as well as what positive methods or doctrines he might be proposing.

³³ This idea of an emphasis on a middle course is supported by what Pavel Hobza notes as the ‘surprising abundance’ of the terms διαλέγεσθαι and συνουσία, both of which require engaging with multiple perspectives. διαλέγεσθαι, for instance, appears fourteen times in these four pages where the conversation breaks down. For more details and comparison with other dialogues, see Hobza, 205 (footnote 28).

Prodicus and Socrates: 'The Choice of Socrates'

Confronted with this array of characters, Socrates is presented with a choice of methodologies. This 'Choice of Socrates' is reminiscent of the choice Heracles confronts in Prodicus' famous lecture, both in subject matter and in the complicated nature of the decision involved. It is certainly plausible that Plato, the historical Socrates, and the original readers of the *Protagoras* were all familiar with this story, although ultimately impossible to verify whether or not they had access to it. What is certain is that modern readers have access to Xenophon's text and that the connections with the *Protagoras* are both manifest and fruitful. By imagining the Socrates of the *Protagoras* taking Heracles' place in the famous story we can gain insight into the nature of his decision and understand why Socrates might want to distance himself from Prodicus.

The story comes to us through Xenophon, and within his *Memorabilia* through the mouth of Socrates. It begins with a young Heracles contemplating whether to take the path of virtue or vice (there is no explanation of why he is prompted to think about this issue in the first place, although this might not seem so strange to Socrates). Soon he sees two women approaching him who turn out to be Virtue and Vice, an ancient version of the shoulder angel/devil. While there is no explicit statement of which one Heracles chooses, the choice of Virtue is implied when Socrates says this was the beginning of Heracles' education by virtue.³⁴

Given that Socrates, at least according to Xenophon's portrayal, was quite fond of this story, it is hard not to see it working in the background of the *Protagoras*. At a first glance there are many immediate links. Heracles in this story is at the formative stage of

³⁴ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.34.

his life just between childhood and manhood. Similarly Alcibiades is on the brink of ἠβη or youthful prime and Hippocrates says that he was too young to remember Protagoras' last visit which, given the account of him as a frequenter of Athens and a representative of Ceos, is hard to believe was too long before their current conversation. Furthermore, as in the dialogue, pleasure is a major theme in the debate between Virtue and Vice. The latter praises the life of ease and the satisfaction of desires while the former holds up the long road to the more noble good (Virtue in this passage likes to speak of the noble or 'τὸ καλόν'). The immediate context of the passage from the *Memorabilia* also implies a direct link, since the last lines of the chapter, like the beginning of the *Protagoras*, stress the importance of thinking ahead in one's life. Socrates' quotation of the 'Choice of Heracles' in the *Memorabilia* appears in the context of a number of thematically similar quotations from Ephicharmus and Hesiod, including the same quotation from *Works and Days* that Plato's Socrates uses in his interpretation of the Simonides poem.³⁵ What might the Socrates of the *Protagoras* think of this choice?

The narrator in the passage is obviously biased.³⁶ The physical descriptions of Virtue and Vice reveal implicit value judgments about their respective characters. Virtue has a fine and noble air while Vice is pale, fleshy, and scantily clad. The exchange is hardly a debate and on the surface Heracles' choice by no means a difficult one. Virtue

³⁵ *Protagoras* 340d.

³⁶ A careful reader will point out that the narrator himself is Socrates, but this does not mean that the implicit views of the narrator are the straightforward views of Xenophon's Socrates, the historical Socrates, or the Socrates of the *Protagoras*. I would like to suggest that the biased views of the narrator here reflect common biases in the public perception of virtue in the same way that the views Socrates argues for at the end of the dialogue are not his own (see below). At this point what is useful is not speculating about the relation between different portrayals of Socrates, but understanding how this text might elucidate Socrates' portrayal in the *Protagoras* given the many similarities between the two texts.

takes the moral high ground and speaks to the conventional goods of love, friendship, respect, and productivity that come from hard work and the worship of the gods. Vice speaks of all of the easy benefits that come about in the life of gratification, yet fails to be at all persuasive. She even admits that while she calls herself Happiness (εὐδαιμονία), those who aren't her followers call her Vice (κακία), and Vice is how she is always referred to by the narrator. She gets one small jab at Virtue when she is able to point out her adversary's path as a 'long and difficult road to enjoyment' (χαλεπήν καὶ μάκρην ὁδὸν ἐπὶ τὰς εὐφροσύνας).³⁷ Yet Virtue is allowed to come back with a much more persuasive response about all of the limitations involved in the life of Vice, followed by a lengthy and rhetorically elevated speech.

The narrator portrays Vice as the easy way out, but in this biased portrayal paints Virtue as obviously the superior choice. The choice, however, isn't quite so easy. Vice seems to take after Prodicus himself, making many of the same distinctions between words in this passage that Prodicus does in the *Protagoras*. Here vice uses ἡδονή, τέρπνον, and εὐφραίνεσθαι, while Virtue's vocabulary is limited simply to ἡδονή.³⁸ The description of Virtue, on the other hand, does seem to be somewhat Socratic. Virtue says: "I will not deceive you with anticipations of pleasure; instead, I shall set out for you truly just how the gods have ordained things to be."³⁹ This emphasis on truth rather than deceit seems familiar, but is Vice really being deceitful here in the Choice of Heracles? She straightforwardly describes her position and if anything has a more nuanced

³⁷ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.29.

³⁸ As Sansone points out, however, Vice uses a wide range of vocabulary but doesn't explicitly distinguish between their meanings, applying them inconsistently and contradicting Prodicus' usage in the *Protagoras*. Sansone, "Heracles at the Y."

³⁹ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.27.

understanding of multiple types of goods than Virtue's sweeping approval of conventional morality. Virtue does talk about matters of trust and hard work, also present in Socrates' positions in the *Protagoras*, yet she also identifies the "sweetest of all sounds" as praise of oneself.

Not being one to compromise his own ideals, surely Socrates wouldn't agree with Vice's narrow pursuit of pleasure nor would he blindly follow the rhetoric of Virtue without a better reason to do so than mere praise. In fact, Socrates likely has the very same reservations about Prodicus himself; a man engaged in his own narrow pursuit of verbal distinctions yet unable to explain the greater significance of his methods. What would Socrates choose in light of such a decision? Unlike a simple question of 'too short' or 'too long,' in this situation Hippias' 'middle way' is anything but obvious. Socrates might be attracted to Virtue's emphasis on the truth or on Vice's ability to deal with complexity. He might even have some positive ideas of his own. What implications does that have for Socrates' own method in responding to such a situation?

While giving a positive interpretation of Socratic method based on the 'Choice of Heracles' would be at best speculative, we can now better understand the type of challenge Socrates is up against. We have seen why someone like Socrates might admire Prodicus' sharp wit but remain unsatisfied with its lack of depth. Prodicus' 'Choice of Heracles' itself shows this same clever opposition between two concepts without the support of a deeper philosophical point, and Socrates will have to look elsewhere for the basis of his own argumentative strategy.

Socrates and Protagoras: Negotiating Similarities, Differences

When Protagoras finishes his great speech at 328d Socrates is stunned. He has questioned Protagoras about excellence, asking the age-old question of whether virtue can be taught and giving his own negative examples (that anyone in the assembly is allowed to speak as an expert on matters of justice and that good citizens are unable to pass on their excellence to their children). Socrates' loss for words after Protagoras' response is understandable, as he has been given not only a set of clever counterexamples, but an entire myth that practically scans, an explanation of the myth's significance, and a brilliantly nuanced logical argument that provides a comprehensive account of Protagoras' thoughts on virtue.⁴⁰ Socrates admits that he has been persuaded by Protagoras' exposition and claims to have only one small question—that of the unity of the virtues that dominates the next 35 pages of conversation.

But where does Socrates' concern come from in the first place? He seems to have been prompted by Protagoras' speech itself but the real force of the question of unity remains unclear. By taking a closer look at Protagoras' speech as well as the initial exchange between him and Socrates we can both appreciate Protagoras' great nuance and skill and come to a better understanding of the fundamental points on which he and Socrates differ. This examination will help us understand methodological differences in particular.

⁴⁰ In this section I focus on Protagoras' strategy in responding to Socrates' questions and the differences in method that result. For a more detailed discussion on Protagoras' positive views on virtue see my piece on "Making Sense of Socrates," especially section two: *Protagoras and the τέχνη Model of Virtue*. There I argue that Protagoras sees virtue primarily on analogy with a skill or τέχνη, a view that is important for understanding philosophical differences between Socrates and Protagoras, and one that Socrates engages with specifically in the last 15 pages of the dialogue (as we will see below, this also helps us understand their methodological differences).

Socrates gives Protagoras a very difficult explanatory task with the specific examples he offers. In order to resolve both difficulties Protagoras must show how everyone is in a sense equal with regard to virtue and at the same time why certain individuals aren't able to attain the same level of excellence as their fathers, all the while defending his position as educator by arguing that virtue can be taught.⁴¹

To answer the first difficulty Protagoras gives the obvious answer, that *everyone* shares in justice (on the contrary, he could have asserted that *no one* is really just, but this would have made it much harder to leave any room for himself as teacher). He shows this through his myth, explaining why Zeus was prompted to distribute justice and shame equally to everyone for the success of the city and the survival of mankind. His example of being shamed for claiming to be unjust reinforces this point and sets justice apart from a skill like flute playing where not everyone is expected to be an expert.⁴²

Up to this point Protagoras has shown virtue to be a sort of natural disposition. His challenge now is to explain in what way virtue can be taught. He distinguishes justice from a natural disposition like ugliness, which comes about by 'nature and by chance'. Instead the virtues come about through education, as punishment for unjust actions implies the expectation that one's character can be changed. Thus while ugliness

⁴¹ Socrates' two main observations that need to be explained by Protagoras are 1) that while only experts are allowed to speak at the assembly about matters pertaining to their expertise, anyone can speak about political matters and 2) that someone like Pericles who is considered to be virtuous is unable to pass those qualities on to his children. Both of these observations challenge Protagoras' claim that virtue can be taught (*Protagoras* 319a-320c).

⁴² *Protagoras* 322b-323b.

comes about by ‘nature and by chance’ (φύση καὶ τύχῃ) justice is about ‘nature and education’ (φύση καὶ παιδευτή).⁴³

This gives Protagoras a brilliant way of tying everything together. According to Protagoras, everyone is naturally disposed to become just, only to different degrees. Furthermore, it takes proper nurture and education to realize that potential, and since justice is unique in being essential for the functioning of the city, it happens to be something that everyone teaches to the best of his ability (not only are we all just, but we are also all *teachers* of justice, further reinforcing why it is anyone can speak up in the assembly). Thus compared to someone with no education whatsoever everyone is perfectly just, but compared to others who have received the same education levels of justice vary depending on one’s natural dispositions. Here Protagoras explains why a good man’s children won’t necessarily be quite as good, since while everyone is teaching them to their greatest potential they may simply not have the same exceptional dispositions (note that just because justice is partly a natural disposition doesn’t necessarily mean for Protagoras that it is hereditary). With these distinctions Protagoras can now easily show why everyone can speak about political matters in the assembly and why different citizens reach different levels of virtue, all the while maintaining that virtue can be taught. Protagoras leaves just enough room at the end to modestly claim that he just happens to be particularly well-suited to teach virtue,⁴⁴ but the bulk of his proof lies in his exceptional display.

⁴³ 323c-324c. Note the similarity to Protagoras’ position on courage discussed above, where courage comes about through a good nature and nurture of the mind.

⁴⁴ 328b-c.

We see, then, how Socrates' challenge pushes Protagoras to make a number of distinctions between virtue and other types of teachable skills. We have seen how Protagoras expertly pulls together his response, yet he doesn't limit himself to this most basic level of explanation. In his story of origins he can't help but tell the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus and explain how we acquired practical skills as well as give an account of Zeus distributing justice equally. When talking about education he finds himself explaining not only how virtue is teachable, but describing in detail how poetry makes one aspire to be good, how lyric makes one gentle and well-spoken, and how physical training develops strength and courage. As we saw above, Protagoras has an exceptional ability to articulate these complicated explanations at length.

Yet this is exactly what Socrates is responding to. He cleverly tries to get Protagoras to cut his answers short by praising him for his supposed skill in both long expositions and pointed arguments.⁴⁵ While Protagoras has indeed given a convincing answer, Socrates' question about the unity of the virtues is designed to tie up a few loose ends. In his various explanations Protagoras begins talking specifically about 'justice and shame', then 'justice and the rest of the excellences of a citizen', 'impiety and injustice and whatever is the opposite of the excellence of a citizen', and 'justice and soundness of mind and holiness—human excellence, in a word.'⁴⁶ By the end of his speech he has variously used the terms 'citizens' excellence,' 'human excellence,' and 'excellence' to entail some combination of justice, holiness, and soundness of mind. Furthermore at 325d he speaks more generally about everyone teaching everyone else what is καλόν and what αἰσχρόν (two opposites entailing moral implications).

⁴⁵ 329b.

⁴⁶ 322c, 323b, 324a, and 325a respectively.

What, exactly, is Protagoras talking about here, and how are all of these concepts related under his theory of virtue? This is exactly Socrates' concern when he asks:

“ὁ δ' ἐθαύμασά σου λέγοντος, τοῦτό μοι ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἀποπλήρωσον. ἔλεγες γὰρ ὅτι ὁ Ζεὺς τὴν δικαιοσύνην καὶ τὴν αἰδῶ πέμψειε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, καὶ αὖ πολλοῦ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἐλέγετο ὑπὸ σου ἢ δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ ὁσιότης καὶ πάντα ταῦτα ὡς ἓν τι εἴη συλλήβδην, ἀρετὴ· ταῦτ' οὖν αὐτὰ δῖελθῆ μοι ἀκριβῶς τῷ λογῶ, πότερον ἓν μὲν τί ἐστὶν ἢ ἀρετὴ, μέρια δὲ αὐτῆς ἐστὶν ἢ δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ ὁσιότης, ἢ ταῦτ' ἐστὶν ἅ νυνδὲ ἐγὼ ἔλεγον πάντα ὀνόματα τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐνὸς ὄντος.”

(329c)

“Just satisfy me on something which surprised me when you said it. You said that Zeus bestowed justice and conscience on mankind, and then many times in your discourse you spoke of justice and soundness of mind and holiness and all the rest as all summed up as the one thing, excellence. Will you then explain precisely whether excellence is one thing, and justice and soundness of mind and holiness parts of it, or whether all of these that I've just mentioned are different names of one and the same thing.”

(trans. Taylor)

Protagoras goes with the former; excellence is one thing and the rest parts of it. Socrates seems to agree. It is important to note here that neither Socrates nor Protagoras thinks that all of the above are really one and the same, thus neither considers a complete unity of the virtues. Yet Socrates gives Protagoras another distinction upon which they disagree. Protagoras again focuses on the differences between each part, seeing a face containing different parts with distinct powers as the best analogy. Socrates, on the other hand, focuses on their similarities, preferring to think of it as small pieces of gold that come together to form one larger piece.

Their disagreement is perhaps articulated best when Socrates is questioning Protagoras about the unity of Justice and Holiness. After being prodded to speak his mind, Protagoras responds:

“προσείκεν τι δικαιοσύνη ὁσιότητι· καὶ γὰρ ὅτιοῦν ὄτωοῦν ἀμῆ γέ πη προσείκεν. τὸ γὰρ λευκὸν τῷ μέλανι ἔστιν ὅπη προσείκεν, καὶ τὸ σκληρὸν τῷ μαλακῷ, καὶ τὰλλα ἅ δοκεῖ ἐναντιότατα εἶναι ἀλλήλοις· καὶ ἅ τότε ἔφαμεν ἄλλην δύναμιν ἔχειν καὶ οὐκ εἶναι τὸ ἕτερον οἷον τὸ ἕτερον, τὰ τοῦ προσώπου μόρια, ἀμῆ γέ πη προσείκεν καὶ ἔστιν τὸ ἕτερον. ὥστε τούτω γε τῷ τρόπῳ κἂν ταῦτα ἐλέγχοις, εἰ βούλοιο, ὡς ἅπαντά ἐστιν ὅμοια ἀλλήλοις. ἀλλ’ οὐχὶ τὰ ὅμοιον τι ἔχοντα ὅμοια δίκαιον καλεῖν, οὐδὲ τὰ ἀνόμοιον τι ἔχοντα ἀνόμοια, κἂν πάνυ σμικρὸν ἔχη.”

(331d-e)

“Justice resembles holiness in a way; since in fact anything resembles anything else in some way or other. There is a respect in which white resembles black, and hard soft, and all the other things that seem completely opposite to each other. We said before that the parts of the face have different powers and are not like on another. Well, in a way each one does resemble and is like the others. So by this line of argument you could prove, if you wanted to, that these too are all similar to one another. But it isn’t right to call things “similar” just because they have some point of similarity, however small, nor “dissimilar” if they have some dissimilarity.”

(trans. Taylor)

Socrates says he’s shocked, and believes that Justice and Holiness have more than a slight similarity. Yet their disagreement here is more than simply the degree to which Justice and Holiness relate to one another, but rather a deeper disagreement on how to go about exploring the relations between concepts.

Protagoras was originally prompted by Socrates to explain the uniqueness of virtue and he did so by striking a delicate balance between nature and nurture. We can see why Socrates might be attracted by this clever tying together of concepts. After all, it gives Socrates an excuse for why followers of his like Alcibiades and Critias might eventually go astray.⁴⁷ Yet in crafting his complex explanation Protagoras gets carried

⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that while Socrates is accused at the beginning of the dialogue of having been chasing after Alcibiades (309a), it is really Alcibiades who chases after Socrates in the dialogue, just like in the *Symposium*. Both he and Critias come into the room literally following right behind Socrates at 316a, and neither one hesitates to go

away. Throughout his account of human nature in the great myth the only concept that ties everything together is mere human persistence; the functioning of the city only seems to be valued insofar as it increases individuals' chances at survival.⁴⁸ Yet when he speaks later on about excellence he seems to refer to a higher moral good through his use of concepts like τὸ καλόν. While Protagoras is happy to give separate explanations for each separate point, Socrates isn't satisfied with his inconsistency. This, fundamentally, is why Socrates remains unsatisfied with Protagoras' exhibition, and why he continues to explore the relations between each of the virtues individually as well as between the good life and virtue as a whole. For Socrates this is exactly what education is all about, understanding the fundamental connections between concepts in a way that illuminates them individually and explains their common significance.

Socrates and Socrates: Resolving Contradictions Through Dialog

Now that we understand the choices Socrates is up against and how he might see himself as different from three very distinct portrayals of a 'sophist,' the difficulty remains of explaining how Socrates responds to the challenge, and why he responds in the way that he does. Here we can once again imagine Socrates confronted with Heracles' choice between virtue and vice. Does go along with the rhetoric of Virtue,

fetch Prodicus at Soocrates' bidding (317d). Alcibiades repeatedly steps in on Socrates' behalf, yet seems to mistakenly interpret his purpose as merely winning in the argument. Critias mentions that Alcibiades takes the side of whoever he is keen on (in this case Socrates) which serves doubly as an implicit comment on Alcibiades' shifting loyalties in the Peloponnesian War. Unlike the *Symposium*, however, Alcibiades plays a very minor role and is the only one chasing after Socrates, while Protagoras has the attention Hippocrates, all of his students, and even Socrates himself.

⁴⁸ McCoy reinforces this point strongly. See *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* pp. 63-65.

follow Vice's wit, or navigate a 'middle course' involving both? As we will see, in a way Socrates adopts all of the above.

In Socrates' response to the prompt about a Simonides poem, however, his work appears to be primarily negative and empty just like Virtue's conventional morality. He begins by soliciting the help of Prodicus, and immediately focuses in on close distinctions between 'being' and 'becoming' as well as 'bad' and 'hard.' Here he takes on Prodicus' narrow quibbling over words, something Socrates admits has no real relevance to the passage when Protagoras objects by claiming it was merely a joke (and by admitting to his friends that he was simply doing this to buy time). Next he embarks on his long exhibition, mirroring Protagoras' method and literally 'transposing the truth' (343e).⁴⁹ Earlier he compared orators (and implicitly Protagoras) to bronze that goes on ringing for a long time once struck, and here he does the same. In his speech Socrates argues for a number of positions one might be sympathetic to: the importance of wisdom and self knowledge, the impossibility of acting against one's will, and doing nothing in excess. Yet he leaves these concepts unexplained and unconnected, and by concentrating only on the poem and not making any room for questions he ultimately fails to help us understand why someone might think that way.⁵⁰

Take wisdom and courage, important concepts that will be discussed at length later on in the dialogue. Here Socrates says that while the Spartans are usually thought of as being exceptionally courageous it's really just all a guise for their real expertise: wisdom. Yet given Socrates' unity argument courage *is* wisdom, and we can in fact

⁴⁹ 343e.

⁵⁰ It is important to note that this is not entirely Socrates' fault as Protagoras was the one who framed this part of the conversation.

understand why these virtues are so important for the Spartans. Socrates doesn't offer this sort of explanation here, but rather treats the two concepts as completely unrelated, neglecting to discuss their significance. Earlier Socrates had claimed he would show Protagoras how he should be answering questions.⁵¹ What he goes on to do is the exact opposite; he emulates the very ways in which Protagoras *should not* go about giving his answers by mimicking Protagorean method. At the end of his exhibition Socrates projects onto Simonides the view that no one is perfect, but that when it comes to praise and blame: "it is enough for me if [a man] is in between and does nothing bad" (ἀλλά μοι ἔξαρκεῖ ἄν ἧ μέσος καὶ μηδὲν κακὸν ποιῆ).⁵² Perhaps this explains part of Socrates' negative approach as simply trying to keep others from doing anything bad. Yet since the positive content of his response seems defensible why does he mimic Protagorean and Prodician method instead of defending his own views?⁵³

Next it is Socrates' turn to ask the questions, a chance for him to question with a different approach that more closely resembles the cleverness of Vice. In the initial discussion of wisdom and courage Socrates argues for the unity of the two concepts. Protagoras gives an alternate understanding and Socrates, instead of restating his own position or adopting that of Protagoras simply to show its faults, takes a much more nuanced approach through the discussion of hedonism. His arguments are based on Protagoras' equation of pleasure with the good, a position he personally doesn't hold and

⁵¹ 338d.

⁵² 346d, trans. Taylor. Note the reappearance of the μέσος or 'middle way' stressed by Hippias.

⁵³ Pavel Hobza points out the striking symmetry of the first and second halves of the dialogue (as marked by the breakdown of the conversation 335b-338e). This brings out the many similarities between Protagoras' great speech and Socrates' lengthy interpretation of the Simonides poem. See Hobza, 200-201.

that he allows Protagoras to change on multiple occasions.⁵⁴ Ultimately this argument leads both to the obviously ridiculous μετρητικὴ τέχνη as well as a number of typical Socratic theses, including the importance of knowledge, the impossibility of being overcome by pleasure, and the unity of the virtues. Instead of taking one extreme or another Socrates has navigated a complicated middle path, arguing at length for a doctrine he doesn't believe in yet at the same time explicitly pointing out its weak points and asserting views that, given a more nuanced understanding of the good, might ultimately be useful ones. There are a number of clever dramatic shifts that allow Socrates to keep talking to Protagoras and examining his implicit assumptions without attacking him directly (e.g. conversing with 'the many'). Thus while in the Simonides passage Socrates mimics sophistic methods while supplying his own positive content, here he is employing (or mimicking) his own method, only with content supplied by Protagoras and the many.⁵⁵

This raises the issue of Socratic method. Again, are his actions in the dialogue better characterized by the complicated weaving between two positions we see in the hedonism passage or by the adoption of extremes found in his interpretation of the Simonides poem? Not surprisingly, Socrates himself makes two comments about method two pages apart from each other that seem to contradict each other. At 331c Protagoras, frustrated, gives up on his position, but Socrates won't have any of it:

“ἀλλὰ τί τοῦτο διαφέρει; εἰ γὰρ βούλει, ἔστω ἡμῖν καὶ δικαιοσύνη ὅσιον καὶ ὁσιότης δίκαιον.—Μή μοι, ἦν δ' ἐγώ· οὐδὲν γὰρ δέομαι τὸ “εἰ βούλει” τοῦτο καὶ “εἰ σοι δοκεῖ” ἐλεγχεσθαι, ἀλλ' ἐμέ τε καὶ

⁵⁴ 354c, 354e, 356b.

⁵⁵ Again, refer to “Making Sense of Socrates” for a more detailed discussion of this point, including the ways in which Socrates is both sharpening Protagoras' τέχνη model of virtue and moving beyond it.

σέ· τὸ δ' "ἐμέ τε καὶ σέ" τοῦτο λέγω, οἴομενος οὕτω τὸν λόγον βέλτιστ' ἂν ἐλέγχεσθαι, εἴ τις τὸ "εἴ" ἀφέλοι αὐτοῦ."

(331c)

"But what does it matter? If you like, let us say that justice is holy and holiness just."

'Oh, no,' I said. 'I don't want to examine any "if you like's" or "If you think so's" but rather to examine you and me. I emphasize "you and me" because I think that one can best examine the question by getting rid of any "ifs".'"

(trans. Taylor)

The emphasis on 'you and me' suggests that Socrates is primarily concerned not with sorting out hypothetical positions, but rather positions which the participants actually believe in. Socrates contradicts this a few pages later at 333c:

"Πότερον οὖν πρὸς ἐκείνους τὸν λόγον ποιήσομαι, ἔφην, ἢ πρὸς σέ; — Εἰ βούλει, ἔφη, πρὸς τοῦτον πρῶτον τὸν λόγον διαλέχθητι τὸν τῶν πολλῶν. — Ἄλλ' οὐδέν μοι διαφέρει, ἔάν μόνον σύ γε ἀποκρίνη, εἴτ' οὖν δοκεῖ σοι ταῦτα εἶτε μή· τὸν γὰρ λόγον ἔγωγε μάλιστα ἐξετάζω, συμβαίνει μέντοι ἴσως καὶ ἐμέ τὸν ἐρωτῶντα καὶ τὸν ἀποκρινόμενον ἐξετάζεσθαι."

(333c)

"Would you rather that I pursued the question with them', I asked, or with you?"

'If you will,' he said 'deal with that popular opinion first.'

'I don't mind, provided that you answer the questions, whether you believe the answers or not. It is chiefly the thesis that I am testing, but all the same it perhaps turns out to be a test for me too, as I ask the questions, and for whoever is answering.'"

(trans. Taylor)

Here Socrates seems concerned not with who holds the position, but with the position itself. This seems a better characterization of Socrates' middling Hedonism passage, and of his interpretation of the Simonides poem as well. When he stands by the claim at 339c that Simonides is consistent he admits to being afraid that he was wrong. What seems important here is not that he actually believes in the position, but that he's committed to it and willing to defend it. This does not mean that Protagoras doesn't believe in the

positions being examined, nor does it mean that Socrates isn't interested in parsing out arguments or revealing contradictory positions held by his interlocutors, but rather it is a fundamental point about the importance of thoroughly examining a position in order to get anything out of it.

This interpretation actually makes sense of both seemingly contradictory passages. At 331a Socrates is not requiring that one *believe* in the argument they are putting forward, but rather that one honestly tries to defend it, not merely accepting it hypothetically. This is exactly what we see at 331c, and what Socrates is doing when he defends hedonism in argument while also bringing attention to its problematic assumptions. We can see how this method is necessarily opposed to Prodicus' hairsplitting distinctions of words and Protagoras' elaborate displays. While Prodicus is putting forth arguments for his distinctions he fails to tie them together to defend a meaningful position. Protagoras, on the other hand, has the opposite problem of having an interesting position he can expound at length, but making neither his reasons for believing that way nor the connections between different concepts clear. Instead Socrates distinguishes without disuniting and connects concepts without collapsing them.

Seeing Socrates' main concern as with the position itself helps us understand his actions in his interpretation of the Simonides poem and the final discussion of unity and hedonism. Above I provided a mixed reading of both passages, seeing the former a negative mimicry of Protagorean method with an exposition of Socrates' positive but unsupported views, and the latter as a positive alternative of Socratic method based on views that Socrates does not necessarily agree with. Yet Raphael Woolf provides a

positive reading of Socrates' method in interpreting Simonides.⁵⁶ While Socrates does fail to connect his positive claims or defend them in argument, he *does* provide a consistent interpretation of the poem in light of its apparent contradictions. In the end Socrates would rather not be discussing poetry,⁵⁷ but he makes the best of the situation by showing how one can reach their own positive views by ironing out inconsistencies rather than focusing on contradictions. Again, the emphasis here is not on what Simonides really thinks and the goal is not to negate someone else's view; instead the method of looking for consistencies and drawing connections allows us to focus on the coherence of the position itself.

Similarly, there is positive content to be gained from the discussion of hedonism and the unity of wisdom and courage. Socrates focuses on Protagoras' τέχνη model of virtue and helps him clarify his view, showing that it only makes sense under the unity of the virtues and results in the μετρητικὴ τέχνη. The manifest limitations of this view, its inability to give any sophisticated account of the moral life and emphasis on a basic human pleasure and survival,⁵⁸ allow Socrates to move beyond these limitations. In his second discussion of unity he moves beyond the talk of basic goods (τὸ ἀγαθόν) to a more complicated discussion of moral goods (τὸ καλόν) and ties the two together in showing how they are both in one's own best interest.⁵⁹ Socrates emphasis on these positions allows us to positively see wisdom not as τέχνη, as Protagoras sees it, but as a concept intimately linked with Socratic method itself. Socrates never explicitly sets out this view in the dialogue or defends it in argument, but perhaps this is part of the point.

⁵⁶ See Woolf, 23-26.

⁵⁷ 347c-348a.

⁵⁸ See both McCoy and Coby for versions of this point.

⁵⁹ See "Making Sense of Socrates" for an elaboration of this point.

On this view wisdom is not something that can be acquired or practiced by oneself. It is not simply a matter of understanding someone else's position or explaining your own, but rather requires that you defend that position in argument and reconcile it with others.

Wisdom, then, becomes impossible without other engaged participants to enter into a discussion with. Without the back and forth of dialog, how can one learn anything new?

Conclusions: A Socratic Discourse on Method

Now that we have a glimpse of what might constitute a positive Socratic method we can return to one of the dialogue's most puzzling questions: is Socrates a sophist? It is a difficult question to answer when the nature of sophistry in the first place remains unclear.⁶⁰ The notion of a sophist is complicated by the rich complexity of a varied cast of characters, many whom are considered to be sophists but have widely differing dispositions and skills. We have seen how Socrates sets himself apart from many of those present, both negatively by parodying their methods in order to point out their flaws, and positively by focusing on the tying together of concepts. Yet this doesn't mean that Socrates is completely dismissal of the people he encounters in the *Protagoras* or their unique style. The entire dialogue is framed by Socrates' discussion with a friend (ἑταῖρος) whom Socrates meets immediately after his conversation with Protagoras, and Socrates is just as excited to tell his story as his friend is to hear it.⁶¹

⁶⁰ This move is a familiar one given the end of the dialogue (361b-c). Socrates argues that while they have been inquiring into the teachability of virtue, they must first consider what virtue itself is before answering whether or not it can be taught.

⁶¹ 310a. Socrates says that it would be a delight for both of them (διπλῆ ἂν εἴη ἡ χάρις).

Surely Protagoras is engaged by the questions, even if he might have the wrong views and go about them in the wrong way. While he may find Protagoras' long exhibitions ultimately unproductive, the playful tone of the dialogue suggests that Socrates enjoys the discussion (most of which, don't forget, Socrates himself narrates), and he finds in Protagoras a serious intellectual opponent with plausible and challenging views. In fact, when it is Socrates' turn to ask the questions he maintains that he is particularly interested in engaging with Protagoras.⁶² In a way Socrates actively *chooses* him as his conversation partner, a decision he reinforces with a quote from Homer. The context is book X of the Iliad where Nestor recommends that volunteers go in to spy on the Trojan camp. Diomedes immediately steps up to the task but argues that two are always more effective than one, hence the quote "Two going together, and one noticed it before the other." (σύν τε δύ' ἔρχομένω, καί τε πρὸ ὀ τοῦ ἐνόησεν).⁶³ A whole crowd of soldiers offer their services, but Diomedes will only settle for the best and chooses Odysseus. In the same way Socrates chooses Protagoras as his partner in present investigation of the unity of virtues.⁶⁴

Socrates does threaten to leave when the conversation breaks down at 335b, but as we have seen is convinced that he and Protagoras can reach a fruitful compromise. Thus the conversation never would have succeeded without the rest of the crowd there to keep

⁶² (ἐγὼ ἔνεκα τούτου σοὶ ἡδέως διαλέγομαι μᾶλλον ἢ ἄλλω τινί, ἡγούμενός σε βέλτιστ' ἂν ἐπισκέψασθαι καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων περὶ ὧν εἰκὸς σκοπεῖσθαι τὸν ἐπιεικῆ, καὶ δὴ καὶ περὶ ἀρετῆς) "I had rather have a conversation with you than with anyone else, for I think that you are best able to examine the questions that it is right for an upright man to consider, especially questions about excellence" (348d-e, transl. Taylor).

⁶³ *Iliad* X.244-5 trans. Taylor.

⁶⁴ For an elaboration of this point see McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* 72-74.

both debaters honest, and we have seen how the presence of Hippias and Prodicus as well enriches the debate. What better dialogue to understand the elusive Socrates than one where he encounters a rich array of challenging interlocutors that help him beyond his initial *aporia*? What better dialogue than one which Socrates himself narrates and is clearly excited about? The dialogue lacks any clear-cut answers and abounds in apparent contradictions, but what better way to come to a resolution than by challenging Socrates' listeners and Plato's reader to engage in the Socratic process of building a consistent interpretation for themselves?

While Socratic method itself is confusing and difficult for its frequent lack of positive answers, the *Protagoras* drives the point home with its brilliantly challenging and nuanced display of Socrates in action. Any interpretation of such a rich and complicated dialogue will be incomplete and, while this can be as frustrating as it is fruitful, the *Protagoras* itself teaches us to be patient with this complexity. In the same way that Protagoras is a particularly good conversation partner for Socrates despite being difficult at times, the *Protagoras* is a particularly good dialogue with which to inquire into Socrates' unique character.

Just as the *Euthyphro* deals with piety and the *Laches* courage, the *Protagoras* can be read as a discourse on Socratic method (or, alternatively, a Socratic discourse on method). The early dialogues provide a series of ultimately unsatisfactory definitions for the concept in question, and similarly the *Protagoras* explores a number of different methodologies and the ways in which they may fail to provide satisfactory results. In the end, Socrates' own method is perhaps the most difficult in its negative work and lack of positive answers. But focusing on these negative aspects is making the exact same

mistake Socrates criticizes Protagoras and Prodicus for: making distinctions without questioning their significance. If Socrates has made a point about method by simply showing a series of false methods, then he is guilty of the very same uncritical distinguishing between concepts and excessive centrifugal rants.

Like Socrates we can't be happy with simply differentiating a variety of methodologies, but have to challenge ourselves to develop a viable alternative. Part of what makes Socrates such a frustrating but ultimately irresistible character is that he refuses to do all of the work for you, but rather gives a nudge in a few possible directions and leaves it up to *you* to defend his (or your own) views. This blending of a variety of perspectives including one's own helps explain the continual mystery mentioned by Nehamas above. It is no surprise that the historical figure that inspired the character of Socrates in the *Protagoras* would serve as the basis for such differing portrayals by different authors. Yet perhaps each of them has one thing right in providing their own consistent picture of Socrates. He may seem contradictory or incoherent at times, but by trying to put together a coherent account we can come to a new understanding of this elusive character and, if we takes Socrates' methods seriously, perhaps even a better understanding of ourselves. The *Protagoras* is such a fascinating dialogue because it allows us to do just that. Returning to the dialogue and raising new questions will always prove both challenging and enlightening.

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Making Sense of Socrates: *Protagoras* 348c ad finem¹

Introduction

Socrates knows what he is doing when he's the one asking questions, and *Protagoras* 348c ff. is by no means an exception. When it's finally his turn to ask the questions after the long, quibbling discussion over the significance of a Simonides poem, Socrates has a very specific line of questioning in mind.

Over the course of the next fifteen pages he argues for a number of familiar Socratic theses—the unity of the virtues, the importance of wisdom, the impossibility of being overcome by pleasure. Yet at the same time he does so in a troubling manner, equating pleasure with the “good”² and proposing a seemingly trivial and oversimplified ‘μετρητική τέχνη’³ that reduces knowledge to an instrumental skill. Interpreters have been rightly confused when trying to make sense of Socrates’ apparent hedonism. Are Socrates’ arguments an exposition of his own views or are they a simple *ad hominem* attack against Protagoras? Has Socrates *proven* anything? Can any positive conclusions be reached through question and answer? Why even enter into the conversation in the first place; has Socrates gained anything from talking with Protagoras?

These are just a few of the many difficult yet related questions that any careful reader of the *Protagoras* must confront. The current paper is one of two related studies that attempt to answer some of these questions. In ‘A Dialogue of Contradictions’ I take

¹ I am especially indebted to my philosophy advisor, professor Ravi Sharma, for his advice and support. Our frequent conversations about the dialogue and Plato’s Socrates were invaluable for the writing of this paper and a true pleasure. I would also like to thank professor Steve Salkever and Willy Lebowitz for their helpful comments.

² E.g. 351c, 354e, 358a

³ See especially 357b.

a broader look at the work and suggest that the *Protagoras* is best understood as nuanced exploration of the differences between philosophical and sophistic method.⁴ In the present article I focus instead on a close textual reading of the last fifteen pages of the dialogue, attempting to explain the significance of this confrontation between Socrates and Protagoras and further clarify their respective views. This reading will help us come to a better understanding of Socratic method and see the form of both Protagoras and Socrates' arguments as intimately linked with their views concerning wisdom.

The discussion of this final argument in the secondary literature is quite extensive, and I will be able to comment only on a fraction of those articles here. Other interpretations of the passage offer an impressive range of different accounts. Irwin takes Socrates here to be arguing for a conception of epistemological hedonism (the notion that considerations of pleasure are epistemologically prior to considerations of the good).⁵ He then relates this view to Plato's greater conception of ethics, showing why he thinks Socrates takes this thesis so seriously. Nussbaum takes a similar approach, but she thinks that Socrates is deeply mistaken in this view.⁶ These interpretations have been motivated primarily by an attempt to explain the relation of the argument to the greater Platonic

⁴ See my piece "A Dialogue of Contradictions: Socrates and the Sophists in Plato's *Protagoras*"

⁵ Irwin, 83

⁶ Nussbaum, chapter 4. Nussbaum revealingly titles her section on Plato "Plato: goodness without fragility?" She contrasts her unsympathetic reading of Plato's ethics with what she sees as a much deeper and richer of the complexities of human life and goodness in Greek tragedy.

corpus. But they do so at the price of failing to engage meaningfully with the dramatic details of the passage.⁷

Below I split the passage into what I see as its four main movements: the initial discussion of wisdom and courage (349d-351b), the setup for the hedonism argument (351b-353b), the discussion with the many (353b-358a), and the final discussion of wisdom and courage (358a-361a). In discussing each of these movements I will comment on Socrates' larger questions about wisdom, excellence,⁸ and the good life, and explain why Socrates argues the way he does. But first, let me begin by remarking briefly on what Socrates is up against.

Protagoras and the τέχνη Model of Virtue

By the time we get to the hedonism passage the conversation has already taken a number of key turns revolving around questions of proper education, the teachability of virtue and its unity. When Socrates first explains what he and Hippocrates have come to discuss, Protagoras seizes the opportunity to boast about his own 'sophistic skill' (σοφιστικὴ τέχνη). This is an ancient art that many famous figures have tried to hide but that he has openly embraced for quite some time.⁹ When asked again about the nature of his teaching, Protagoras embraces the label 'political skill' (πολιτικὴ τέχνη),

⁷ For articles that deal more with the specific context of the *Protagoras* see Russell and McCoy. For reasons that will become clear below I think their interpretations still fail to explain fully Socrates' own motivations for entering in to this specific argument and its significance.

⁸ In this paper I use both 'virtue' and 'excellence' interchangeably as translations of the Greek ἀρετή. For more details see Taylor's note on 74-75

⁹ See 316c-317c

prefiguring the emphasis he will shortly place on such skill as the sum and substance of virtue.

Protagoras goes on to address the issue in his “great speech,” when he responds to Socrates’ challenge concerning the teachability of virtue. Pavel Hobza notes that teachability is one of the most distinctive features of a skill. He observes that, if Protagoras can successfully maintain the analogy between virtue and skill, then he can demonstrate its teachability and defend his own position as an excellent educator.¹⁰ This is exactly what we see happen in the great speech. According to the myth with which Protagoras begins, humans originally lack the πολιτικὴ τέχνη necessary for them to survive as a species. Thus, Zeus orders Hermes to distribute justice and shame equally to all men.¹¹ Protagoras then compares justice to the skills of carpentry and flute playing, the only difference being that everyone is expected to participate in the former.¹² This ties into his point later on that everyone helps young men cultivate virtue to the best of their ability since virtue is a skill taught by everyone.¹³ Here he cleverly addresses the issues of democratic practice brought up by Socrates, maintaining that the skill of virtue is universally shared while leaving room for himself as a particularly skilled teacher of it.¹⁴

¹⁰ Hobza, 199

¹¹ 322b-d

¹² 322d-323b

¹³ 327a

¹⁴ See 328b

The τέχνη model of virtue suits Protagoras well; his long speeches and fine logical distinctions are themselves a fine-tuned skill.¹⁵ Socrates never explicitly agrees that virtue is reducible to τέχνη, but even if one accepts the τέχνη model the details of Protagoras' position remain unclear. What is so special about the various 'skills' that are virtues? Surely in some sense they are necessary for human survival,¹⁶ but where does one draw the line between a 'virtue' and another sort of skill? Why are the skills provided by Zeus considered virtues while those procured by Prometheus not?¹⁷

Socrates pursues these questions immediately after the great speech by asking Protagoras about the unity of the virtues.¹⁸ After multiple attempts at addressing the unity thesis, the conversation breaks down due to a disagreement over method. Frustrated, Socrates decides to leave.¹⁹ Yet he is persuaded to stay and, after humoring Protagoras' question about a Simonides poem, Socrates is ready to return to the question of unity and engage in a more productive conversation. As we will see, understanding Socrates' arguments in the context of Protagoras' τέχνη model of virtue will help us understand

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of Protagorean method see my piece "A Dialogue of Contradictions" (sections on *Protagoras of Abdera* and *Socrates and Protagoras*)

¹⁶ For an elaboration of this point in Protagoras' great speech see McCoy, 63-65

¹⁷ Up to this point Protagoras has not been very clear on what exactly he considers to be a 'virtue.' In his various explanations Protagoras begins talking specifically about justice and shame (322c), then 'justice and the rest of the excellences of a citizen' (323b), 'impiety and injustice and whatever is the opposite of the excellence of a citizen' (324a), and 'justice and soundness of mind and holiness—human excellence, in a word' (325a). By the end of his speech he has variously used the terms 'citizens' excellence,' 'human excellence,' and 'excellence' by itself all of which seem to entail some combination of justice, holiness, and soundness of mind.

¹⁸ 329c ff.

¹⁹ See 335b

them as neither a simple exposition of his own views nor a vicious *ad hominem* attack against Protagoras, but rather a much more subtle form of philosophical engagement.

Wisdom and Courage: Take One (349d-351b)

Socrates begins his questioning by returning to the debate over the unity of the virtues. The question is whether or not the virtues are separate entities each with their own unique powers, or whether they are all similar to each other like separate pieces of gold.²⁰ The answer to this question is decisive for one's conception of wisdom and why it's so important. Socrates has been arguing for the unity of the virtues under wisdom, and on this view wisdom is an integral part of both excellence and the good life as a whole. By this point Protagoras has spoken of the supreme importance of wisdom but has evaded Socrates' specific questions about what makes wisdom so crucial.²¹ Given the great speech Protagoras must see wisdom on the analogy of a τέχνη. He claims that he will make his pupils 'better men' and 'good citizens.'²² How, then, does wisdom relate to these goals? Protagoras has maintained that the virtues are in fact distinct from one another, which makes it difficult to give a singular account of what is "good."²³

²⁰ See 329d for the original question.

²¹ An explicit discussion of wisdom is surprisingly absent from Protagoras' great speech, and Socrates is quick to point this out (330a).

²² 318a, 319a respectively

²³ At this point, what Protagoras and Socrates actually mean by 'wisdom' remains relatively unclear. Protagoras himself may not have clear ideas on the subject, but his τέχνη model of virtue limits his options. The closest either character gets to an explicit account of wisdom is Socrates' interpretation of the Simonides poem where, among other

Protagoras is given the option to change his mind but stands by his earlier claims. He argues that courage is altogether different from the other virtues²⁴ and in support points out that someone can be ignorant and vicious in all other respects but still be courageous. Socrates stops Protagoras right here to examine his views.

While other interpreters have recognized the following lines as related to the discussion of hedonism, it has been explained as simply a false argument that then gets replaced later on.²⁵ Wolfsdorf gives a much more sophisticated reading of the passage, explaining away potential difficulties for interpreting the details, but does so without fully accounting for their relation to the rest of the discussion.²⁶ With an eye both to textual detail and the greater context we can see the implicit assumptions in the statements of both Socrates and Protagoras and the real tensions between their two views.

Protagoras' claim that some people are both ignorant and courageous surprises Socrates. If courage is a virtue along the lines of the τέχνη model then how could the courageous be ignorant? Surely any skill requires knowledge of some sort. Socrates first needs to make sure that they are in fact talking about the same thing—that courageous

things, he mentions the famous sayings 'know thyself' and 'nothing in excess' (see 343b).

²⁴ While it may seem here that Protagoras is admitting to the unity of wisdom, justice, piety, and self-control this is not the force of his argument. Here Protagoras is still being essentially noncommittal; he is willing to grant the unity of the first four virtues because the *disunity* of courage seems manifestly apparent. Thus he eventually explains how proper nature/nurture will bring about this 'καλόν' thing without having to relate to wisdom at all (see 349e, 351b).

²⁵ For versions of this hypothesis see McCoy, Russell, and Taylor.

²⁶ See Wolfsdorf, 2006. I am ultimately in agreement with Wolfsdorf's reading of the passage, but believe it can be illuminated in its relation to the greater dramatic context.

men are confident (θαρραλέους) and that courage, along with the rest of virtue, is something fine (καλόν). We can understand Socrates' confusion here, for if courage is not at all related to the other virtues and in fact can be present even among other *vices*, how does one become courageous in the first place, and how is courage a fine thing?²⁷ Socrates wishes to push Protagoras on this point in the argument that follows. Given the belief that some men can be both courageous and ignorant, what's the importance of knowledge for the courageous man, if at all?

Socrates' argument for the unity of wisdom and courage is based on the following four premises, all of which Protagoras agrees to:

- (1) Courageous men are confident
- (2) Excellence is something fine (and presumably taught by Protagoras as a fine thing)
- (3) Experts are confident in their field *because of* knowledge.
- (4) Some people are still confident despite their lack of appropriate knowledge.

These people are *not* courageous but rather mad.²⁸

Note that (4) doesn't explicitly state that those who are both ignorant and confident are confident *because of* their ignorance. Instead it suggests that whatever it is that makes such people confident, their lack of knowledge prevents them from being courageous.

²⁷ Given the unity thesis that Socrates has been defending, courage comes about from wisdom, which itself is what makes courage 'fine.' This is in fact the conception of courage Socrates eventually argues for after the hedonism passage—that courage is wisdom about what is to be feared (360d).

²⁸ 349e-350b5

Also, in Socrates' conclusion he claims that the most knowledgeable are the most confident. While this doesn't follow explicitly from his premises, it is an implicit agreement with Protagoras' elaboration of (3), that those with knowledge are more confident than those who lack it and that those who acquire it are more confident than they themselves were beforehand.

Given these premises Socrates argues for the unity of courage and wisdom. As shown above, Socrates sees two different types of confidence—confidence acquired through knowledge (3) and confidence acquired without knowledge through some other means (4). Since all courageous men are confident (1) they must fit into one of these two categories, and because the courageous are also in some sense fine (2) they cannot fit into the category of the confident but ignorant. The courageous then must be those who have acquired confidence through knowledge, and since their knowledge allows them to be confident, their knowledge also allows them to be courageous. In this sense, then, courage is knowledge, and knowledge an important component of both virtue and the good.

In his long response,²⁹ Protagoras begins with a mistaken interpretation of the argument, but ends with a legitimate objection. Protagoras sees courage not as wisdom but rather a natural disposition that can be cultivated by education. Thus, the courageous are distinguished primarily insofar as they are disposed differently towards fear.³⁰

²⁹ 350c-351b

³⁰ Socrates understands this as Protagoras' position, and in fact suggests a similar view when he brings up the conversation again at 359c which he then goes on to modify: "Do

Protagoras originally accuses Socrates of making a logical mistake, asserting that the confident are courageous when they had only agreed that the courageous are confident.³¹ He provides what he sees as a parallel (and equally false) argument depending on alternate versions of (1) and his elaboration of (3) above. According to this falsified argument the strong are capable, and knowledge makes man more capable than someone without knowledge or themselves before they had knowledge. Protagoras thinks Socrates would then claim that knowledge is strength by falsely asserting that the capable are strong.³² Protagoras has left out the nuances of Socrates' argument—of course Socrates wouldn't say that all the confident are courageous since he has argued that some confident people (namely those who are ignorant) are base and mad. It is unclear here whether Protagoras purposefully misinterprets Socrates' argument with a series of glib distinctions designed to dazzle and awe his audience, or if he truly misses the crux of Socrates' point. Yet either way it is clear that in his following explanation Protagoras reveals his fundamental disagreement with Socrates' implicit understanding of (3) and (4).

cowards go for things which they are confident about, and courageous men for fearful things?" (Taylor's translation)

³¹ 350c

³² In order to properly reconstruct an argument analogous to Socrates' we would have to add in a version of (1) that strength is something fine and (4) that those capable but ignorant are in some sense mad. The argument would then go as follows: Since the strong are both capable and fine, and those that are not capable in a knowledgeable sense mad, it is instead those that are more capable in a knowledgeable sense that are strong, thus strength is wisdom. As Wolfsdorf interestingly points out, Socrates essentially argues for this position in the hedonism passage (Wolfsdorf, 444. See in particular 352b ff. and 357c5).

At the very end of his objection Protagoras says that confidence comes from skill (τέχνης), madness (μανίας) and spirit (θυμοῦ), while courage is something that comes “from a good natural condition and nurture of the soul”³³ (ἀπὸ φύσεως καὶ εὐτροφίας τῶν ψυχῶν). Here Protagoras’ position is confused and he has left the relationship between courage and confidence unclear. On Protagoras’ view the confident are not necessarily courageous since skill, madness, and spirit, all of which make someone confident, do not contribute at all to courage. Yet Protagoras has not thought through his position carefully as it is inconsistent with the τέχνη model of virtue. While skill was held up before as a paradigm of virtue, here it is reduced to one of several means of achieving mere confidence. Someone could be naturally courageous and therefore confident in a fine sense without having any particular knowledge.³⁴ Yet this talk of ‘nature and nurture’ is the exact same language Protagoras used in the great speech on analogy with other skills, virtue being a special type of skill that everyone teaches but that still varies in different individuals due to natural ability.

The main difference in Socrates and Protagoras’ genealogies of courage and confidence is that Socrates sees only two types of confidence, one that is praiseworthy and comes about through knowledge and another that is base and mad. This makes it clear to Socrates that the fine type of confidence is fundamentally related to courage,

³³ Taylor, 351b

³⁴ Thus, on the analogy with strength, Protagoras would hold the perhaps more intuitive view that someone could be naturally very strong without having any knowledge to accompany that strength. Socrates might argue in response that this is not in fact the finest type of strength (see Wolfsdorf for an elaboration of this point).

which is a fine thing. Protagoras, on the other hand, elaborates three types of confidence, all of which are completely unrelated to courage. These differences make clear the separate methodologies of Socrates and Protagoras. Socrates is trying to link together concepts, showing how knowledge relates to confidence, how confidence relates to courage, and the way in which all three are fine things. Protagoras resists this move by making extra logical distinctions, leaving unclear the nature of key relations between courage and confidence as well as virtue, skill, and the good life. The only way Protagoras could maintain these positions would be to hold that each virtue is fine in its own unique way and that they each relate to the good life differently. While this is a coherent and viable view, it fails to do the same explanatory work that Socrates' position does.

Yet we must be careful with the term 'Socrates' position.' He does consistently argue for unity and clearly builds off of the earlier discussion whether or not he argues for his own views. As we saw above, Socrates never explicitly agrees or disagrees with the τέχνη model, but his example of the well diver as courageous is consistent with an understanding of virtue as skill. By clarifying concepts and connecting them to one another Socrates provides a coherent picture of virtue, knowledge, and courage and why we might call all of these 'fine things.' Protagoras' account fails to explain why, for instance, both courage and wisdom are part of virtue, are considered to be fine things, and are important for the good life.

Hedonism: The Setup (351b-353b)

We see then how Socrates and Protagoras' methods differ from one another in their respective accounts of courage. Protagoras has recently argued that courage is essentially a natural disposition towards fearful things and completely unrelated to wisdom and the rest of the virtues. Why then does Protagoras see them as so important? If wisdom and courage are not unified as an essential component of the good, then what could he possibly envision as constituting the good life? Protagoras theoretically could take a couple of different positions. He could argue that wisdom is really the most important virtue and the rest have little to do with the good life, but he has already claimed that excellence as a whole is the finest of all things.³⁵ He could instead argue that wisdom in fact plays no role in the good life, and that it simply consists in acting out one's fine natural dispositions, but once again Protagoras has asserted that wisdom is of supreme importance. The only account of the good life consistent with Protagoras' disunity is a fragmented one that, on the one hand, praises the virtues of conventional morality without explaining them and, on the other, acknowledges other goods without unifying them or connecting them to the concept of virtue. Yet as we have seen this view is also inconsistent with the τέχνη model.

Seeing this as Protagoras' only option, Socrates wants to push Protagoras on the question of the good life and its relation to other important concepts they have been discussing. While the shift from the discussion of wisdom and courage is seemingly

³⁵ 349e5

abrupt, we can see that Socrates follows up on his concerns by immediately questioning Protagoras about the good life—what it means for some to live well and for others to live badly.³⁶ Annas, Taylor, and McCoy are right to point out that the view argued for in this passage is not necessarily one that either Socrates or Protagoras personally holds. Instead Socrates enters into the argument as a way of exploring what he sees as the implicit assumptions behind Protagoras’ simultaneous disunity and praise of virtue as τέχνη. Thus Socrates can claim that the discussion with the many “is relevant to our question of how courage is related to the other parts of excellence.”³⁷

The initial discussion about the relation between pleasures and the good confirms this portrayal of Socrates’ strategy. Socrates expects Protagoras to agree that in some sense a pleasant life is a life well lived, as evidenced by the οὐκ expecting a positive response at 349b6.³⁸ Protagoras evades the force of the question when he raises his qualification that the pleasant life is only good when one takes delight in fine things (τοῖς καλοῖς). Again he has avoided explaining what he means by pleasure or how it is connected to the good life by bringing in what the concept of what is ‘fine,’ which he sees as separate. Thus Socrates insists: “Surely you don’t go along with the majority in calling some pleasant things bad and some painful things good. What I say is, in so far as things are pleasant, are they not to that extent good, leaving their other consequences out of account?”³⁹

³⁶ See 351b

³⁷ Taylor, 353b

³⁸ Smyth, 2651

³⁹ Taylor, 351c

Protagoras' choice of words here points to his fragmented view of the good. The word καλόν (usually translated as good, noble, beautiful, or fine) also carries a sense of the excellence of the upper classes and conventional morality.⁴⁰ Protagoras sees τό καλόν as essentially different from pleasure or a more instrumental conception of the good, which is why he only wants to accept pleasure of fine things as related to the good life. Yet Socrates won't let Protagoras off the hook so easily and continues to push him on the question.

Socrates' interest in pleasure does not necessarily make him a hedonist, although he does see pleasure as a useful concept with which to examine Protagoras' disunity and understand his conception of the good. We will see later on how Socrates unifies the τέχνη model and relates pleasure to skill with the 'μετρητική τέχνη.' Taylor is right to point out that "what I say" (ἐγὼ γὰρ λέγω) here is ambiguous, and could just as well be translated "what I mean."⁴¹ This supports the idea that Socrates is not necessarily defending a view he personally holds, but instead uses the position to try to clarify how, if at all, Protagoras sees pleasure as related to the good life. Given Protagoras' previous reluctance, Socrates knows that he will not accept a simple equation of pleasure and the good. This is why Socrates uses the negative μή at the beginning of the statement, expecting a negative answer.⁴²

⁴⁰ This point can be seen more easily when taking into account the fact that the standard opposite of καλόν is αἰσχρόν.

⁴¹ see Taylor (2003) pp. 151

⁴² Smyth, 1772

Once again Protagoras resists answering Socrates question directly. He is reluctant to subscribe to hedonism and doesn't want to be associated with the position of the many. After hesitating, he tries to set himself apart with his same glib distinctions and centrifugal explanations (saying 'some pleasant things are not good' instead of 'some pleasant things are bad' and introducing a third category of pleasant things that are neither good nor bad). Yet he eventually gives an answer very similar to the position of the many.⁴³ Socrates tries to get Protagoras to answer more precisely since he has still failed to explain the significance of his three categories of pleasures. Protagoras evades the question by suggesting that they instead they investigate it together.⁴⁴ At this point Socrates knows that his current line of questioning will not get him any further and decides to try a different line.

Socrates understands why Protagoras is hesitant to agree to hedonism but, given Protagoras' view of wisdom as τέχνη, thinks he has no coherent conception of the good by which to defend his claims about pleasure. Socrates recognizes that he needs to find a new way to examine the position without Protagoras being too difficult. Interestingly

⁴³ Strictly speaking, Protagoras is giving a different answer than the many, as the many think that some pleasures are bad, whereas here Protagoras claims that there are at least some pleasures that aren't good. Yet on this reading Protagoras is not making any deep philosophical distinctions, but rather simply trying to avoid being pinned down by Socrates either as a hedonist or as someone who simply holds the same views as the many.

⁴⁴ This is an odd move—aren't Socrates and Protagoras already investigating the question, and isn't Protagoras the one preventing that investigation by being troublesome? Either way Socrates understands that his current strategy is going nowhere and decides to shift gears.

enough, Socrates' new approach is to lay down his cards, revealing to Protagoras that he is especially interested in Protagoras' views on knowledge. Socrates uses the analogy of a doctor, who after looking at someone's hands asks to see their chest and back; he sees how Protagoras conceives of pleasure and wants to look deeper at how this relates to knowledge.⁴⁵

As Socrates says, he already knows that Protagoras is inclined to distinguish between some pleasures that are good and some that are not. He also already knows that Protagoras places a great deal of importance on knowledge and wisdom. Thus his move here is really just a clever way of keeping Protagoras engaged in the conversation. He has already failed to get Protagoras to disagree with the views of the many concerning pleasure since that entailed a type of hedonism that Protagoras was not comfortable with (at least, not at this point in the conversation). Here Socrates instead uses a position that he and Protagoras both agree upon—the importance of knowledge—and engineers a disagreement between Protagoras and the many, who think that wisdom can be overpowered by pleasure. Protagoras maintains that wisdom is “the mightiest (κράτιστον) of human things”⁴⁶ and by no means hesitates any more to disagree with the many. Since the many obviously see wisdom and pleasure as entirely separate, this

⁴⁵ It is important to note at this point that neither Socrates nor Protagoras have specifically defined pleasure or given an account of what it consists in. What they have discussed is the relationship between pleasure and the good, and by this point Socrates has seen that Protagoras doesn't see the two as necessarily related.

⁴⁶ Taylor, 352d

disagreement with the many also opens up an opportunity for Socrates to explore the connections between these concepts.

Thus Socrates has brought Protagoras over to his side of the argument, curing his hesitancy and fear of being forced into potentially shameful positions. Ironically, that is exactly what Socrates is doing: grabbing Protagoras and forcing him to follow along with his own incomplete arguments against the many. At the same time, however, Socrates is trying to get Protagoras to understand what he sees as the tension between Protagoras' multiple claims and in doing so helping him tidy up his τέχνη model of virtue. As we saw above the position of the many is essentially the same position that Protagoras holds—that some pleasures are good and some pleasures are bad. Now, however, Socrates and Protagoras are defending the more fundamental claim that knowledge is something extremely important. The argument with the many, then, shows how Protagoras' views concerning knowledge and virtue as skill actually conflict with his idea that there are good and bad pleasures. More importantly, the argument reveals how to resolve these tensions by looking into the way in which all of these key concepts are connected.

Protagoras himself is confused about why they need to question the views of the many. Of course, if Socrates were to be completely open about his methods Protagoras would again refuse to participate in the conversation. Instead Socrates phrases the point in a roundabout manner, explaining that the discussion with the many is relevant to their disagreement about the relationship between courage and virtue. This is true; Protagoras'

position remains confused and Socrates' original questions about the relation between wisdom, virtue, and the good are yet to be fully answered. The discussion of hedonism is indeed relevant, but it will be another six pages before they explicitly discuss courage again.

Hedonism: Controlling Pleasure and the μετρητική τέχνη (353b-358a)

As Socrates continues to argue against the many and their conception of being overcome by pleasure, the hedonism he puts forth becomes increasingly obvious.⁴⁷ Socrates shows the many that they can give no other conception of good and bad other than pleasure and pain. As a result, this idea of being overcome by pleasure becomes instead a type of error in proper measurement. The strongest form of hedonism is invoked at 355e5 ff. where Socrates substitutes the word 'bad' for 'painful' in order to prove his argument.

There are many different interpretations of the exact nature of the hedonism in this passage. Gosling and Taylor discuss the rich variety of ideas about pleasure that have been advocated by Plato's time. They describe Simonides and others as 'uncritical hedonists' who blindly praise pleasure.⁴⁸ Others like Democritus are 'evaluative hedonists' who distinguish between different types of pleasure with an eye to the good and stable life.⁴⁹ While the exact nature of the hedonism discussed in this passage is hard

⁴⁷ See 345c, 354e, 356b, 358a

⁴⁸ Gosling and Taylor, 10

⁴⁹ Gosling and Taylor, 27-37

to pin down, it is not what Gosling and Taylor identify as the position of the Cyreanics—a radical hedonism which claims that the only wise thing to do is to focus on the attaining as much pleasure as possible in the present moment.⁵⁰

Thus we need to be explicit about exactly what type of hedonism is being argued for in this passage. Kahn claims that Socrates only commits himself to saying that pleasure is *a* good, not *the* good.⁵¹ He calls this ‘quasi-hedonism’ but notes, like Taylor, that Protagoras takes Socrates to be equating pleasure and the good. While hedonism is brought up first, Kahn sees the discussion of it as merely a prerequisite for disproving the possibility of being overcome by pleasure.⁵² Ultimately, he argues, Socrates’ proof of the unity of wisdom and courage depends on the current discussion: “His goal, here as always, is to show that virtue is impossible without a correct understanding of good and bad, and hence that wisdom is an essential ingredient, a necessary condition, for any kind of virtue.”⁵³ Yet Kahn argues that Socrates exaggerates here and overstates his point by saying that virtue is in fact identical with wisdom.

⁵⁰ Gosling and Taylor, 41

⁵¹ Here Kahn is building on the work of Vlastos (1969)

⁵² Kahn argues that the discussions of being overcome by pleasure and of hedonism are “equally isolated and equally anomalous in their appearance” (167). Here he is asking why it is we focus on hedonism as the most troubling part of the dialogue and not the disapproval of being overcome by pleasure. It is important to note, however, that Socrates is not denying the fact that the common phenomenon we call ‘being overcome by pleasure’ actually happens. Instead he simply argues that we are mistaken in our description of the phenomenon—instead of being caused by pleasure, it is caused by a lack of proper knowledge. While Socrates may not ultimately believe in the validity of the arguments put forth in this passage, he does elsewhere posit similar ideas (see, for example *Protagoras* 345e).

⁵³ Kahn, 170

Kahn fails, however, to appropriately contextualize the argument or to explain why Socrates would exaggerate his point here. He is right to point out that the discussion relates to the argument about courage and wisdom, but he oversimplifies the passage by seeing Socrates as arguing merely for a set of conclusions he needs in order to best Protagoras in argument. If that is the case, does Socrates have any motivation other than winning the argument? If he does not, then why even engage with the many in the first place? As we have seen Socrates already has Protagoras' agreement about the importance of knowledge and its power over pleasure at 352d. Why not just use that agreement to recapitulate the unity of wisdom and courage?

Here Kahn reads Socrates' arguments too straightforwardly. Socrates isn't dishonest when arguing for hedonism nor is he arguing for his own personal views. He does, however, have concerns about the relation between wisdom, excellence, and the good. Socrates wishes to explore these concerns more deeply, since they were not addressed in the initial discussion about courage and wisdom and are yet to be explained on the τέχνη model of virtue. In this passage Socrates shows that Protagoras' (and the many's) only way of conceptualizing the good is through pleasure, but this does not mean that Socrates conceives of the good in the same way. In fact, Socrates explicitly gives the many multiple chances to come up with some other account of the good life, signaling to the crowd (or perhaps Plato signaling to his readers) that there are other available options that his current interlocutors are unable to provide.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Socrates reiterates this point at the following locations (translations by Taylor): 354c, "For if you call enjoyment itself bad for any other reason and by reference to any other

Like Kahn, Russell sees two possible conceptions of hedonism at play in the dialogue. He distinguishes between psychological hedonism (the stronger view, that people in fact *do* what they know to be most pleasant or least painful) from what he calls normative hedonism (the weaker view, that people *ought* to do what they know to be most pleasant or least painful).⁵⁵ Again he sees the distinction as ambiguous in the dialogue, but important for its interpretation. Russell believes that if the many only agree to normative hedonism, they can still argue that while people *ought* to do what is most pleasant in the long run, they actually *do* what is immediately pleasant. Thus he thinks that in order to show the impossibility of being overcome by pleasure, Socrates needs the many to agree to the stronger view of psychological hedonism, but conflates the two and never specifically gets the many to agree to the latter.

Here Russell interestingly points out the surprising lack of a discussion of morality in this passage, and tries to fill that gap with what he sees as the implicit distinctions between ‘ought’ and ‘do’—moral and actual motivations for a given action. Yet on what basis could the many maintain a difference between the two? Socrates shows that the only method they have for valuing an action is examining whether or not it

result, you would be able to tell us what it is. But you can't.” 354e-355a, “But even now you are at liberty to withdraw, if you can give any other account of the good than pleasure, or evil than pain. Or are you content to say that it is a pleasant life without pains? Now if you are content with that, and aren't able to call anything good or bad except what results in that, listen to what follows.” 356b, “For if someone said ‘But, Socrates, there is a great difference between immediate pleasure and pleasure and pain at a later time,’ I should say, ‘Surely not in any other respect than simply pleasure and pain; there isn't any other way they could differ.’”

⁵⁵ Russell, 323

brings about pleasure or pain, thus they have no other theoretical background with which to put forward a conception of 'moral' duty. This seems to be exactly Socrates' point, that 'ought' and 'do' are actually the same, and he proves this not by presupposing it with an account of psychological hedonism but rather by deconstructing our motivations for certain actions. Unlike Kahn who mistakes Socrates' arguments for his own personal views, Russell makes the opposite mistake of attributing too complicated a view to the many. Again, Socrates isn't necessarily advocating the personal views of anyone present, but rather arguing against Protagoras' fragmented account of the good by showing how a variety of concepts can be tied together.

Taylor (2003) sees the upshot of the argument as a simple form of evaluative hedonism that boils down to equating pleasure and the good. He admits that most of Socrates statements are ambiguous, and could either mean 'Pleasure is the only underderivatively good thing' or "'Pleasant' and 'good' are names for the same characteristic." But either way Protagoras thinks Socrates argues for the latter (after all, Socrates does equate the two at 355e5). Thus Taylor takes this stronger view as the position being argued here. Taylor is probably right in reading this as a somewhat rudimentary position, closest to what Gosling and Taylor call an 'uncritical hedonism' above. After all, the examples used are quite simplified and the term 'pleasure' never accurately defined. Yet by the end of the argument Socrates comes to some quite daring conclusions.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ 356c-358a. See below for further analysis.

Given this hedonism and the inability of the many to provide an account of motivation other than the desire for pleasure, Socrates can show that what they originally called ‘being overcome by pleasure’ is really just an error in judgment. On this account, Protagoras’ emphasis on the importance of knowledge boils down to the μετρητικὴ τέχνη or what Irwin calls a ‘hedonic measuring craft.’⁵⁷ Since he has no greater conception of wisdom as part of the good itself, wisdom is reduced, along with the rest of the virtues, to a mere instrumental skill in weighing pleasures and pains. Socrates ends by praising this new skill as the sophists’ cure for the misconceptions of the many, sarcastically lamenting their blindness in failing to see the benefits of sending their children off to the sophists.

Socrates has finally given a consistent account of Protagoras’ τέχνη model of virtue. On this view virtue is concerned with the proper measurement of pleasures which, being commensurable, are linearly related to the good and provide a clear, consistent, and teachable method for achieving happiness. Yet Socrates has shown that such a conception necessarily entails the unity of the virtues and has revealed its limited ability to explain the human experience with any nuance or complexity.⁵⁸

In this passage it is doubtful that Socrates has really taken the τέχνη model to heart, yet he has cleverly taken Protagoras’ emphasis on the importance of knowledge and used it to show how one can elucidate important concepts by understanding deeper

⁵⁷ Irwin, 85

⁵⁸ Nussbaum is correct in pointing out the obvious failings of the μετρητικὴ τέχνη, but is mistaken in reading it as a straightforward representation of Socrates’ own view.

connections between them. Unlike the Simonides passage where Socrates presented a series of views without defending them or showing the connections between them, here Socrates emphasizes these very connections. Yet, in a typically frustrating manner, Socrates never finishes the picture by explaining what he really means by ‘pleasure.’ Instead he allows the discussion to be confined to a simplistic view of bodily pleasures and pains that results in the over-simplified μετρητικὴ τέχνη. Unlike Socrates’ emphasis in the Simonides passage, instead of ‘know thyself’ this craft is simply about measuring external pleasures, and instead of ‘nothing in excess’ it encourages one to always choose the most pleasurable action. Prodicus has already distinguished between different types of pleasure and enjoyment,⁵⁹ and Socrates himself has shown a more nuanced use of the term elsewhere,⁶⁰ yet here he refrains from engaging with a more sophisticated sense of the word. What we are left with is not a complete exhibition of anyone’s views on the subject, but rather a mutual exploration of a position that builds off of the views of all parties involved. More than anything else Socrates’ unique contribution to the discussion is his method of clarifying and connecting the different

⁵⁹ At 337c Prodicus distinguishes between the more sophisticated mental process of enjoyment (εὐφραίνεσθαι) and a more base conception of pleasure (ἡδόνεσθαι).

⁶⁰ Towards the beginning of the passage discussed in this essay Socrates uses derivatives of ἡδονή on three different occasions to describe more of a mental faculty rather than physical enjoyment. At 347b after Alcibiades has suggested that Socrates begin to ask the questions, Socrates says he will concede to Protagoras “whichever he prefers” (ὁπότερον αὐτῷ ἥδιον) but adds that he should be ‘very glad’ (ἡδέως ἔλθοιμι) to return to the question of unity. At 348d Socrates says to Protagoras “I had rather had a discussion with you (σοὶ ἡδέως διαλέγομαι) than with anyone else” (English translations by Taylor).

views at hand. It is through this method itself that Socrates makes his own contribution to the discussion of wisdom, virtue, and education.

Wisdom and Courage: Take Two (358a-361a)

In restating his conclusions to Hippias and Prodicus, Socrates interestingly shifts his wording. He begins with a qualification, admitting to his generalized use of the term ‘pleasure’: “I leave aside our friend Prodicus’ distinction of names; for whether you call it ‘pleasant’ or ‘delightful’ or ‘enjoyable’, or however you care to apply such names, my dear Prodicus, give your answer according to the same sense of my question.”⁶¹ Again, Socrates has been using the word ‘pleasure’ quite broadly throughout the hedonism passage, and is restricted only by his limited examples that deal with the bodily pleasures of food, drink, sex, drugs, and athletic training. He goes on to bring back discussion of the ‘fine’ (καλόν), a concept never mentioned in the conversation with the many (there Socrates sticks exclusively to the ‘good’ or ἀγαθόν). He also changes his description of the ‘error’ that the many think of as being overcome by pleasure, describing it more broadly as “having false opinions and being mistaken about matters of importance.”⁶²

With this shift of wording Socrates prepares himself to argue once again for the unity of courage and wisdom (it is much harder to reduce courage to a talk of pleasures and pains, and easier to talk of the good and the praiseworthy instead). Socrates gets Hippias and Prodicus to agree that fear is the expectation of bad things (note the use of

⁶¹ 358 a6-b1

⁶² 358c 4-5

‘bad’ instead of ‘painful’), and then uses this fact to attack the very conception of courage that Protagoras had put forth in the earlier argument—that the courageous are defined as those properly disposed to fearful things.⁶³

Since fear is the expectation of what’s bad, no one, not even a courageous person, would do something that he fears. This makes it seem as if both cowards and the courageous go for the same things, namely, what they are confident about, but that cannot be the case since courage and cowardice are opposites. How, then, do we differentiate between the two? Socrates does so by arguing that the courageous go for things that are fine, and since they are fine they are both good and pleasant. We see, then, the importance of reintroducing ‘fine’ into the discussion, for it is not immediately obvious that the courageous do what is most pleasant. But why don’t cowards also do fine things? It would be ridiculous to say that they chose not to do what is fine while knowing that it is also most pleasant. Thus it must be some sort of *knowledge*, not simply a natural disposition that separates cowardice from courage. Unlike (4) in the first argument, Socrates has now shown that the confidence of cowards is disgraceful *because of* their ignorance of what is truly in their own best interests.⁶⁴ Since cowardice is ignorance and error, courage is the opposite—knowledge of what is and isn’t to be feared. Protagoras is now for the first time forced to admit that he was wrong, and that it is impossible for someone to be both ignorant and courageous.

⁶³ See above, pp. 46

⁶⁴ See above, pp. 45

Yet the reintroduction of καλόν into the argument is more than a mere convenience, and Socrates' point is deeper than the simple unity between wisdom and courage. In his transition from using ἀγαθόν and speaking of a more instrumental conception of the good in the hedonism passage back to a discussion of καλόν and conventional morality, Socrates successfully shows how these two concepts relate to one another. For Socrates, what is morally right and what is in one's own best interests are really one and the same thing. Unlike Protagoras who separates the two, Socrates wants to unify them under a single conception of the good that consists in understanding these connections, knowing what is a truly virtuous action, and seeing why that is ultimately the most beneficial for oneself. With this shift in focus and terminology Socrates has moved away from the μετρητικὴ τέχνη and Protagoras' equation of virtue and skill, opening up the path to a richer conception of virtue and wisdom.

Conclusions

Where might this path lead us? As mentioned above, Socrates has effectively argued for a number of what are typically thought of as 'Socratic' positions—the unity of the virtues, the importance of wisdom, the impossibility of being overcome by pleasures. Yet, in a way, the dialogue is about how one can come to all of the right conclusions for all of the wrong reasons. Socrates investigates hedonism in the first place as a way of exploring the type of unity and connections between concepts that he is interested in. Yet by confining the bulk of the conversation to Protagoras' τέχνη model of virtue he makes

these connections through an uncritical hedonism that results in the blatantly deficient μετρητική τέχνη. Thus without a sufficient understanding of the good, the moral, and the truly desirable, someone like Protagoras is left with an oversimplified conception of the good life and of our motivation for action (that is, governed merely by pleasure and pain).

In his discussion of these concepts, however, Socrates leaves sufficient ambiguity to let us rethink what is missing in the argument, allowing us to consider what a more nuanced understanding of the good life might entail. He constantly reminds us that while the many can't think of anything else, 'pleasant' and 'painful' aren't the only way of describing the good and the bad. His examples are limited to the domain of what may seem obviously pleasant or painful to the many, but his use of the term 'pleasure' itself remains relatively open and unspecified. When he reaches the conclusion of his 'hedonic measuring craft' he adds: "since it's measurement, then necessarily it's an art which embodies exact knowledge... *which art, and what knowledge, we shall inquire later.*"⁶⁵

When, exactly? Perhaps Socrates has the same thing in mind here that he does towards the end of the dialogue. There he claims they have argued about the teachability of virtue without first inquiring about what virtue is in the first place.⁶⁶ Here he argues for hedonism and the μετρητική τέχνη similarly—without really clarifying what he means by pleasure and knowledge. Inquiring into the exact nature of this knowledge will reveal the μετρητική τέχνη as insufficient, just as the inquiry into the teachability of

⁶⁵ Taylor, 357b

⁶⁶ 361c

virtue showed that neither Socrates nor Protagoras had a good enough grasp on what virtue *is*. Both of these realizations point to the inadequacy of understanding wisdom and virtue along the lines of a skill or τέχνη.

The main disagreement between Socrates and Protagoras in the dialogue is not concerning unity vs. disunity or teachability vs. unteachability, but rather concerning virtue as skill (τέχνη) vs. virtue as wisdom (σοφία). Thus far I have used the terms ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ somewhat interchangeably, and according to Protagoras wisdom, knowledge, and skill are all virtually identical. Yet Socrates might not be so comfortable with such a simplistic account of wisdom. As we saw in his first argument for the unity of wisdom and courage Socrates does actually make this jump from knowledge to wisdom; the example he uses is of a knowledgeable well-diver, not the ‘wise man.’ Here he is still working within the confines of the τέχνη model and has really only shown the unity of courage and knowledge. Yet when he returns to the argument with a slightly new vocabulary at the end of the dialogue he is really speaking about the unity of courage and a modified conception of wisdom that relates to self-knowledge.

While Socrates appears to be arguing in favor of the Sophists towards the end of the discussion with the many, we have seen how abruptly he changes his wording in his conversation with Hippias. Perhaps within this transition we catch a glimpse of what Socrates might see as an alternative to the views, and a deeper point about what it really means for something to be in one’s own interest. To show the unity of the virtues and the

importance of wisdom for the good life we need to think not only of what is ‘good’ insofar as it is pleasant or painful, but also of what is ‘fine’ or morally good, and truly in our own best interest.

But what is the point if the *Protagoras* fails to explicitly develop Socrates’ conception of the good? If Socrates isn’t arguing for his own personal views in the hedonism passage, then what is there to be gained from the conversation? Both Prodicus’ quibbling distinctions between the meaning of near-synonyms and Protagoras’ lengthy expositions of fragmentary concepts fail to elucidate the true meaning of terms and their relations to one another. Socrates parodies both of these methods in his interpretation of the Simonides poem, and even fails to define key concepts in his own arguments towards the end of the passage. Yet Socrates is eager at the end of the dialogue to keep inquiring into the nature of virtue, and they may not be as far from away as it seems. By showing the connections between different concepts Socrates has not only brought us closer to a unified conception of the good, but has also revealed how connecting two concepts can bring about a more nuanced understanding of both.⁶⁷ We have seen, for instance, how understanding the relationship between ἀγαθόν and καλόν helps us understand both how what is fine is in our own best interest and how what is instrumentally good can be virtuous. Thus the inquiry into virtue itself need not be a

⁶⁷ In fact, on an alternate reading of the Simonides passage this is exactly what Socrates is doing; providing a consistent interpretation of the poem in response to Protagoras’ charge of self-contradiction. Raphael Woolf sees a deeper point here about Socratic hermeneutics as based in the resolution of contradictions in order to help develop ideas of one’s own. See ‘The Written Word in Plato’s *Protagoras*’ for a fascinating discussion of this point.

completely fresh start, but could proceed by better understanding the relations between pleasure, knowledge, skill, and the good life.

But for now, at least, Socrates has lost the interest of his interlocutors. A further elaboration of these views remains to be explored in another dialogue, yet the essential foundations have been laid here in the *Protagoras*. Socrates may disagree strongly with Protagoras, but still finds him to be an enormously helpful interlocutor. Protagoras is engaged by the questions at hand even if he has mistaken views and, despite going about explaining them in the wrong way, he is a serious intellectual opponent. Socrates gets little out of the conversation when Protagoras goes off on his long exhibitions that model his own conception of wisdom as skill. Yet when they engage in question and answer in the last fifteen pages of the dialogue Socrates becomes much more invested. Protagoras' views provide a good starting point from which to inquire into the nature of virtue. Perhaps on a Socratic conception of wisdom you can't even *be* wise unless you find interesting people to talk to. Interpreters of Plato often times speak of how dramatic form complements philosophical content, but here we see a sense in which form *is* content and contains the main philosophical point. Socrates never gives an exhibition of his views on wisdom because wisdom itself is incompatible with such a one-sided method. What he *does* do is model that conception himself, continually leading us in the direction of a deeper understanding.

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