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INTRODUCTION

Michael Frede

(I) The Place of the Protagoras *in Moral Thought*

The core of Plato's *Protagoras* is a purported discussion between Socrates and Protagoras concerning virtue. Toward the end of the dialogue, Socrates is made to say: "I have no other reason for asking these things than my desire to answer these questions about virtue, especially what virtue is in itself" (360e6–8). Some lines later, he is made to explain this concern: "Since I take . . . forethought over my life as a whole, I pay attention to these things . . ." (361d3–5).

As we shall see, the Socrates of the dialogue suggests a particular position, according to which one's entire life depends on the view one takes of what virtue is and of what is true about virtue. He thinks that if one has the wrong views one's life is bound to be a failure; if one has the right views one's life is bound to be a success—hence the urgency with which he pursues these questions. Even if we do not share this view, its discussion in the dialogue remains interesting for at least two reasons. Even if the connection between one's life and one's views about virtue is not as straightforward as Socrates takes it to be, there is a connection that makes the questions the dialogue raises vital ones, questions that affect our lives profoundly. It does make a difference to our lives what, in the end, we want to have succeeded in; it makes a difference what we

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think it takes on our part to succeed, what abilities and kinds of competence we think we need in order to be, as we say nowadays, competent human beings; we want to know what it would take to be the kind of person one would, on reflection, like to be, if that were possible; whether and how one could acquire this ability and competence, and what roles natural endowment, upbringing, and reflection play in this. It makes a difference to what extent we think a society requires and is entitled to insist on, by coercion if necessary, a certain level of competence in living our lives; and whether we think that in order to succeed we need some critical knowledge to rectify the systematically distorted beliefs that life in a society tends to induce and which, if we lacked this knowledge, would guide us in our preferences. These questions, and others like them, are forcefully raised by the discussion in the *Protagoras*.

Second, not only do the answers to these questions have an obvious bearing on our lives; our own thought on these questions, however inarticulate and conventional it may be, has itself been shaped by a long tradition, in which reflection on the position and the questions Socrates invites us to consider play a major role. Plato's moral thinking in the middle and the later dialogues (cf. e.g. *Republic* 435e ff.; *Philebus* 20c ff.) is crucially shaped by his highly qualified acceptance of the suggestion, made by Socrates in this early dialogue, that the good life is a matter of knowing what is good; and so will be Aristotle's moral philosophy, though his acceptance is even more qualified (cf. e.g. *E.N.* 1145b21 ff.). When the Stoics reject these qualifications, to return to what they take to be the unqualified, undiluted, uncompromising doctrine of Socrates, they seem to obtain this doctrine in good part from an interpretation of our dialogue. At least, this seems the easiest explanation of a surprising number of parallels between views put forward by Socrates in the *Protagoras* and Stoic doctrine.[1] Similarly, when, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses Socrates' view on weakness of the will, his language clearly shows that he relies on the exposition of this view in the *Protagoras* (cf. *E.N.* 1145b23 ff. and *Prot.* 352b–c).

1. For example in their views on the "passions of the soul," "weakness of the will," the "unity" of the virtues, and on reason as the governing part, the *hegemonikon* (cf. 352b4)—quite apart from the identification of virtue with wisdom, of wisdom with knowledge of the good, and the assumption that virtue is a necessary, but also sufficient, condition for the good life.

Philosophers in late antiquity, it is true, had little interest in the *Protagoras*. Its undogmatic and unspeculative character did not appeal to a time which was looking for salvation in dogma, sometimes even in dogma beyond the reach of reason. Although it contains certain claims that almost ask to be expanded and developed in the context of some larger theory, still, like the other early dialogues and unlike the middle ones, the *Protagoras* proceeds rather untheoretically; and even when it seems to suggest certain views, their tentative and provisional character is emphasized. One is not even tempted to accept any of these views without further reflection or inquiry.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, when Plato again came to be more widely read, and even more when, later in that century, he became an important part of any higher education, the *Protagoras* regained a great appeal, in particular to the reform-minded. John Stuart Mill, for instance, devoted to the *Protagoras* the first of a series of essays on Platonic dialogues in the *Monthly Repository* (VIII, 1834, pp. 89–99 and 203–211; Collected Works, vol. xi, p. 39 ff.). He was attracted to it, at a time when, as he complains, Plato was sadly neglected, not only because of the dialogue's sympathetic characterization of the sophists, for whom he shared Grote's[2] admiration, but because he saw in the *Protagoras* a precursor of his own utilitarianism.

So the *Protagoras* plays an important role in the tradition of moral thought; and thus, at least indirectly, it has had an impact on how we have come to think about these questions, which, in some version or other, still matter to us as much as they did to Plato and his contemporaries.

(II) The Athenian Background of the Debate about Virtue

Let us turn to the details of the dialogue. As we noted, toward the end of the dialogue Socrates says it is a concern for his life that makes him pursue these questions about virtue (361d4–5). This pursuit is not an idle intellectual pastime, nor does it take place in a vacuum. What gives the dialogue its power, what draws us in and engages us, is in good part the art with which Plato fills out the context in which the argument is set forth.

2. Cf. Grote's influential *History of Greece* (London, 1846) and his *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London, 1865), both of which Mill reviewed.

The *Protagoras* is striking not just for the length, complexity, and richness of the argument, but also for the unusually rich and lively detail of its setting.

To begin with the external form of the dialogue, it has a double frame: Socrates meets a friend who asks him whether he has just come from seeing Alcibiades. The ensuing conversation between Socrates and his friend is the first frame. Socrates has just seen Alcibiades, he says, but paid no attention to him, because they were in the company of somebody far more attractive than Alcibiades, because wiser, namely Protagoras. Socrates is very cautious, though, not to commit himself to the assumption that Protagoras, in fact, is wise (cf. 309c10; d1–2). In this way we are introduced to two central topics of the dialogue: the supreme attractiveness of wisdom and the question of what constitutes wisdom. Asked by his friend for an account of the meeting with the famous sophist, Socrates starts out by explaining how he came to have a discussion with Protagoras (310e8 ff.). Hippocrates, a young acquaintance of his, has heard that Protagoras is in town, and wants Socrates to help him persuade Protagoras to take him on as a student (310e2–3). Socrates' report of his conversation with Hippocrates constitutes the second frame.

Hippocrates obviously comes from a well-to-do family and wants to succeed in life, more particularly in public life (cf. 316b10–c1). However, he does not want to rely solely on what we may presume to be his good traditional upbringing. He wants to acquire the wisdom Protagoras is supposed to have and impart to his students (310d5–6; cf. 318e4–5). This suggests that Protagoras' wisdom is an art or expertise that he can impart by teaching. But the ensuing discussion between Hippocrates and Socrates shows that Hippocrates is quite confused, both about the nature of the wisdom Protagoras imparts and about how it might benefit or harm him. So the discussion with Protagoras, once Socrates and Hippocrates gain admittance to the sophist's presence, will begin with the question what it is precisely that Protagoras promises to teach.

As they are about to enter Callias' house, where Protagoras is staying, Socrates and Hippocrates pause at the door to finish the discussion they had continued on their way; the doorman obviously overhears them; so when they knock, he opens and says, "Ha! More sophists! He's busy," and slams the door in their faces. When they finally gain entrance, they see

> Protagoras walking in the portico flanked by two groups. On one side were Hipponicus and his brother on his mother's side, Paralus, son of Pericles, and Charmides, son of Glaucon. On the other side were Pericles' other son, Xanthippus, Philippides, son of Philomelus, and Antimoerus of Mendes, Protagoras' star pupil who is studying to become a sophist. Following behind and trying to listen to what was being said were a group of what seemed to be mostly foreigners, men whom Protagoras collects from the various cities he travels through. He enchants them with his voice like Orpheus, and they follow the sound of his voice in a trance. There were some locals also in this chorus, whose dance simply delighted me when I saw how beautifully they took care never to get in Protagoras' way. When he turned around with his flanking groups, the audience to the rear would split into two in a very orderly way and then circle around to either side and form up again behind him. It was quite lovely. (314e3–315b8)

In addition to those mentioned in this passage we also learn that the following are present: the sophists Hippias and Prodicus, Plato's relative Critias, who also appears in the dialogue *Charmides;* Phaedrus, Pausanias, Alcibiades, Eryximachus, and the playwright Agathon, all of whom appear in the dialogue *Symposium*, the Andron who also is mentioned in the *Gorgias* (487c), Adeimantus, a general in the Peloponnesian War, and another Adeimantus. Present, then, are the major sophists (only Gorgias is missing), six persons after whom a Platonic dialogue is named, for the most part persons who turn up once or more in Plato's dialogues outside the *Protagoras*, some of Plato's relatives, sons of some of the most prominent Athenian families, some men who over the next thirty years will play a prominent or even fateful, but in any case questionable, role in Athenian history. At least four of those present (Alcibiades, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and Adeimantus) will be implicated in the scandal of the sacrilegious mutilation of Hermae in 415 B.C., which will lead to the recall of Alcibiades as one of the commanders of the Sicilian expedition, his condemnation, and his temporarily changing sides in the war with Sparta. One, Andron, a friend of

Callicles, will be a member of the oligarchical regime of the so-called Four Hundred in 411 B.C. and two, Critias and Charmides, both relatives of Plato, will form part of the so-called tyranny of the Thirty in 404 B.C.

What are we to make of this? Why do the sophists and in particular Protagoras attract promising young men with such force? Part of the attraction, no doubt, is that Protagoras is supposed to be a powerful speaker (cf. 310e6–7), and they hope the sophist will turn them, too, into powerful speakers (cf. 312d6–7; d9). In a democratic society that does not acknowledge any rights of the individual and in which most important decisions are made by the people, a large assembly, or a court with a large jury, on the basis of speeches, the ability to speak well is, no doubt, a crucial and perhaps vital asset for young men of ambition. But we need not underestimate the young men we encounter here by supposing they are just out to make a career in public life. Rather, they seem somehow aware that a traditional education is insufficient to deal with the problems a citizen of Athens faces in the second half of the fifth century. They sense that traditional ways are inadequate, that one must approach problems in an enlightened, rational way, and that there should be a special competence, an expertise, in dealing with them. Indeed, according to the dialogue, Protagoras promises to impart just such an expertise. He is made to say that he will teach his students precisely what they come for, and he explains that he teaches how best to run one's household, sound deliberation in one's own affairs, but also in the affairs of the city, and how one is best able to act and speak concerning them (318e4 ff.). He is ready to accept Socrates' suggestion that he teaches the *politike techne* (319a4). Often this is translated as "the art of politics," but, from the context, what Protagoras has in mind is perhaps rather the art of the citizen, the competence that makes a citizen a good citizen (cf. 319a4–5), part of which is to run one's household properly (318e5–6).

Now, one can immediately see why such a claim, on the part of an influential and respected figure like Protagoras, would be regarded as a threat by the people, by democrats. Democracy rests on the assumption that the affairs of a city are not the subject of some special expertise, but that every citizen is competent to judge them. To claim that a special expertise or art is needed for these matters comes dangerously close to claiming that the people are not fit to rule, for they do not have this

expertise. They may not have the talent to acquire it. They certainly do not have the time or the money to enroll with Protagoras. The fact that Protagoras attracts ambitious young men, from prominent families, whose attitude towards democracy is ambivalent, would heighten the misgivings. On the other hand, he does not attack democratic procedures, and seems unwilling to. On the contrary, he rhetorically supports the ideology on which these procedures rest. The result is a certain confusion in his own position: he supports the value of special expertise, but also the democratic ethos that is fundamentally at odds with it.

Protagoras' confusion manifests itself in a certain ambiguity in his claim to teach good citizenship. Truly virtuous action has to satisfy at least two conditions: (i) it must be an action of the right kind, and (ii) it must spring from the appropriate motivation. Not only must it be a good thing to do, but it must also be done out of goodness, out of a settled and enduring attitude, a certain disposition of mind or character or both. This seems to be the point of the contrast between "becoming good" and "being good," drawn by Socrates in his interpretation of Simonides' poem (339e6 ff.), a passage whose seeming irrelevance to the subject at issue has troubled interpreters. Socrates interprets Simonides as claiming that it is difficult enough to "become good," but impossible to be good, at least for a human being. The curious phrase "becoming good," as we can see from, for example, its repeated use in Thucydides (II, 87, 9; III, 64, 2 and 4; VII, 77, 7), refers to the kind of behavior a virtuous person would display, where it is left open, or even questioned, whether in the case at hand it actually is produced by virtue. When, in his speech (320c ff.), Protagoras claims that, and explains how, all Athenians teach virtue, what he largely seems to have in mind is a kind of conditioning which, by threat or lure, manages to make people, by and large, exhibit the kind of behavior thought desirable. But this, at best, constitutes "becoming good," rather than being good. Being good is a matter of acting freely out of insight, and not out of social coercion.

The difference, in a way, is the difference between vulgar or popular virtue, which amounts to behaving as "good citizens" are supposed to behave, and real virtue, which is a matter of personal attitude determined by insight, a difference Plato refers to in the *Phaedo* (82a10 ff.) and the *Republic* (619c7 ff.). This, then, is the ambiguity in Protagoras' position: When he claims to teach good citizenship, is it real or popular virtue he has in

mind? That he conceives of it as some kind of wisdom suggests he is talking about real virtue. But the way he talks about virtue and its inculcation makes him seem rather to be an advocate of popular virtue. His skill can perhaps make popular virtue more attractive, and he may refine and enhance it; but it is not real virtue and not the kind of thing that can be taught, at least not in the same sense as an art or a science.

Socrates, on the other hand, seems to think that virtue is wisdom; and, given his view of the difficulty of attaining knowledge, he must, like Simonides on his interpretation, think that it is next to impossible to be virtuous. True virtue is not just somehow managing to behave, or having somehow been pushed, perhaps by rhetoric like Protagoras', into behaving as we would like people to behave. One must oneself come to understand, and hence to accept, how it is good to behave, as if it had become one's nature to behave well. For Socrates, virtue is crucially a matter of motivation, more precisely of understanding and wisdom. Further, given that, as we shall see, he believes that such understanding cannot be overridden or set aside by any other motive, he thinks that virtue is *entirely* a matter of wisdom. Needless to say, he will hardly agree with Protagoras that wisdom is widely distributed among his fellow-Athenians, or that it is successfully taught by them.

There is an irony in all this which can hardly escape the reader and surely is intended. Socrates presents himself as less wise than Protagoras, who, with his cautious prudence and respect for traditional values and democratic views, manages to avoid harm (cf. e.g. 316c–317c), but also has become quite confused in his own position; and it will be Socrates who will pay with his life for his own consistency and lack of prudence. The Athenians, their democracy regained, will put him to death in 399 B.C. The reaction of the doorman who had listened to the end of Socrates' discussion with Hippocrates is telling: it is meant to indicate that the people found it quite difficult to distinguish between Socrates and the sophists. Socrates is very interested in, and on good terms with, sophists like Protagoras and Prodicus. He draws on the same questionable following of young men as the sophists; and he, like Protagoras, questions the adequacy of their traditional upbringing and envisages a rational art or discipline to guide one's life, private or public. But, unlike Protagoras, Socrates uncompromisingly insists on the idea of a special expertise, in spite of its obvious con-

sequences for our attitude both towards traditional values and democratic tenets.

(III) The Nature of Dialectic

One important part of the background of the dialogue, then, is the social and political situation of Athens, which is about to embark on an imperialist war that will end in complete disaster. Another is the character of the protagonists, which is sketched in considerable detail. Protagoras' caution and prudence, his desire to be respectable, and his decency are clearly connected with his views and the way he argues, just as Socrates' views and the way he argues are connected with his fate. Thus the dialogue represents dramatically how the issues in question are embedded in our lives, which shape our answers to them and which in turn are shaped by these answers. Indeed, also important in the background of the dialogue are the very styles of thought and argument represented by Protagoras and Socrates. Though Protagoras is also famed for his succinct answers in debate (cf. 334e6 ff.), his strength obviously is in carefully crafting speeches that overwhelm the audience as if by magic. The dialogue, at 320c8 ff., presents a powerful example of such a speech and its effects. Perhaps it is a testimony to Plato's literary abilities that scholars have seriously considered whether the speech in some sense can be attributed to the historical Protagoras. Socrates, on the other hand, proceeds "dialectically," by short question and answer, so that we can see precisely on what assumptions and inferential steps a given conclusion rests, instead of being carried away by the magic of a speech. Our dialogue, however, shows that this style of argument was not peculiar to Socrates, but characteristic of a more general practice, cultivated also by the sophists, which was familiar to the audience and conducted according to certain agreed-upon rules (cf., e.g., 335a4 ff.; 338a8 ff.). Indeed, the *Protagoras* is perhaps our most important source of knowledge about this practice, a source which has not yet been sufficiently explored.

This manner of arguing by question and answer, in which Socrates obviously developed great skill, gives Plato's dialogues their basic form. This accounts for the fact that the dialogues do not portray what we would think of as real discussions—full exchanges of views. Rather, the dialogues follow the rules of

dialectic. There is a questioner and a respondent. The questioner elicits from the respondent a thesis, and the task of the questioner is to compel, by the appropriate use of yes-or-no questions, admissions from the respondent that contradict his original thesis. It is part of the formal role of the respondent in dialectic that he answers just with "yes" or "no." This does not make for much of a discussion in our sense, and it certainly constrains the respondent, a feature unfairly exploited by some sophisms, like the argument which asks, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" The *Protagoras* gives us a vivid picture of the practice of dialectic, of how the respondent can be fair or unfair, cooperative or uncooperative, of how the questioner can conceal the aim of his questioning, of the role the audience plays, of the possible need for an umpire (cf. 338a8). But our dialogue also allows Protagoras, the main character besides Socrates, repeatedly to break this scheme; for example, to exchange roles with Socrates (338e6 ff.), or to hold forth in long speeches. For this reason, the form of the dialogue in the *Protagoras* is much more varied than in most dialogues of Plato.

Now, one particular feature of dialectic, as practiced by Socrates, needs brief comment. To win in this kind of debate is to force the respondent to contradict something he had originally claimed. Originally he had claimed that p, and now he is forced to admit that not p. This practice fits Socrates' purposes admirably. Socrates always claims ignorance and is, to say the least, hesitant to state his own views (cf. *Apology* 20e6 ff.; *Theaetetus* 149a ff.). He wants to hear what others have to say, and he wants to determine whether they speak from knowledge or ignorance. Dialectic provides Socrates with an ideal means to show his interlocutors that, though they think they know, they are speaking out of ignorance. By contradicting himself on the very subject of his presumed competence, the opponent shows himself not to be much of an expert. Coming to acknowledge this ignorance, though painful, is the first necessary step toward real knowledge or wisdom. The argument, then, which forces the respondent to admit that not p need not really constitute a proof that not p. All it needs to show is that the respondent is prepared to make assumptions from which it would follow that not p; but these are not necessarily assumptions Socrates himself is making. After all, Socrates is just asking questions, and we can at best guess how he himself would answer them. The arguments do not so much refute a thesis or establish its contra-

dictory, as they refute a person by showing him to be inconsistent and confused.

Socrates' mastery of this practice is such that he manages to "refute" the respondent even where we have some reason to believe that Socrates actually shares the respondent's view—which just goes to show that it is not the thesis, strictly speaking, but the respondent who is refuted. One gets the feeling that Socrates could manage to refute any thesis; that is, that he could show anyone to be ignorant on any of the questions at issue in such discussions. It is not clear which moral we should draw from this—that knowledge is indeed difficult to come by, or that, at least in fact, if not in principle, there is no knowledge. The Stoics drew the former moral, that it takes Herculean labors to gain the knowledge which constitutes wisdom, and that human beings in principle are capable of knowledge, though in fact as a rule are too weak to submit themselves to the toils. The Skeptics, equally inspired by Socrates, inclined to the view that even such Herculean labors, a life uncompromisingly devoted to philosophical inquiry, may not suffice to achieve this aim, though it might leave one in a state of Socratic ignorance, rather than the common state of pretense and pretension. What is clear, though, once we understand the nature of dialectic and the conception of knowledge for which Socrates' dialectical questioning is supposed to constitute a test, is that Socrates' own claims to ignorance are not disingenuous or sheer irony. Even when he seems to have a view on a matter and, moreover, a view which happens to coincide with that of the respondent, what really matters is that this is just a view, not supported by the kind of knowledge which would enable one to rationally hold on to it whatever considerations to the contrary might be available.

(IV) The Reversal

That a dialectical argument is sometimes meant to refute the respondent's claim to knowledge, rather than to show that his thesis is false, helps to explain the odd reversal of positions on which Socrates remarks near the end of the dialogue (361a3 ff.). In his eagerness to show that virtue is some one thing, Socrates has been arguing that virtue is some kind of knowledge, that virtue is wisdom. This would strongly suggest that virtue can be

taught; but that is precisely what Protagoras had originally claimed and what Socrates had set out to argue against. Protagoras, on the other hand, in his eagerness to deny that the virtues are very much alike, if not identical, has taken the view that courage, for example, quite definitely is not a matter of knowledge or wisdom. By taking this position, however, he has committed himself to the view that virtue, or at least one of the virtues, not being a matter of knowledge, cannot be taught. At the beginning of the argument, however, although Protagoras has been cautious not to explicitly claim to teach virtue, he does not object when Socrates proceeds as if he had claimed that the wisdom, learning, or *mathema* he imparts to his students is in fact virtue (cf., e.g., 319a10–b1 and 320b4–c1). Nor is Socrates without reason to suppose that Protagoras thinks of himself as teaching virtue, since he agrees that his aim is to turn men into good citizens by teaching them the art of the citizen (319a4–7). At that point, then, it looks not only as if Protagoras thinks that virtue can be taught, but that it can be taught because it is a certain wisdom, and wisdom really is an art or expertise. In fact, using an old-fashioned synonym of "wisdom" (*euboulia*), Protagoras himself characterizes the learning he imparts as a matter of some kind of wisdom (318e5).

This not only sounds very much like the position generally associated with Socrates, but like the position towards which Socrates is arguing in this dialogue: that the virtues, and hence virtue, are wisdom and so can be taught. Given all this, we need to ask not only how the reversal of positions comes about, but, more fundamentally, why Socrates objects in the first place to Protagoras' claim that virtue can be taught, when, in fact, it appears he agrees with him to an amazing degree.

Here it is important to remember the dialectical and, in particular, elenctic character of Socrates' arguments; that is to say, Socrates' use of dialectical argument to test the expertise of the respondent and to reveal his ignorance and confusion, even though Socrates might well agree with his interlocutor's thesis. On the first page of the dialogue (309), Socrates already, by his careful language, indicates that he has reservations about Protagoras' wisdom. Though Protagoras claims his wisdom to be a *mathema*, an art (*techne*), Socrates politely doubts whether Protagoras has such a body of systematic knowledge to impart (319a8–9). And Socrates obviously has doubts concerning Protagoras' conception of virtue and how, given this conception, he can think of virtue as a *techne*. Consequently, when he finds out that his young friend Hippocrates is ready to turn himself over to Protagoras to become wiser and better, Socrates puts Protagoras to the test of a dialectical examination, for all to see whether he has the wisdom or knowledge he claims to impart.

As the discussion evolves, it will also become clearer why Socrates was right to question Protagoras' wisdom. Protagoras' reversal of position is no dialectical strategy, but rather is rooted in the political cautiousness mentioned above and the confused conception of virtue that it motivates. Protagoras should hold on to the fundamental insight that virtue is a matter of wisdom and that wisdom is some expert knowledge, though this, perhaps, needs some qualification. But, instead of trying to get clearer about this, working out its consequences and systematically developing and articulating the relevant expertise, Protagoras hesitates to speak his mind and to develop his view in a direction which inevitably would bring him into conflict, not only with the people of Athens, but also with traditionalists among the upper class. Instead, as we have seen, he compromises his position, and this compromise leads to the reversal and to Protagoras' downfall.

When Socrates challenges the thesis that virtue can be taught and points out that at least the Athenians (cf. 319d3–4) do not seem to think that virtue is some special expertise (319b5 ff.) for which special teachers are needed (319d5–6), or that it can be taught at all (319d6–7), Protagoras is willing to defend the thesis at great length. He argues, among other things, that any civilized society treats virtue as a skill or competence which, in the division of labor, is not divided, because every citizen needs it, and thus society makes sure that everybody acquires it (cf., e.g., 322d1 ff.; 326e8–327a2). Hence every effort is made, both on the part of the society as a whole and of its individual members, to teach virtue to the young (cf., e.g., 326e2–4 and 327e1–3). Protagoras concludes his long speech (328c3 ff.) by claiming that he has shown that the Athenians, too, assume that virtue can be taught, and that, indeed, they are teaching it all the time.

This defense of the dangerous claim to teach virtue is politically expedient, since it provides a foundation for the democrats' claim that every citizen, because of his virtue, is entitled to the epithet "good," which the aristocrats had reserved for them-

selves, and thus has the competence to participate in the affairs of the city; but it compromises and confuses Protagoras' own position. The citizens have their own notion of virtue, and it is not the notion of a *techne*, some special expertise or knowledge, as Socrates seems to think and as Protagoras had originally seemed to suggest. In consequence, the citizens also have their own idea of how virtue is taught—namely, by traditional upbringing and education, which is largely accomplished by conditioning, often by some form of coercive persuasion, rather than by imparting or fostering rational, reflective insight, in the way Socrates and Protagoras originally seem to think.

Protagoras is aware of a certain tension in his position. The question naturally arises why, if all Athenians teach virtue and are reasonably successful at raising good citizens, there is any need for his services. In his long speech (328a3 ff.), he tries to address this problem by pointing out that his services should still be appreciated, since he is somewhat better able than others to advance his students' virtue beyond what their traditional education would achieve. Indeed, in hindsight, one may see some significance in the fact that Protagoras has been rather careful not to promise to make his students good or virtuous, but merely better every day (316c9 ff.; 318a9). This differential increase is well worth the fees he is charging, Protagoras points out at 328b3 ff.; he is catering to the promising, ambitious sons of the Athenian well-to-do, who traditionally, in their concern for virtue, do not spare their resources but send their sons to all kinds of teachers anyway (326b6–c6). But this defense of the need for his teaching only reflects the awkwardness of Protagoras' position, in spite of his praise of the citizens' virtue. It acknowledges, as the meeting in Callias' house also shows, that he is surrounded by ambitious sons of the well-to-do and of aristocratic families who, as their subsequent history shows, are hardly friends of the people and have a pronounced tendency to support oligarchic rule. He is easily seen, not as providing an increase in civic virtue welcome to everybody, but as giving the well-to-do the edge, an increase in competence which, in the best case, will justify their claim to power and, in the worst, will allow them to succeed in the pursuit of their self-interest by their incredible ability to handle arguments and to persuade, just as on this occasion Protagoras manages, by his long speech, to charm and cast a spell on his audience and so to persuade them that virtue can be taught.

(V) The Structure of the Central Argument

The formal situation in the dialogue at the conclusion of Protagoras' great speech is this. Protagoras has committed himself to the thesis that virtue can be taught. Socrates has challenged this thesis (319a10), but instead of immediately proceeding to "refute" it, Socrates gave Protagoras occasion to defend his claim in a long speech. It is in this situation, only at 329b7, that Socrates begins the long dialectical argument which forms the argumentative backbone of the dialogue, ending at 360e5. Even now, however, Socrates does not attack Protagoras' thesis directly. In fact, he talks as if he might be willing to let Protagoras get away with asserting the teachability of virtue. Rather, he seems to raise a new question. Relying on Protagoras' long speech, Socrates elicits from him the opinion that virtue consists of a number of virtues that are distinct and quite different from each other. Formally, this, rather than the teachability of virtue, is the thesis which Socrates sets out to refute, it seems successfully. But once this argument concerning the unity of virtue is concluded at 360e5, Socrates points out politely that it could easily have been extended to constitute a formal refutation of Protagoras' original thesis that virtue can be taught: as mentioned above, Protagoras seems to have committed himself, in the course of this argument concerning the unity of virtue, to the view that courage, at least, is not some kind of knowledge or expertise and hence cannot be taught. What is more, Socrates drives home the point that Protagoras has shown himself to be confused about what virtue is and hence does not know whether or not it can be taught. A fortiori, Protagoras cannot claim to be an expert on virtue and so is in no position to teach it. Hippocrates, obviously, should think twice before submitting himself to Protagoras' teaching. The argumentative core and backbone of the dialogue, then, consists of a long argument, repeatedly interrupted, concerning the unity of the virtues, or the unity of virtue, which extends from 329b7 to 360e5. Its great relevance to the question of the teachability of virtue, and to the more basic question of the nature of virtue itself, only gradually becomes more apparent in the course of the argument.

It is in 329c1 ff. that Socrates raises the question of the unity of virtue: "Is virtue a single thing with justice and temperance and piety its parts, or are the things I have just listed all names for a single entity?" On the face of it, there does not seem to be a

problem here, and Socrates' question looks artificial. Protagoras is saying that there are different virtues, but that they go together so as to constitute one thing, namely virtue: "Virtue is a single thing," he replies, "and the things you are asking about are its parts."

In fact, Socrates' question is less artificial than it seems. Protagoras himself had suggested (318e5) that virtue is a certain kind of wisdom. If so, wisdom is not just one among several virtues. Rather, one must wonder whether wisdom is also a necessary condition for the other virtues or even whether the other virtues are not just parts of this wisdom. Perhaps, indeed, one and the same wisdom, applied in different contexts, grounds or even guarantees a courageous or pious or just response, as the context demands. In any case, as Protagoras' own words show, there is a serious question about how the virtues go together to form virtue. So Socrates quite naturally proceeds, in 329d4 ff. (cf. 349a6 ff.; 359a4 ff.), to ask more specifically how Protagoras thinks the different virtues are related to each other and to virtue itself so as to form one thing. The view he elicits from Protagoras is the following: The individual virtues are, first, quite distinct and unlike each other, and unlike the whole (virtue itself) of which they are parts. That is, they are unhomogeneous, like the parts of a face, which differ from each other and from the face itself; rather than homogeneous, like the parts of a single lump of gold, which are like each other and like the whole lump. Second, the individual virtues are mutually independent, in the sense that one can have one virtue without having the others (329e2 ff.). These rather abstract statements remain somewhat vague, but in any case, the claim that Socrates will subject to criticism is that the virtues are not identical, one and the same, with each other and with virtue, or even qualitatively similar to each other, but rather qualitatively different parts of one and the same thing, namely virtue (cf. the recapitulation in 349a6 ff. and 359a4 ff.).

To refute this thesis, it would suffice to show of any two virtues that they are like, and not unlike, each other; but Socrates does not content himself with this. In his Great Speech, and elsewhere, Protagoras has mentioned or accepted at least five virtues. Socrates takes up these five virtues in four pairs: (i) justice and piety, (ii) wisdom and temperance, (iii) temperance and justice, and (iv) wisdom and courage. He tries to show, for

each of the four pairs, that the two virtues in question are not unlike each other. But Socrates does this in such a way as to suggest that the virtues not only are like each other, but that their relation is much closer, perhaps even that they are identical with each other and hence with virtue. Nevertheless, some of the conclusions concerning the pairs of virtues do not obviously amount to straightforward claims of identity. So the refutation of Protagoras' thesis seems to leave open a whole range of positive possibilities as to how the virtues go together to constitute virtue, including the possibility that the different virtue-names refer to a single state of the soul. Hence the problem of the unity of virtue is a problem of interpretation for the *Protagoras*, but it is also a philosophical problem which will occupy Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. And it is a problem which should also occupy us. For when we think about what kind of person we ideally would want to be like, we also have to ask ourselves whether the list of features we find desirable just constitutes, as it were, a shopping-list, or whether, as seems likely, they are systematically related so as to form some kind of unity which goes beyond their being severally desirable features. How do we make comparisons and judge people, if there are a number of different and perhaps even independent relevant features?

Perhaps it is misleading to say that in the case of the *Protagoras* it is a problem of interpretation. For this would suggest that the Socrates of the dialogue is committed—has been committed by Plato, in writing the dialogue—to a certain position on the question, and that the interpreter's task is to find out which position it is. Here we should keep in mind the nature of dialectic: Strictly speaking, Socrates, as the questioner in the debate, is not committed to a view anyway. By having Socrates put his questions and draw his conclusions in a way which raises, but does not settle, the question of the unity of the virtues, Plato may have made the point precisely to encourage us to pursue for ourselves the different possibilities.

This said, it still seems true that, if the dialogue does suggest a positive thesis, it is the strong thesis that the virtues are identical with wisdom, the knowledge of what is good and bad. One of the positions suggested by Socrates as an option, namely that the virtues, like different parts of a piece of gold, are entirely similar, though not identical, seems vacuous: it is introduced

simply to get a clear view of the contrasted possibilities. If this is so, there are only two, not three, main options: the identity view and the view, espoused by Protagoras, that the virtues are distinct and independent. But, even on the identity view, there remains a problem, as we can see from Stoic discussions of the question: What are we to make of the fact that there are five (or perhaps more) different names of this allegedy single condition, virtue? They do not seem to be related merely arbitrarily, like two names of a single city (e.g., "Istanbul" and "Constantinople"), but seem in at least some cases rather to apply to virtue through its relation to the different types of acts—just acts, pious acts, courageous acts, and so forth—in which virtue is exercised in different circumstances. We still want to know how to characterize these different manifestations of virtue and their relations to each other. Even on the identity view suggested by Socrates, then, the question of the unity of virtue remains highly complicated.

(VI) The Relations Between Particular Virtues

Let us now briefly consider some of the issues raised by the four particular arguments that make up this central argument about the unity of virtue.

The first argument (330b6–332a3) concerns the unity of justice and piety. One remarkable thing about this argument is that it explicitly assumes that justice is just (330c4–8) and that piety is pious, indeed that if anything is pious, piety is (330d8 ff.). What is even more remarkable is that both Protagoras and Socrates seem to accept this curious claim without comment, as if it were an obvious, basic truth. This is perhaps the earliest occurrence in Plato of what scholars have come to call "self-predication." Plato freely uses statements in which the predicate "F" is ascribed to an item, F-ness, as if such statements as "heat is hot," "difference is different," "oddness is odd," were trivially true. This is extremely puzzling. To us, most of these statements seem absurdly false. As a rule, a feature is not an instance of itself, and to assume so amounts to a "category mistake." Color itself does not seem to be the kind of item which we could say is colored. Nevertheless, such statements play a prominent role in Plato's later metaphysics. There is considerable scholarly debate about how Plato might have dealt with the difficulties they raise. This is not the place to review this debate, let alone to take

a stand in it, but to understand the argument of the *Protagoras* the following may be of some help.

(i) Suppose Socrates is just. In that case, we might ask what it is about him that is just. We might answer by specifying some feature which is precisely what is just about Socrates. So there would be something, namely in fact his justice, of which we are willing to say that this is what is just about Socrates. Further, we might think that it was precisely this feature which was what was just about any just person. So, in this sense, we might be prepared to say that it is this feature, justice, which is just. In saying this we would, of course, be quite aware that justice is not just in the same way and sense in which Socrates is just. Socrates is just, it would seem, by *having* this feature, justice. Justice rather would be just by *being* this feature.

(ii) Suppose we say that water is wet, and that whatever else is wet is wet because it has some water mixed into it. One might then identify water with wetness and think that it was a trivial, but basic, truth that wetness (i.e., water) is wet; and that, if wetness were not wet, nothing else would be wet, because whatever else is wet is wet because it has a share of (partakes of, is appropriately related to) water. This, again, would not mean that water is wet in the same way or sense in which a piece of cloth is wet. The latter is wet by somehow *having* some wetness, the former by *being* wetness or water.

(iii) We need to keep in mind that in Plato's day abstract nouns were still rare; in fact, Plato himself contributed significantly to the formation of abstract names to correspond to adjectives, and in the *Theaetetus* he apologizes for coining the general abstract noun, "quality" (182a). Instead of abstract nouns, one used the neuter adjective with the definite article: "the hot" instead of "heat," "the ill" instead of "illness," "the beautiful" instead of "beauty." Now, if one used "the wet" and "wetness" interchangeably, it would be natural to think that in some sense wetness is wet, for it seems obvious that there is a sense in which the wet is wet.

Moreover, only the use of abstract nouns makes it seem at all natural to assume that there even are corresponding general abstract features. It is, of course, difficult to see in what sense an abstract feature could be self-predicational, how wetness could be wet, for example. But if, instead of wetness, coldness, and so on, we think of the wet, the cold, the hot, the ill, it is by no means obvious that we should think of these as abstract fea-

tures. We might rather think of them on the model of stuffs; for example, of the wet on the model of water, or some wet-making stuff, rather than as an abstract feature, though we might well be aware that this can be no more than a model or an analogy. In fact, some philosophers before Plato (for example, Anaxagoras, but also some doctors) clearly think of qualities as stuffs, as ingredients in a mixture which constitutes an object. Even much later, the Stoics, and doctors influenced by them, think of qualities in this way. Against this background, then, we should not be surprised if Plato has no difficulty in making such claims as "justice is just," as if they were trivial truths, even though he does have considerable difficulty in spelling out the precise force of this, once he gets interested in clarifying the metaphysical status of such items as justice. Here in the *Protagoras* he seems to content himself with the assumption that there really is such a thing as justice (330c1), and that it is just, if anything is.

Suppose, then, we understand "justice is just" as the claim that what is just about somebody—what, for instance, reliably produces just actions when they are called for—is a person's justice. How does this help to understand Socrates' argument? If we assume that piety is merely a form of justice, namely justice in one's dealings with the gods, there would be a ready sense in which, as Socrates also asserts, justice is pious and piety is just. What it would be about Socrates which is pious, which would reliably produce pious actions, would be his justice; and what could be relied upon to produce just actions, at least in his dealings with the gods, would be piety. In this case, justice and piety would not be, as Protagoras supposes, quite unlike each other, separate and independent. Whether or not they are identical, Socrates would have shown all he needs to refute Protagoras.

Next follows an argument that wisdom and temperance are the same (332a3–333b6), and the beginning of an argument that justice and temperance go together (333b ff.), which, however, Protagoras does not allow to arrive at a formal conclusion (cf. 334a3 ff.). In the case of justice and temperance, it is clear enough that they are related, and that these are not two entirely independent, separate abilities, united only by the fact that both are required by a certain conception of what it is to be virtuous or good. Obviously justice requires a certain amount of temperance, in the sense of self-restraint; that one recognize and respect the boundary between oneself and others; that one

not let oneself be carried away beyond one's limits to invade or violate somebody else. Actually, "temperance" and "self-restraint" are somewhat one-sided translations of the Greek term *sōphrosunē*, which might more literally be rendered "soundness of mind." It is soundness of mind that lets one see one's limits and not transgress them, and so be self-restrained or temperate. If we choose this rendering, it also becomes more obvious that the subjects of the previous argument, wisdom and temperance (or soundness of mind), cannot be entirely separate and unrelated: clearly, to be wise must minimally require soundness of mind. As in the case of justice and piety, the different virtues are intricately related in a way that needs sorting out if we want to know precisely what would make us good or virtuous.

After the major interruption provoked by Protagoras at 334c7, the overall argument resumes only at 348c5. There Socrates recalls the original questions and the stand Protagoras had taken, but allows him, in the light of the previous argument, to shift his position and to claim now that the virtues are the different parts of virtue, but that four of them, namely wisdom, justice, piety, and self-restraint, are quite alike, whereas courage is quite different from them (349d2–8). At 351b3, Socrates begins a complex argument against this view, in favor of the conclusion that courage, too, is a matter of wisdom or knowledge.

This argument is full of puzzling and interesting detail. Perhaps the greatest difficulty for the interpreter is that Socrates seems to rely on the assumption that the good is what is pleasant (cf. 351e5–6), or even that "good" and "pleasant" are interchangeable (355b3 ff.). This suggests some form of hedonism, i.e., a view to the effect that pleasure is the highest good, that pleasure is what we in fact do, or should, aim at in our lives. It is a position some version of which, at least, Plato vehemently rejects in the *Gorgias* (495a ff.), in the *Republic* (505b ff.), and in the *Philebus* (20e ff.). It is difficult to determine precisely what position it is, among the great number of possibilities, that Socrates means to be arguing from here. It is clear that he assumes, against Protagoras' objection, that the pleasant as such is good (cf. 351c1 ff.). If pleasures are objectionable, it is not because they are bad in themselves, but because of their bad consequences. He also clearly assumes that a good life is a pleasant life (cf.351b4 ff.), perhaps even the most pleasant life. But this, of course, is perfectly compatible with the view (adopted by Plato

even in the *Philebus* and, with qualification, by Aristotle) that, though the good we aim at is not pleasure, but something else, nevertheless the good life turns out to be the most pleasant life, and, what is more, that pleasure contributes directly and in its own right to the goodness of life.

But, further on in the argument, Socrates seems to assume not only that the pleasant as such is good, but that it is with reference to their pleasantness and nothing else that things are called "good" (cf., e.g., 354b5 ff.; d1 ff.; d7 ff.; 355a3 ff.). This does sound as if now the pleasant is treated not only as a good, but as the supreme good we aim at in all our actions: a position incompatible with what Plato makes Socrates say in other dialogues. Now, in considering this, we need to keep in mind the following:

(i) Socrates uses the hedonist thesis in the context of his rebuttal to an objection raised by the common man, to whom Socrates also attributes the hedonist thesis itself. For his argument that even courage is nothing but wisdom, Socrates wants to claim that knowledge or wisdom cannot be overcome by any motive, in particular not by fear. This runs into the objection that it is commonly believed that, overcome by passion, we often act against our better judgment. But the upshot of this part of the argument is that, given the hedonist thesis, it does not make sense to say, as the common man does, that one acts against one's better judgment in such cases. Since the common man also accepts the hedonist thesis, he is refuted: either he is wrong in his assumption that knowledge can be overcome by passion or he is in no position to make this claim, since it contradicts his hedonism. In this way Socrates neutralizes his objection, but we need not think of Socrates himself as committed to the hedonist thesis.

(ii) Given the appropriate assumptions about the mind (more about these below), the arguments in this section can be reformulated without relying on a hedonist thesis.

(iii) The text goes out of its way to indicate that the term "pleasant" admits of a variety of interpretations. "Pleasant" may not just mean "pleasurable," in the sense of "providing one with pleasure." It also may cover anything which is not painful (cf. 355a3; 358b4). More important, it might refer to things which satisfy in other ways than by giving pleasure, a point dwelt on at some length in 358a5 ff. Indeed, at 358a, Socrates explicitly says that when, in this context, he speaks of what is pleasant, he is ignoring certain distinctions between kinds of pleasure, satisfaction, enjoyment, elation, and so forth. So perhaps it is perfectly acceptable for Socrates to say that we aim at the pleasant, that the pleasant is not just good but *the* good. He might mean by this that we aim at what satisfies our needs.

Whatever may be the position Socrates attributes to the common man, it is worth commenting briefly on the fact that, and the question why, Socrates denies that there is such a thing as *akrasia* or weakness of will—that we sometimes are, as the common man supposes, driven by passion to act against our better judgment. Indeed, the very term *akrasia*, which we then find in Aristotle and later, may come from this passage (cf. 352c5; d2), as does the image of reason as the slave of the passions (cf. 352b4; b7–8; c1). Plato and Aristotle, each in his own way, will disagree with Socrates on this point, whereas the Stoics will revert to Socrates' position.

Now, one might think that, for his denial of *akrasia*, Socrates relies on some claim about the special power of knowledge or wisdom. Perhaps, one might think, he holds that if one really knows what is right, no amount of passion of whatever kind can cause one to act contrary to one's knowledge; that failure to act rightly just reveals that one does not really fully know what is right. But it becomes apparent later (cf. 358b7; c7; d1) that the Socratic claim is the much stronger one that nobody acts even against his beliefs, much less his knowledge. That is to say, the claim does not rely on some special power attributed to knowledge as distinct from mere opinion. Hence Socrates must assume that somebody who, on the face of it, believes that he should do X because it is good, but nevertheless fails to do it, does not really believe that to do X is good, but believes that, on balance, to do X is bad. The passage at 358d5 ff. provides a clue to how Socrates can think this. There he characterizes fear as a certain kind of belief, namely, as the expectation of something bad. Hence, he seems to assume, if one fails to do X out of fear, despite believing that it would be good to do it, this really means that one believes that the bad expected from doing X outweighs the expected good; and that therefore, on balance, it is not good after all to do X, but bad. If the other passions (e.g., desire, pleasure, pain) are also characterized as beliefs about what is good or bad, then Socrates can describe what the common man takes to be conflicts between reason and passion, in which one's considered judgment is sometimes overwhelmed,

as mere conflicts of belief, to be settled by a rational calculation of expected consequences. He can then deny that anyone ever acts against his belief about what, on balance, it is good for him to do.

If we find this highly intellectualistic account of the passions as judgments of some kind implausible, we should keep in mind that it is only Plato, in the *Republic* (IV, 437b ff.), who, precisely to explain how one can act against the judgment of one's reason, for the first time introduces different parts of the soul, each with its own desires, allowing us to understand how irrational desire may overcome the dictates of desire and reason. Here in the *Protagoras*, Socrates seems to argue as if the soul just were reason, and the passions were reasoned beliefs or judgments of some kind, and as if, therefore, we were entirely guided or motivated by beliefs of one kind or another. On this picture of the soul, it is easy to see why Socrates thinks that nobody acts against his knowledge or even his beliefs: nothing apart from beliefs could motivate such an action.

Although no assumption about the special power of knowledge, as opposed to mere belief or opinion, is needed for his denial of *akrasia*, Socrates does want to claim that knowledge or wisdom provides one with a special ability or strength that mere belief does not. This is what Socrates turns to next (356c4 ff.).

The point is this. In some respects, in certain areas, phenomena are systematically misleading; hence the beliefs based on them are systematically misguided. If we did not have some independent body of knowledge, on the basis of which we knew better, and if we just followed appearances, we would end up with the wrong beliefs. Plato is particularly impressed with one kind of case, which he first refers to here, but also discusses in greater detail in the *Sophist* (235e ff.): optical illusions caused by viewing objects from nearby and from afar. For example, tall columns, seen from the ground directly below, would look impossibly thin at the top if they were really straight; they have to be thicker at the upper end so as to look reasonably straight. A mathematical formula determines the correct proportions. Ultimately, only applying the correct optical theory can protect us against being misled by such appearances. What is true for apparent size is also true for pleasure and pain, as Plato will point out again in the *Philebus* (41e ff.), drawing on the same analogy. Nearby pleasures and pains seem large, while those far in the future seem smaller. Accordingly, falling prey to a kind of illusion, we systematically tend to overestimate present pains and pleasures, and underestimate pleasures and pains in the more distant future. But this means that our beliefs concerning them, which guide our actions, are systematically distorted unless we have a theory, a calculus of pleasure and pain, to correct them. Hence knowledge, some kind of science, seems to be needed if we are to avoid making the wrong choices and thus ruining our lives (cf. 356e2; e6; e8; 357a6–7).

Obviously, this part of the argument still rests on the hedonistic assumption that we aim at pleasure (and nothing else); but it need not do so. What is true of pleasure and pain, namely, that they are systematically misestimated depending on the distance, is generally true of whatever is held good or bad. If we are guided by the systematically distorted beliefs about good and bad that naturally arise from appearances and gain acceptance in our communities, thus reinforcing our own illusions, we shall ruin our lives. Only knowledge, a calculus of goods to correct our misleading beliefs, can save us. This is one reason why knowledge, as opposed to mere true belief, is so crucial. Mere belief, even if true, always is threatened by the powerful but illusory evidence of appearance.

Socrates has thus suggested a conception of knowledge or wisdom on which it not only cannot be overwhelmed by the passions, but is decisive for our lives, because it determines how we act, so that we live a maximally good and satisfying life. Now, at 359a2, he can finally return to the relation between wisdom and courage. Are they, as Protagoras had insisted, quite unlike each other, so that one may well be courageous but not wise, or wise but not courageous? Given the notion of wisdom Socrates has developed, it is obvious that courage is just wisdom, and that fear will not prevent the wise person from doing what is courageous. Being wise, one will know what is bad. One will not be oblivious to the dangers of a situation. Otherwise one would just be rash or stupid. But one will also know that what appears so frightful, and thus is shunned by cowards, in fact, on balance, is not. What appears frightful, in the light of one's corrective knowledge, will be seen at worst to be less awful than what would result from the opposite course of action. One will know that the really terrible thing, the thing really to be afraid of, would be to fail to do what the situation demands. Thus cowardice turns out to be ignorance, a failure to calculate properly what is to be feared and what is not.

(VII) Conclusion

In this way, then, the long argument concerning the unity of the virtues comes to a conclusion. Being virtuous, Socrates suggests, is being wise, possessing a science or an art of properly evaluating things. It would seem that Protagoras was right to claim that virtue can be taught, that it is an art, a matter of wisdom. Where Protagoras went wrong was in abandoning this insight. By following common belief and separating the virtues from each other, and in particular by insisting that courage is altogether different from wisdom, Protagoras showed that he had not thought things out to their conclusion, and that he was confused concerning virtue, the very subject on which he claimed expertise.

But Socrates, in his concluding remarks (361c2 ff.), tellingly does not assume that we have now seen what virtue is and that it can be taught. All we have been shown is that Protagoras is confused, that he does not know what virtue is and whether it can be taught, and hence that he can hardly be qualified to teach virtue. It is true, we also have seen a way of looking at the matter on which virtue would be wisdom and so could be taught (in the sense in which wisdom can be taught—a further question Protagoras' great speech will have already suggested, but which now presses itself on us without being raised explicitly). But whether this is the right way to look at things, Socrates himself insists, only further and more thorough *skepsis*, further inquiry, can show (cf. 361c6; 361d6).

Hence Socrates would like to continue the discussion with Protagoras, but Protagoras has had enough for now. So Socrates leaves, only to run into a friend, the friend he meets at the beginning of the dialogue, and to whom he then tells the whole story of his encounter first with Hippocrates and then with the great sophist himself. This allows him, if not to continue the discussion with Protagoras, at least to go over the argument with him again by recounting it. It is an argument worth going over again and again; but not because, by going over it, we might finally uncover the veiled truth, the wisdom, it is ready to reveal to the reader who is willing to listen diligently and to follow its clues for long enough. Already in antiquity, many believed that the dialogues of Plato contained a hidden truth, or at least hinted at the true doctrine. But the power of the *Protagoras* seems to be precisely that, instead of closing off and

seeming to settle questions, it always provides us with new questions to pursue, new ways to look at familiar things, which, though certainly illuminating, in turn can be and often are questioned themselves. Surely, if wisdom can be taught, it is not by being told the truth—such a truth one would not know how to make one's own—but by being moved to look at things oneself, to consider and reconsider them in all their complexity, from all angles, until, if ever, one arrives at a view of one's own that seems to remain stable however much one is prepared to reconsider it. In this sense, though written with great art to embed it firmly in its time and place, the *Protagoras* continues to provoke us to pursue basic questions about our lives, and the way we think about them, with an amazing freshness and directness.

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