

SOCRATES' REFUTATION OF PROTAGORAS: A PRAGMATIC INCONSISTENCY

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Commentators have long puzzled over the peculiar characterization of Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras*. In his relentless drive to refute Protagoras, he argues fallaciously,¹ he willfully misinterprets a poem in order to justify his belief in its worth,² and he notoriously defends an apparently non-Socratic hedonism in support of the Socratic identity of knowledge with virtue.³ In general it seems that he will stop at nothing to dissuade his young friend Hippocrates from entrusting his soul to the sophist. And thus there is merit to Protagoras' charge that Socrates is a victory-lover, i.e., that he is just out to win the argument (360e). Socrates' most pressing concern in this dialogue, it seems, is not to understand what virtue is, but to show that Protagoras does not know what it is (311d-314b).

On the other hand, Socrates' characteristic disregard for wealth, reputation and public honors and the nature of his philosophical mission in general make it hard to imagine that he is after anything other than truth. And there are specific indications in the *Protagoras* that this is the case. Socrates allows Protagoras to speak for the majority view that one could be moderately unjust, regardless of whether it his opinion or not. For, Socrates claims, "I am primarily interested in testing the argument, although it may happen both that the questioner, myself, and my respondent wind up being tested" (333c).⁴ Here, refutation takes a back seat to the primary goal of discovering the truth. Later in the dialogue when Protagoras is reluctant to continue, Socrates reassures him: "I don't want you to think that my motive in talking with you is anything else than to take a good hard look at things that continually perplex me" (348c, see also 348a).

Thus the tension: Socrates seems to be committed to discovering the true nature of virtue *and* to defeating Protagoras in verbal combat. Truth and victory may be seen, metaphorically, as two forces pulling Socrates in two opposing directions. If he plays strictly by the rules of logical inference and treats the discussion as a cooperative endeavor to discover the truth, he will be at a disadvantage against the seasoned orator, thereby denying his love of victory and exposing Hippocrates to what he takes to be the dangers of a Protagorean education. But to the extent that he pursues victory at any cost, he gives up the hope of revealing the truth regarding virtue.

In what follows I will explore this tension further, and argue that the best resolution is a modified version of the dialectical interpretations that have been developed in recent years.⁵ In particular, I will argue, the inconsistency that Socrates reveals is not among Protagoras' philosophical commitments, but between what Protagoras says he is able to do and what he is actually able to do in the dialogue. Socrates' refutation thus exposes a pragmatic inconsistency and not a logical one. But nonetheless, this sort of refutation is just as damaging, if not more so, to Protagoras' reputation as a teacher of (Protagorean) virtue.

We might try to eliminate the tension right away by claiming that Socrates is serving two masters, victory and truth. His desire for truth could peacefully coexist with his desire for victory. For example, one may desire to win an argument so that he may discover in the process whether his view is true. In this ideal situation, there are no losers since the prize of truth is shared between the participants. This is the sort of attitude towards philosophical discourse that Socrates explicitly endorses and claims to have himself (348c-e, cp. Rep.

336e). It is difficult, however, to maintain this view of him in the *Protagoras*. The most important reason for this is that Protagoras is out for victory. So Socrates cannot play the communal-search-for-truth game even if he had wanted to. "Socrates," Protagoras remarks, "I have had verbal contests with many people, and if I were to accede to your request [to keep his remarks as brief as possible] and do as my opponent demanded, I would not be thought superior to anyone, nor would Protagoras be a name to be reckoned with among the Greeks" (335a). Protagoras believes that both he and Socrates are out to win and be thought superior. "Winning" in this context is not a matter of uncovering some truth but simply getting one's opponent to admit defeat.

Protagoras therefore steers the debate to familiar terrain—the interpretation of poetry. He gets Socrates to praise a certain poem by Simonides which he then shows to be inconsistent, thus revealing the inadequacy of Socrates' interpretation. Socrates is well aware by this point that they are involved in verbal warfare. "Protagoras got a noisy round of applause for his speech. At first I felt as if I had been hit by a good boxer. Everything went black and I was reeling from Protagoras' oratory and the others' clamor" (339e). He then uses evasive tactics to gain time in order to think more carefully about how he can respond. By willfully misreading the poem, Socrates patches up the inconsistency and "discovers" the counter-intuitive, and Socratic, notions that the only real kind of faring ill is the loss of knowledge (345b), and that no one willingly does anything bad (345d-e, 346e). The most plausible explanation of this behavior is that Socrates desires victory first and foremost.

Even more to the point, Socrates occasionally employs fallacious arguments in his attempt to refute Protagoras. Again, this is best accounted for by his desire for victory. It is very likely that Plato was aware of the fallacious nature of at least some of these arguments. One reason for thinking this is that Protagoras accurately diagnoses one of Socrates' fallacies (350c-351a), and Socrates does not object to this diagnosis. In another case, the fallacy is so rudimentary that it can hardly have escaped Plato's notice. In response to Protagoras' claim that the virtues do not resemble one another, Socrates asks: "Is piety the sort of thing to be not just [*mê dikaion*], and therefore unjust [*adikon*]...?" (331b). He may just as well have asked, "Is piety the sort of thing to be not beautiful, and therefore ugly?" Piety might not be the sort of thing we may appropriately describe as just, or as beautiful—hence it would be properly described as not-just, or not-beautiful. It does not follow that piety is unjust and ugly. Protagoras is reluctant to answer Socrates' question as he suspects a distinction is in order (331c). Presumably Plato could have allowed Protagoras to diagnose this fallacy as well.

Finally, Socrates seems to defend hedonism as the basis for his claim that all the virtues are unified by being forms of knowledge (351b-360d). Courage, for example, turns out to be knowledge of what is and is not to be feared. The coward and the courageous man both seek what appears to be most pleasant, but they differ in that the former is ignorant of what is most pleasant overall whereas the latter knows that his courageous action will bring him the most pleasure and least pain. The details of this argument are highly controversial, but regardless of how we read it, if we take it as Socrates' own view we must then explain how it can be reconciled with his attack on hedonism in the *Gorgias* and in general his insistence that virtue is supremely important. On the other hand, if it is not his own view, then we must explain why he is arguing the way he does. And again, we may have recourse to the view that Socrates is just out to defeat Protagoras and is not interested in articulating or defending any of his own views.

By taking this dialectical approach, we may account for Socrates' argumentative behavior and at the same time reconcile his desire for victory with his desire for truth. Socrates is primarily seeking to refute Protagoras. But he is not just trying to beat the sophist at his own game. His desire for verbal victory is subordinated to his desire to discover the truth regarding Protagoras' claim to expertise. So he draws out Protagoras' view in order to show that the sophist is committed to inconsistent propositions regarding the nature of virtue. It would then follow that Protagoras does not really know what virtue is, and thus that he cannot be a teacher of it. This is, in broad outline, the sort of logical inconsistency that proponents of the dialectical reading offer.

In a recent, carefully argued paper, Russell (op. cit.) points out that Socrates must present an attractive account of hedonism as a form of knowledge that unifies the virtues in order to gain Protagoras' assent. This assent is crucial since it commits Protagoras to the unity of the virtues which is inconsistent with his earlier commitment to the view that courage is unlike the other parts of virtue (349d). According to Russell, Protagoras is enticed to accept this account of hedonism insofar as it may serve as a sort of advertisement which would help him to explain how he is in fact able to make men noble and good (328b).

Protagoras *should* not have accepted Socrates' account of hedonism, however; and despite the fact that he does, based on what we know of Protagoras' views from Plato, the sophist is not even implicitly committed to this account of hedonism. But if Socrates is to genuinely accomplish the task of dialectical refutation, he needs to elicit assent to views that Protagoras really holds, or at least is implicitly committed to. Otherwise, Protagoras could just shrug off any logical inconsistency that Socrates is able to generate. For if Protagoras does not really accept one of the views that leads to the inconsistency, then he has not really been refuted.

First, let us look more closely at why Protagoras should not have accepted Socrates' offer of hedonism. A person who has mastered the hedonic measuring art is able to determine which course of action will produce the greatest pleasure and the least pain. In order to do that, he must be able to see past the mere appearances regarding pleasure and pain. For example, a pleasure that is near at hand may seem much larger than it really is since the power of appearances can cause us to ignore the painful consequences. And similarly, a painful experience like undergoing surgery may seem much larger than it really is since the imagined pain can cause us to ignore the more distant pleasures that will follow. The fundamental presupposition here is that we can have true or false beliefs about which choices will provide the most pleasure and the least pain. The fact that we often regret our choices may be interpreted as a matter of being misled by the proximity of a pleasure or pain into making a choice that results in a greater balance of pain.

But the notion that we can be misled by appearances presupposes that the world is not the way it seems. And yet Protagoras' considered opinion is that man is the measure of all things—that is, the world is for me precisely the way it seems to me. Part of Socrates' explication of this view in the *Theaetetus* is that "perception is always of what is, and unerring" (152c). If this is right, then whatever appears most pleasurable to me is most pleasurable to me. So, on the basis of Protagorean relativism, we cannot make the sort of mistake presupposed by the hedonic measuring art. It follows that Protagoras should not claim that he makes men better by means of such an art. What Socrates says on behalf of him in the *Theaetetus* is that "the man whom I call wise is the man who can change the appearances—the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us,

works a change and makes good things appear and be for him" (166d).⁶ On this view, our regrets do not indicate that we have made some mistake but rather that we are besieged by bad appearances regarding our past choices.

If this is correct, it also follows that Socrates has not refuted the real view of Protagoras—he has not led Protagoras into a logical inconsistency based on what the sophist really holds.

Nevertheless, there is still a version of the dialectical interpretation that may work. If Socrates' goal were to reveal that Protagoras is not the expert orator he claims to be, then his behavior in this dialogue would be fitting. For in that case, any and every verbal device would be legitimate. And in that case Socrates would also be justified in claiming that the resulting refutation of Protagoras did reveal an important truth, namely that Protagoras is not the *rhetorical* expert he claims to be. But Socrates wants to discredit the claim to moral expertise. Is it possible to accomplish the latter by means of the former?

It is possible, but only because of the intimate relation between moral and rhetorical expertise in Protagoras' view. The ability to persuade was certainly an essential component in a politically successful life in Athens. And political success was widely held by the Greeks to be an essential component in a good life. Hippocrates' eagerness to study with Protagoras is based on just such a series of inferences. In his initial exchange with Socrates, he complains that Protagoras has a monopoly on wisdom and will not share it (310e). Within a few lines Socrates gets him to admit that the sophist's wisdom is really just an ability to make people clever, (i.e., persuasive) speakers. Socrates also gets Hippocrates to admit that he does not really know on which subjects sophists make people clever speakers, and thus he is dangerously ignorant not only about what he wishes to learn, but also about the sort of person he is likely to become if he entrusts himself to Protagoras.

Socrates is eager to pursue this issue with the great sophist, and asks him, "[I]f Hippocrates studies with you, exactly how will he go away a better man and in what will he make progress each and every day he spends with you?" (318d). Protagoras says the student will acquire the skill of "sound deliberation [*euboulia*], both in domestic matters... and in public affairs," and this is the way "to realize one's maximum potential for success in political debate and action" (318e-319a). It is clear that such success is largely contingent on one's ability to persuade. Socrates first interprets this skill as the art of citizenship. But he apparently thinks that if Protagoras is really able to make men good citizens, then he must be able to make them good (i.e., *virtuous*) men. This accounts for Socrates' willingness to rephrase his challenge to Protagoras a few lines later as this: "[I]f you can explain for us how virtue [*aretê*] is teachable, please don't begrudge us your explanation" (320c). Thus Protagoras conceives of rhetorical skill as a necessary prerequisite for political and domestic success. And this is precisely the sort of success he aims at as a teacher in assisting others to become noble and good (*kalon kai agathon*, 328b). Consequently, Protagoras' admission of defeat at the end of the dialogue seriously damages his reputation as an expert orator, and by implication his ability to make men better in the sense that he claims.

Thus, we should agree with Klosko's interpretation (see note 1), at least in its general thrust, that Plato is showing us a Socrates beating the sophist at his own game. But, as I have argued, Socrates is also playing his own philosophical game of dialectical refutation. What this refutation shows, however, is not what proponents of the dialectical interpretation have claimed, namely that Protagoras is committed to an inconsistent set of beliefs regarding virtue. This would require Protagoras' unlikely commitment to the hedonic measuring

art. What the refutation does show, I believe, is that Protagoras is not as adept at spotting fallacious inferences as he needs to be. He needs to be such a rhetorical expert because of the intimate connection between the art of speaking and the acquisition of Protagorean virtue. So, the inconsistency that Socrates reveals is not among Protagoras' convictions, but rather between his convictions and his ability. If he really were able to make men noble and good by means of teaching them good judgment and the requisite verbal skills then he really should have been able to defend himself against Socrates' fallacious arguments.

NOTES

¹ See G. Klosko, "Toward a Consistent Interpretation of the *Protagoras*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 61 (1979): 125-142; L. Golberg, *A Commentary on Plato's Protagoras* (New York: Peter Lang 1983); and D. Zeyl, "Socrates and Hedonism: *Protagoras* 351b-358d," eds. J.P. Anton and A. Preus, *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* III, (Albany: SUNY P, 1983).

² See N. Pappas, "Socrates' Charitable Treatment of Poetry," *Philosophy and Literature* 13 (1989): 248-261; and H. Parry, "An Interpretation of Simonides 4 (Diehl)," *TAPA* 96 (1965): 297-320.

³ For defense of the view that Plato actually endorses the hedonism of the *Protagoras*, and later rejects it in the *Gorgias*, see T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1995).

⁴ All translations of the *Protagoras* are from Lombardo and Bell in J. Cooper, ed., *Plato, Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

⁵ D. Zeyl; R. Weiss, "Hedonism in the *Protagoras* and the Sophist's Guarantee," *Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1990): 17-40; S.R. Hemmenway, "Sophistry Exposed: Socrates on the Unity of Virtue in the *Protagoras*," *Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1996): 1-23; M.B. McCoy, "Protagoras on Human Nature, Wisdom, and the Good: The Great Speech and the Hedonism of Plato's *Protagoras*," *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998): 21-39; and D. Russell, "Protagoras and Socrates on Courage and Pleasure: *Protagoras* 349d *ad finem*," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000): 311-338.

⁶ Translated by M.J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat, J. Cooper, ed., op. cit., 1997.