

## THE PURPOSE OF PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*

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The common interpretation of the *Protagoras* holds that Plato is basically presenting a contest between Socrates and Protagoras in order to show the superiority of the former. There is some disagreement whether the essential question being debated is method (Adam<sup>1</sup>), education (Jaeger, *et al.*<sup>2</sup>), ethics (Taylor<sup>3</sup>), or epistemology (W. Kirk<sup>4</sup>); but they all agree that the *Protagoras* is basically an attack on Protagoras and the sophists. Some scholars also see in the dialogue a positive statement about the unity of *aretê* or its teachability, but this is considered secondary to the main purpose of attacking Protagoras. Even Gigon, who holds the extreme view that Protagoras is the victor, considers the dialogue to be a "Streitgespräch."<sup>5</sup>

In my view, this emphasis on the combat between Socrates and Protagoras leads to a serious misunderstanding of the dialogue and of Plato's intentions. Certainly differences exist between the two men, and the discussion of the long vs. the short speech (334C-338E) suggests an important contrast between two methods. But in this dialogue Socrates and Protagoras also exhibit many similarities and, more important, their views as stated here are fundamentally the same. It is true that they treat the basic issue, the nature and teachability of *aretê*, from different points of view, but they agree that this is the crucial problem in life, and they both come to the same conclusions

<sup>1</sup> See his edition of the *Protagoras* (1893) xviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Paideia*, vol. 2, chap. 5. See also Friedländer, *Plato* (Engl. tr.) 2.5; and Nestle's edition of the *Protagoras* (1931) p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Plato, The Man and his Work* 238.

<sup>4</sup> *Studies Presented to D. M. Robinson* 2.595.

<sup>5</sup> *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühll* 95.

concerning the teachability of *aretê*. My thesis, therefore, is that in the *Protagoras* Plato is attempting to establish the basic continuity between Protagorean and Socratic thought, and to show that they agree on the most important matters, *aretê* and *paideia*. The dialogue also reveals where the two differ and how Socrates advances beyond Protagoras. But the *Protagoras* is essentially a positive statement about *aretê* and education, and not an attack on Protagoras and the sophists.<sup>6</sup>

The major reason why almost all scholars have misunderstood Plato's intentions in this dialogue is that they assume on the basis of other dialogues that Plato was unalterably opposed to sophists in general and, therefore, to Protagoras. Examining the *Protagoras* with this preconception, scholars then interpret every praise of Protagoras as subtle irony, excuse every one of Socrates' fallacious or morally distasteful arguments as clever debating tactics, and magnify every small slip on Protagoras' part into a crushing defeat. The resulting interpretation of the *Protagoras* naturally confirms the initial prejudice. I think, however, that an unprejudiced examination of the dialogue will produce rather different conclusions.

In order to clarify this view, it is necessary to make a detailed analysis of the dialogue. To facilitate this, let me divide it into seven major sections:

- I. 309A1-314C2, Prologue
- II. 314C3-328D2, Protagoras and the Great Speech
- III. 328D3-334C6, Socrates' First Arguments
- IV. 334C7-338E5, Interlude on Method
- V. 338E6-348C4, Poem of Simonides
- VI. 348C5-360E5, Socrates' Final Arguments
- VII. 360E6-362A4, Conclusion

I will deal first with each of these sections in turn, and then with the overall structure and meaning of the dialogue.

<sup>6</sup> I have only found one treatment of the *Protagoras* which takes the same general point of view as mine: Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*<sup>4</sup> (Oxford 1953) 1.119-31. He says, for instance, "there is quite as much truth on the side of Protagoras as of Socrates" (p. 126), and "the force of argument, therefore, and not Socrates or Protagoras, has won the day" (p. 129).

## I. PROLOGUE (309A1-314C2)

The *Protagoras* opens<sup>7</sup> with an unnamed companion asking Socrates if he has been out chasing Alcibiades, to which Socrates replies that he has indeed been with Alcibiades, but he took no notice of him. Someone far more beautiful was there, namely Protagoras, who is more beautiful because he is the wisest of men (ὁ σοφώτατος, 309CD).<sup>8</sup> The companion becomes very excited and begs Socrates to relate the meeting, which Socrates agrees to do (310A).

This brief conversation makes two points. First it establishes the wide reputation of Protagoras and the esteem in which he is held by some people. Moreover, Socrates' statement, confirmed by the rest of the dialogue,<sup>9</sup> that he paid no attention to Alcibiades, the most beautiful man in Athens and right now at the most beautiful age of his life, testifies to the power of Protagoras' wisdom. Secondly, this brief prologue is the first of many affirmations of the importance of wisdom, and a hint at the major role which *sophia* and *epistēmē* will play in the dialogue.<sup>10</sup>

Socrates now begins his narrative with a description of how he is awakened before dawn by Hippocrates,<sup>11</sup> who wants Socrates to accompany him to the house of Callias in order to talk to Protagoras. Hippocrates' excitement, while partly a result of his youth and inexperience, nonetheless provides additional testimony to Protagoras'

<sup>7</sup> On the dramatic date of the dialogue see Morrison, CQ 35 (1941) 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to think that Socrates is just being ironic when he refers to Protagoras as "the wisest." Socrates does, in fact, ignore Alcibiades and concentrates on Protagoras, and he is presumably serious when he says that wisdom is more beautiful than physical beauty.

<sup>9</sup> Alcibiades is only mentioned six more times in the dialogue, and always briefly (316A, 317D, 320A, 336BD, 347B, 348B). He takes no part in the discussion of *aretē*, but helps keep Socrates and Protagoras together at some crucial points.

<sup>10</sup> I can find no indication in this dialogue that Plato is making any distinction between these two words. See, for instance, 352CD, where Socrates uses *epistēmē* and *phronēsis* together and Protagoras then uses *epistēmē* and *sophia* together. See also 312C, where Hippocrates defines a sophist as ἐπιστήμων τῶν σοφῶν. It is true that Socrates tends to use *epistēmē* and Protagoras *sophia*, but this does not mean that Plato intends the reader to make a distinction between the two terms in this dialogue.

<sup>11</sup> The role of Hippocrates in the dialogue is fairly limited. He is used, it seems, only as a means for getting Socrates and Protagoras together, and his preliminary conversation with Socrates only sets the stage for the main discussion of the dialogue. At the end of the dialogue there is no mention of his desire to study with Protagoras, which may be a slip on Plato's part, but is more likely an intentional omission. If

reputation. In the succeeding conversation between the two, Socrates questions Hippocrates in true Socratic fashion about his reasons for wanting to study with Protagoras. On the analogy that one studies with a doctor in order to become a doctor and with a sculptor in order to become a sculptor, Hippocrates is led to the conclusion that he wants to study with Protagoras, a sophist, in order to become a sophist himself, but he then admits that he would be ashamed to present himself to the Greeks as a sophist.

Socrates, however, rescues him from this dilemma by making the crucial distinction between liberal education on the one hand (*ἐπὶ παιδείᾳ*) and professional or technical education on the other (*ἐπὶ τέχνῃ*, 312B3-4). This distinction is essential in this dialogue, for, as I shall show below, it is the distinction which Protagoras must make in order to answer Socrates' two questions about how *aretê* can be teachable. It is not taught to sons by their fathers as are the other specialized *technai*, nor is it the subject of specialized discussion in the assembly. Everyone participates in general *paideia*, but only a few learn the specialized *technai*. Protagoras makes this distinction even before the Great Speech, when he says that he does not teach the specialized subjects to his pupils, but rather the general one, *politikê technê* (318D-19A).

Having reassured Hippocrates that he need have no fear of becoming a sophist, Socrates presses him further about the exact nature of a sophist. Hippocrates gives what was probably the most prevalent popular view, that the sophist is one who knows wise things (*τὸν τῶν σοφῶν ἐπιστήμονα*, 312C6) and that his particular brand of knowledge makes a man a clever speaker (*δεινὸν λέγειν*, 312D7). Again, however, Socrates will not let the matter stand here, but presses Hippocrates more closely about the exact subject matter taught by a sophist, at which point the youth has no answer.

the purpose of the *Protagoras* is to show the worthlessness of the sophist and his teaching, then, of course, it would be odd that Plato does not end it with an admonition to Hippocrates to find a better teacher (i.e. Socrates). But if, as I interpret it, the dialogue portrays the two teachers as equals, then it is quite understandable that Plato does not want to end with a warning to avoid the sophist. Nor, of course, would he want to urge Hippocrates to study with Protagoras in preference to Socrates. Any reference to Hippocrates at the end would disturb the friendly balance between the two main characters.

What does this conversation accomplish? First, it reveals again the popularity of Protagoras, and then a certain popular aversion to actually becoming a sophist. But although Socrates traps Hippocrates by this apparent contradiction, he then immediately rescues him from the trap. He wants to go beyond this popular confusion and also beyond the view that a sophist is just a clever speaker, and so he now turns to the question, what is a sophist really, and what is his special knowledge (312E)?

This is important, it seems to me, for a reader with preconceptions about Plato's hostility to the sophists would probably expect that after Hippocrates suggests that the sophist's special sphere of wisdom is clever speaking, Socrates would naturally follow this with an attack on rhetoric and sophistic in general, and Protagoras in particular.<sup>12</sup> Instead Socrates dismisses clever speaking as an attribute of lyre players (and presumably of others, too), as well as of sophists, and insists upon a definition of the object of a sophist's wisdom. Hippocrates cannot give one, and so they must ask Protagoras himself. This brief discussion makes it clear that Plato is not interested in attacking the sophists or Protagoras as clever speakers, but will rather be seeking a different, a more accurate appraisal of the sophists, or at least of Protagoras.

Socrates next (313C-14B) draws an analogy between a sophist, who sells food for the soul, and a merchant, who sells food for the body. As presented in the *Protagoras*, this analogy implies a neutral, not a hostile attitude toward Protagoras. Socrates does say that some sophists do not know what they are selling, but he implies that some do. Moreover, he states explicitly that one may buy the wares of Protagoras if one can distinguish between the good ones and the bad ones (*χρηστόν* and *πονηρόν*, 313E), implying, it would seem, that the sophists distribute some of both. Socrates is only advising Hippocrates to obtain more information before associating with Protagoras, and such advice would presumably be given even if Protagoras charged no fee at all.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The same point is raised in the *Gorgias* (449E-50B) where it does, in fact, prepare the way for a strong attack on rhetoric.

<sup>13</sup> Some modern readers may be reminded of the comparison of the sophist to a retailer in the *Sophist* (223C-24E), but a more exact parallel is Socrates' warning to Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, when Alcibiades is trying to seduce him (218E-19A). He

Protagoras' fee has been mentioned earlier (310D, 311D), but it is not specifically mentioned here, only the fact that one pays a sophist for his knowledge. There are three passages later in the dialogue, however, where his fee is mentioned, and in none of them is there any explicit criticism of the practice. When Socrates is praising Protagoras just before the long final argument, he mentions, without comment, that Protagoras is the first one to charge a fee (349A3-4). Again, at the end of the long final proof that all decisions in life depend only upon knowledge, Socrates says that the *polloi* do wrong, both to themselves and to the public, by saving their money instead of using it to send their sons to a sophist (357E7-8).

Although most people would see some irony in this last observation, I think that Socrates must be at least partly serious here. For he has just shown convincingly that decisions about pleasure and pain and good and bad all depend upon knowledge, and it is clear that he accepts this conclusion. Since knowledge is so important, Socrates is quite right in suggesting that the *polloi* be willing to pay for it. Certainly there is no implication in this passage by itself that charging a fee is the least bit disgraceful.<sup>14</sup> Nor can one avoid this by saying that charging a fee for instruction was commonly thought to be disgraceful and therefore the reader would necessarily interpret this passage in this way, for there is no evidence to support this assumption.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the most conclusive evidence for Plato's attitude in this

advises Alcibiades to make sure of the value of what he is seeking (i.e. Socrates' wisdom) before trying to acquire it.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the fee is not at all important in this argument. Socrates is arguing for the overriding importance of knowledge, and not against a fee. I would also suggest that perhaps this remark is the answer to the question raised in the preliminary conversation between Socrates and Hippocrates: is Protagoras' knowledge worth buying? This question, as I mentioned above (note 11), is otherwise unanswered.

<sup>15</sup> The only pre-Platonic evidence for the practice of charging a fee is Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Here the fee charged is mentioned only twice (98, 245-46), and in neither case is there any attempt to make fun of it or to criticize it. In fact, the extreme poverty of everyone in the *phrontistêrion* is the butt of much humor. Moreover, in the *Apology* Socrates denies that he himself has ever charged a fee primarily in order to emphasize his own poverty, and thereby remove one possible motive for his misdeeds, financial enrichment. Certainly in other places Plato does attack this practice, as does Xenophon, but this is no necessary indication of popular feeling. Although there was undoubtedly much popular resentment toward the sophists, it probably had little to do with their fee, and the *polloi* undoubtedly felt much the same resentment toward Socrates.

dialogue toward Protagoras' charging a fee is that he allows him to relate at the end of the Great Speech that, if any of his pupils think his fee excessive, they may deposit at a temple whatever sum they think fair (328BC). Whether or not this claim was true (and we have no reason to suspect that it was not), the fact that Plato allows Protagoras to make it proves that he is not seriously attacking the sophist's practice of charging a fee.

The preliminary conversation ends (314C) as Socrates and Hippocrates set off to get more information from Protagoras and the other sophists about this food for the soul. The question has been raised: what is a sophist? And the only partial answer so far is that he is concerned with liberal education and some sort of knowledge. For a more definite and more complete answer they must ask the sophist himself.

## II. PROTAGORAS AND THE GREAT SPEECH (314C3-328D2)

Section Two begins with a humorous description of the scene at Callias' house. The porter is fed up with the whole crowd of guests; he has obviously been working overtime. Socrates declares that he and Hippocrates are not sophists, and they are allowed to enter.<sup>16</sup> Protagoras is the first to be described, with his group of disciples rather absurdly following him around. He is compared to Orpheus, charming them with his voice (*κηλῶν*, 315A9), and he has the same effect on Socrates, who is charmed by the Great Speech (*κεκηλημένος*, 328D4).<sup>17</sup>

Socrates next describes Hippias and Prodicus in an equally amusing manner. Especially memorable is his description of the latter, lying in bed wrapped in blankets and speaking in a loud but incomprehensible voice. The descriptions of these two sophists are introduced

<sup>16</sup> Note that it is the number of guests that upsets the doorman as well as the fact that they are sophists (*διὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν σοφιστῶν ἄχθεσθαι*, 314D1). When Socrates announces that they are not sophists, for the doorman this means simply that they will not be spending the night.

<sup>17</sup> The reader would not view this description of Protagoras as a charmer as necessarily critical. Compare the descriptions of Socrates by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* (215) and by Meno in the *Meno* (80AB). See also the reference to Socrates as a charmer in the *Phaedo* (77E-78A; the word used here is *ἐπαίδειν*).

(315B9, 315C8) by two quotations from Book Eleven of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus meets the *psychai* from Hades; and Friedländer takes this to imply that Socrates "is the only one who is truly alive, whereas the others are 'shades.'" <sup>18</sup> But if we carry the comparison this far, we should remember that Socrates has just described Protagoras as Orpheus, and therefore he too, as well as Socrates (Odysseus), can leave Hades and is not really dead. This would put Socrates and Protagoras together as alive against the rest, who are dead. Plato was probably aware of these implications, but one should not exaggerate the significance of the allusions or overlook their more general comic effect.

After this description of the scene in Callias' house, Socrates addresses Protagoras directly, saying that they have come to find out why Hippocrates should study with the sophist. Then there is a brief exchange about whether to carry on the discussion of this question in public or private, which gives Protagoras the opportunity for a rather lengthy digression on the history of the earlier *sophistai*; this is followed by the claim (probably true) that he was the first one openly to call himself a sophist and that his business is to educate men (316C-17C).

Protagoras begins his speech with a word of thanks for Socrates' foresight (*ὀρθῶς προμνηθῆναι*, 316C5), which is the first suggestion that Socrates has something in common with Prometheus (cf. 361D). Protagoras then gives a warning of the dangers of his profession, the jealousies one arouses when one tries to make young men better and the attacks to which one is open. This warning is certainly intended to suggest the dangers which Socrates himself later faced as well as those which threatened Protagoras himself.<sup>19</sup> Thus Protagoras here is also displaying foresight on Socrates' behalf. He then offers to speak in public, which Socrates interprets as a desire to show off. But one suspects that when Socrates assembles the other sophists and guests, he is gratifying his own wish for an audience as much as Protagoras'. This whole passage, in fact, is an indication that, in spite of a certain rivalry between the two men, they are essentially in

<sup>18</sup> Plato 2.8.

<sup>19</sup> The tradition that Protagoras, too, was tried for impiety and banished from Athens is probably either false or greatly exaggerated. See the discussion by Bluck in his commentary on the *Meno*, 358-59.



the same position; both are openly committed to educating young men, and both face the same sort of reaction from a generally hostile public.

The two men now attack the problem at hand: why should Hippocrates come to study with Protagoras? Protagoras answers that he will make him better every day (318A6-9), and Socrates continues in exactly the same way as in his earlier conversation with Hippocrates: better at what? Protagoras, however, is not at a loss, nor does he beg the question. He compliments Socrates on his fine questioning, and answers that he does not teach the specialized *technai*, which his pupils have already been studying, but rather he teaches them good management of the affairs of the household and of the city (εὐβουλία περὶ τῶν οἰκείων . . . καὶ περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως), or in Socrates' words, *politikê technê*; he makes men good citizens (ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας, 318E-19A). Protagoras does not reject the value of the specialized subjects when studied at an earlier age, but by the time one goes to a sophist, he feels, one wants a more general education.

Socrates then objects that he does not think that the subject is teachable, and he adduces two arguments in support of this view. First he argues that the Athenians, who are wise men (σοφοί), consult a specialist in matters relating to architecture, shipbuilding, and other teachable crafts, but in matters concerning the state they listen to everyone, even to those who have no special training; therefore, they do not consider this skill to be teachable (319B3-D7).

Secondly Socrates argues that the best and wisest citizens (e.g. Pericles) do not, in fact, pass on their *aretê* to their sons or try to teach them anything in this field, and that many good people have never made anyone else good (319D7-20B3). *Aretê*, therefore, for these two reasons does not seem to be teachable. But since Protagoras claims to teach it, Socrates is uncertain what to think, and so he asks Protagoras if he has any clearer proof that *aretê* can be taught (320B4-C1).<sup>20</sup>

Protagoras replies to these two objections with what is generally referred to as his "Great Speech," a comprehensive account of man

<sup>20</sup> Socrates includes in this request some generous praise of Protagoras, including the compliment that the sophist has made many discoveries on his own (τὰ δὲ αὐτὸν ἐξηγηκέναι, 320B7-8). This praise is unlikely to be mere irony, in view of the undeniable originality of the Great Speech which follows.

and society from the beginning. The speech is a masterpiece in itself, but it should always be kept in mind that it is a direct answer to Socrates' two questions, and if Protagoras is occasionally imprecise in his language, he is no more so than Socrates is in his questioning.

The Great Speech has frequently been analysed and discussed, and I do not intend to examine it in detail here. Kerferd's treatment of the speech<sup>21</sup> is excellent and concise, and I agree with his contention "that Protagoras' answer is perfectly satisfactory if rightly understood and that the contrary opinions are due to misunderstandings of what Protagoras actually says in the dialogue" (p. 42). I do not intend to repeat Kerferd's arguments, but merely to offer a few additional comments.

The essential problem which Protagoras faces involves the relationship between *technê* and *aretê*. A *technê* was a specialized skill, possessed by only a few members of the society, and passed on (i.e. taught) from one member to the next, usually by apprenticeship. Before the sophists, the teaching of *technai* in such a fashion was the only formal education beyond primary schooling. *Aretê*, on the other hand, was not confined to any one occupational group, nor by the fifth century to any one class, and thus it was uncertain how it was transmitted, if indeed it was not inborn. If it was to be taught by specialists, such as the sophists, would it not then, like a *technê*, be the possession of only a few?

This is the difficulty which Protagoras faces in this dialogue, and must have faced in real life as well: he must justify himself as a teacher of *aretê*. For if he does teach *aretê*, then *aretê* is a *technê*, and is consequently the possession of only a small specialized group. Protagoras must show how *aretê* is a *technê*, in that it can be taught, but is also a general quality unlike other *technai*.

As I have mentioned above, Socrates has already raised this question in his conversation with Hippocrates when he makes the distinction between most teachers, who teach ἐπὶ τέχνῃ, and the sophists, who teach ἐπὶ παιδείᾳ. But it is also Socrates who, in the course of raising his two objections (319A-20B), has subtly changed his terminol-

<sup>21</sup> *JHS* 73 (1953) 42-45.

ogy from *politikê technê* to *aretê*.<sup>22</sup> It seems then that, although Socrates is well aware of the important distinction which must be made, he obscures it, so that Protagoras is forced to clarify it himself.

This he does first of all in the myth of Prometheus (320C8–24D1). There he makes *Aidôs* and *Dikê* (presumably representing *aretê*) gifts of the gods like the other *technai*, but they are given to man by a different god (Zeus instead of Prometheus), they are sent at a later time, and they are distributed to all men, not just to a few. In this myth Protagoras also solves the minor dilemma as to which came first, the city or *aretê*, by having Zeus start the process.

In his *logos* which follows the myth (324D2–28C2), Protagoras presents an account of the actual process of teaching *aretê*, followed by the description of a hypothetical situation in which flute-playing replaces *aretê* in the society. This analogy, of course, emphasizes the similarity between *aretê* and other *technai* as well as the difference. During this description of the flute-playing society, Protagoras also helps to clarify his view of human nature by introducing the concept of “naturally endowed” (*εὐφυής*, 327B8). This is clearly something different from the idea of possessing *aretê* by nature (*φύσει*, 323C5) in the sense of automatically, which he has earlier rejected.<sup>23</sup> Protagoras' position is that no one automatically possesses *aretê*, but everyone has some capacity for acquiring it, although some are potentially more capable than others.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The progression is as follows: Protagoras begins by identifying the object of his teaching (*τὸ μάθημα*) as *εὐβουλία περὶ τῶν οἰκείων . . . καὶ περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως* (318E5–I9AI). Socrates then replies that Protagoras means *τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην*, and that he undertakes to make men *ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας* (319A4–5). Socrates then objects that he does not feel that this *τέχνημα* is *διδασκόν* (319A8–BI). Then in the first part of his objection Socrates contrasts the Athenians' actions in technical matters (*περὶ ὧν ἐν τέχνῃ*, 319C7–8) and in matters of government (*περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως διοικήσεως*, 319C8–DI). And finally in the second part of Socrates' objection he refers for the first time to the *aretê* of the *σοφώτατοι καὶ ἀριστοί*, which they cannot give to others (319EI–3).

<sup>23</sup> Protagoras' rejection of this idea of acquiring *aretê* automatically is a direct answer to Socrates' suggestion that the sons of Pericles are just wandering around hoping to pick up *aretê* automatically (320A3).

<sup>24</sup> Ostwald (*Protagoras*, trs. Jowett, rev. Ostwald, introd. by Vlastos, 1956) makes a serious mistake by translating *τῆς ἀρετῆς, εἰ μέλλει πόλις εἶναι, οὐδένα δεῖ ἰδιωτεύειν* (327AI–2), “a state can exist only if everyone is an expert in this thing, virtue.” It is not necessary for everyone to be an expert, only for everyone to possess

The essential point of the Great Speech is thus reaffirmed in the *logos*, which, as Kerferd shows (p. 44), is an alternative to the myth, not a continuation of it. Both halves of the speech argue that *aretê* is similar to other *technai* in that it is taught, but different from them in that it should be possessed to some degree by all. This point is to my mind demonstrated conclusively, and, as Kerferd points out, the inconsistencies which others find in the speech either do not exist or exist only potentially; neither Socrates nor Plato seem to be aware of them. Certainly Socrates' objection to the speech does not, as I will show below, challenge any of Protagoras' arguments, but only the vagueness of his terminology, a vagueness no greater than Socrates' own has been earlier.<sup>25</sup> Socrates' objection does, however, move the discussion to a new level, where it remains until the end of the dialogue. But Socrates' view of the nature of *aretê* does *not* contradict Protagoras' arguments that it is teachable. Quite the contrary, it affirms them.

### III. SOCRATES' FIRST ARGUMENTS (328D3-334C6)

Socrates is definitely impressed by this speech, and even says at the beginning of Section Three that he stood spellbound for a moment, wishing to hear more (328D4-6).<sup>26</sup> Then he collects himself and says that he considers it worth a great deal to have heard Protagoras. Whereas he had formerly disagreed, he is now persuaded that, as he puts it, "good men become good through the care of other men" (328E2-3), which must in this context be equivalent to saying that *aretê* is teachable. But although he is persuaded, "a little something" still bothers him: Protagoras has used the term *aretê* almost interchangeably with several other words, "justice" (*dikaiosynê*), "self-control" (*sôphrosynê*), and "piety" (*hosiotês*). Just what is *aretê*, and how is it related to these other words?

It should be made quite clear that this objection in no way invalidates any of the arguments of the Great Speech. It is certainly true that

some virtue. On this point Jowett's original translation was more accurate, "the existence of a state implies that no man is unskilled in virtue."

<sup>25</sup> See above, note 22.

<sup>26</sup> This is quite a different feeling from that which Socrates describes later (329A). There he says that Pericles and others of that sort go on speaking like pots that go on ringing and do not stop until one puts one's hand on them.

Protagoras uses these terms loosely and interchangeably. But none of his arguments depends upon a strict definition of *aretê*, which for him is a generally understood, even if not easily definable, quality. What Socrates does is to take the discussion one step further; he shifts the consideration of *aretê* from a sociological plane to an ontological one. The shift is an important one, for it represents one of the great advances in philosophical thought made by Socrates (or Plato). Socrates' objection, however, does not question the validity of Protagoras' arguments; he accepts these arguments, and then proceeds further with his own ideas on the subject of *aretê*.

One could, of course, argue that it is impossible to prove that *aretê* is teachable until one has analysed the nature of it, and Socrates, it is true, makes just that point in the *Meno* (71B). But if Plato wants to raise this particular objection to Protagoras' arguments, why does he not let Socrates state it plainly right here? Why does he have Socrates state instead that he is convinced by everything else in the speech except for the vagueness in terminology? And more important, why does Plato let Protagoras make such a long and convincing speech if he disagrees with the arguments presented in it but never attacks them? The only reason, it seems to me, why Plato lets Protagoras deliver his Great Speech and lets this speech go unchallenged is that he wants the reader to read, consider, and accept these arguments. Certainly Plato also wants the reader to go beyond these arguments as Socrates does, but he gives no indication that the reader should reject them.<sup>27</sup>

In answer to Socrates' questions Protagoras asserts that *aretê* is one (329D4), and that justice, self-control, piety, and also wisdom (*sophia*) and courage (*andreia*), which he adds in 330A1, are all parts of it, but different from one another and having distinct functions (330A3-B3). He also asserts, quite spontaneously, that *sophia* is the most important of the parts (330A2). This is important, for when he says later that it would be shameful (*aischron*) for him to deny that *sophia* and *epistêmê* are the mightiest of all human things (352D1-3), some critics, such as

<sup>27</sup> Even if Plato thought that the speech was such an obvious collection of totally illogical arguments that every reader would immediately realize that it was completely invalid, and that it was thus not necessary for Socrates to attack it, even in this case there would be no reason to include the speech in this dialogue.

Friedländer (p. 29), feel that he admits this only "for the sake of professional honor." Clearly this is just a manner of speaking (cf. 333C1-2), and Protagoras certainly does recognize the importance of *sophia* and *epistêmê*. After receiving this response to his question, Socrates tries to show the identity of the parts of *aretê*, first of justice and piety, then of self-control and wisdom, and finally of justice and self-control. Courage is not considered at this time, presumably so that Protagoras can introduce it as a fresh objection later in the dialogue (349D4-5).

Socrates first reasons that both justice and piety are both just and pious, and therefore very similar, if not identical. Protagoras objects that many things show some similarity to one another, which does not prove their identity. Socrates' argument here has been examined in depth recently, and it has been pointed out that on the one hand he does not prove the identity of justice and piety,<sup>28</sup> but that on the other hand Protagoras does not show that they are as dissimilar as the parts of the face.<sup>29</sup> Socrates, it appears, tries to exclude any middle ground by suggesting only two possible analogies for the parts of *aretê*, the face and gold, but his argument suggests that a middle ground should be sought. And indeed in the end Protagoras rejects either extreme, and I think the reader would agree.

Socrates next argues that wisdom and self-control are identical, since they are both the opposite of *aphrosynê*, and nothing can have more than one opposite. The argument is clearly invalid,<sup>30</sup> but since Socrates manages to obscure the direction of the argument throughout, Protagoras, who is obviously not very experienced in this sort of "dialectic," agrees reluctantly (333B3-4). Socrates then begins to argue, as the final step, that self-control and justice are identical. But before he gets very far, Socrates introduces the idea that good things are beneficial (*ὠφέλιμα*, 333D9) to men. To this Protagoras responds with a short speech on the relative nature of the good, and Socrates breaks off the discussion on the grounds that Protagoras' answer is too long.

<sup>28</sup> D. Gallop, *Phronesis* 6 (1961) 86-93.

<sup>29</sup> D. Savan, *Phronesis* 9 (1964) 130-35.

<sup>30</sup> See Vlastos' introduction to the Jowett-Ostwald translation (above, note 24) p. xxix, note 19.

Socrates does not challenge Protagoras' analysis of the good; nor does he try to introduce the concept of an absolute good. He himself has, in fact, suggested the identity of the good and the beneficial, and the latter is clearly a relative concept, i.e. it must be thought of in relation to someone or something. Then too, Socrates asks explicitly for an elaboration when he says (333E5-34A2), "Protagoras, do you mean not advantageous for any man, or not advantageous altogether? And do you call the latter good?" Protagoras may be a little long-winded in his elaboration of various situations in which something is both beneficial and harmful, but his analysis certainly has some validity. Thus when Socrates objects only to the length of Protagoras' reply, the reader may well suspect that he is simply looking for an excuse not to answer the actual content of Protagoras' remarks.

Before we examine the discussion on method which follows, we might pause and ask what Plato is trying to accomplish by these arguments of Socrates. Is he trying to convince his readers of the identity of the parts of *aretê*? This seems highly unlikely. I have already commented upon the weakness of the arguments, and I feel that Plato could certainly have found better, less "sophistic" arguments if he had wanted to.<sup>31</sup>

However, it could perhaps be argued that Plato's logic was so weak that he himself considered these arguments sound, or at least sound enough to convince the reader. But there are several considerations against this view. First of all, in two of the three parts of the argument Protagoras objects to Socrates' reasoning, and his objection is the last word—Socrates does not attempt to overcome the objection. Secondly, the argument as a whole is incomplete. Socrates never concludes that all the parts of *aretê* are identical or nearly so. And thirdly, even if he did come to such a conclusion, this would have nothing to do with his really important argument at the end of the dialogue, that *aretê* is knowledge and therefore teachable. To prove this point Socrates begins with a wholly new approach (the "hedonistic"

<sup>31</sup> As Grote says of one of the arguments, "It is indeed so futile, that if it were found in the mouth of Protagoras and not in that of Sokrates, commentators would probably have cited it as an illustration of the futilities of the Sophists" (*Plato and the Companions of Sokrates* 2.51).

argument), for which these earlier arguments do not even help prepare the ground.<sup>32</sup>

If Plato is not particularly interested in proving the identity of the parts of *aretê*, what is he trying to do? To some extent he may be trying to stimulate the reader's thought on the subject of *aretê*, but if so the result is more confusion than enlightenment. It seems to me, however, that Plato has another purpose, and that if the substance of the arguments is not essential, the form is. For Socrates' arguments are presented in his dialectical manner, and yet they are weaker than Protagoras' assertions both in this section and in the Great Speech. Is Plato perhaps then deliberately presenting weak dialectic? Is he saying that in some cases Socrates' method is inferior to Protagoras' and that at times Socrates is concerned only or primarily with trapping the opponent, not with the *logos* itself? I will return to this suggestion when I consider the overall structure of the dialogue.

#### IV. INTERLUDE ON METHOD (334C7-338E5)

The Interlude now begins when Socrates says that Protagoras' speech was so long that he cannot remember it all, which seems rather a poor excuse. Socrates himself, in fact, has already made three speeches longer than the one which he protests (313C7-14C2 to Hippocrates, 318B1-D4, 319A8-20C1). Moreover, if he wanted to protest the length of one of Protagoras' speeches, the obvious place to do so would have been after the Great Speech.

Alcibiades later dismisses Socrates' claim of forgetfulness (336D2-4), and the reader cannot help but agree with him. He also gives better reasons for objecting to a long speech: it enables one to avoid giving a direct answer to the question. But Socrates himself puts his case very weakly. Although he constantly claims that Protagoras is being stubborn and is refusing to cooperate, he himself is just as stubborn, if not more so, in insisting upon his conditions and threatening to leave.

<sup>32</sup> The conclusion that the parts of *aretê* are identical does *not* follow from the proof that they are each knowledge, for one must then ask, as Socrates points out (357B), what kind of knowledge; and the probable answer is that courage is one sort of knowledge, and justice another, etc. See also *Laches* 194DE, where Socrates concludes that courage is knowledge and then proceeds to investigate what sort of knowledge it is (both *sophia* and *epistêmê* are used).



Protagoras counters Socrates' objection by saying that one should speak at whatever length is necessary, to which Socrates agrees. But when Protagoras asks whether the speaker or his listener should determine what length is necessary, Socrates avoids the question and says that in this case Protagoras should use short speeches because he can speak at any length, whereas Socrates himself can only speak in short speeches (335B7-C2). He then elaborates his position by comparing the discussion to running on a course. He could not run, he says, with Crison of Himera (one of the best racers of the day) if the latter were to run quickly. The only way for them to run together would be for Crison to run slowly.

This is a curious analogy, for in racing the only thing that counts is running quickly, and if Socrates were to beat Crison while they were running slowly, it would not be regarded as a victory. In this sense of the analogy, Protagoras' long speech is all that counts, and he is clearly superior.<sup>33</sup>

It is quite likely, however, that Socrates does not mean to imply this, and the analogy certainly makes more sense if we understand it as referring not to a race, but merely to "running along with someone."<sup>34</sup> Socrates wants Protagoras to use short speeches *not* so that he can beat him, for Socrates would have to concede victory in a contest, but so that they can continue the discussion for some other purpose. In this sense of the analogy, Socrates is making every effort to remove competition from the discussion and make it instead a cooperative venture.

After Callias, Alcibiades, and Critias have all expressed their views, Prodicus speaks (337A1-C4), making several fine distinctions between almost synonymous words. There is a good deal of humor in these distinctions, but they are of no immediate value in settling the dispute between Socrates and Protagoras. They do prepare us, however, for Prodicus' role in the interpretation of the poem of Simonides, and

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Hippias Minor* 373D.

<sup>34</sup> The vocabulary in this passage does not necessarily suggest a race. The verbs *ἔπεσθαι* and *ἀκολουθεῖν* (335E3-36A2) do not necessarily contain the idea of competition, nor do the nouns, *δολιχόδρομος* and *ἡμερόδρομος*, which may mean merely a "fast-running messenger" (see Herodotus 9.12 and 6.105).

they are an example of the sort of distinction which Socrates and Protagoras will later make between courage and confidence.<sup>35</sup>

Hippias speaks next, and after a digression on *physis* and *nomos*, he suggests that both men compromise and proposes that they appoint an umpire (who presumably he expects would be himself). Socrates rejects this proposal, presumably since none of the rest of the company is worthy to be an umpire between himself and Protagoras, but he accepts a compromise whereby Protagoras will first ask questions. Protagoras also agrees to this, and so the discussion goes on.

This central interlude has brought out an important difference between Socrates and his short speech and Protagoras and his long speech. But it has *not* shown us that this disagreement is irreconcilable, nor that Socrates' method is superior. Quite the contrary! The two men are reconciled, and the only superiority which is openly acknowledged is Protagoras' in long speeches. But if we assume Socrates' superiority in short speeches, then we must accept the conclusion of the interlude, that Protagoras and Socrates are equal, but both are superior to the others present.

#### V. POEM OF SIMONIDES (338E6-348C4)

Protagoras begins his questioning at the start of Section Five by stating that he believes skill in poetry (*περὶ ἐπῶν δεινὸν εἶναι*) to be a major part of education (338E-39A), which is in accordance with his account of education in the Great Speech (326AB). The discussion, he says, will still concern *aretê*, but in reference to poetry. He then quotes two verses of a poem by Simonides, which Socrates claims to

<sup>35</sup> Plato's superb artistic talents can be seen in this speech of Prodicus. It is on the surface merely a humorous parody, but all four of the apparently pedantic and irrelevant distinctions made in it have bearing on some part of the dialogue. His first distinction, between *koinos* and *isos* (337A3-4)—all people should be listened to impartially, but their opinions should not be weighed equally—alludes to the Great Speech. The second distinction, between disputation and quarreling (*ἀμφισβητεῖν* and *ἐρίζειν*, 337A8-B1), alludes to the present situation of Socrates and Protagoras. The third distinction, between esteeming and praising someone (*εὐδοκιμεῖν* and *ἐπαινεῖσθαι*, 337B5), alludes to Socrates' distinction between real and false praise during his interpretation of the poem of Simonides (345E-46B). And the fourth distinction, between gratification and pleasure (*εὐφραίνεισθαι* and *ἡδεσθαι*, 337C1-2), alludes to Socrates' "hedonistic" argument (351B-58D).

know well, and then forces Socrates to contradict himself in his appraisal of the poem.

Although Protagoras claims to be concerned with *aretê*, it is difficult to see any purpose here in his specific questions except to trap Socrates. He almost succeeds. Socrates is quite overwhelmed, and calls upon Prodicus to help him repel the attack of this Achilles (340A).<sup>36</sup> The cruelty with which Socrates handles Prodicus here is remarkable. First he flatters him by asking for his help and praising his talents. But then, when Prodicus has eagerly supplied the information he requested and is challenged by Protagoras, Socrates sustains Protagoras' objection and suggests that Prodicus was just joking (341D). Prodicus is thus portrayed as nothing more than a rather pathetic toy. It is clear that by using him Socrates has gained the extra time which he said he needed (339E), and he has demonstrated to us his cunning in debate. But at the same time he has revealed to us that, at least in this passage, his primary concern (like Protagoras') is not with *aretê* or the truth, as he often claims it is,<sup>37</sup> but with escaping defeat by any means.

Socrates then begins his own interpretation of the poem, which is obviously incorrect.<sup>38</sup> What he presents is a parody of poetic criticism in order to show the absurdity of all such exercises. He begins (342A-43B) with a short history of the supreme wisdom of the Spartans, who, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, have long been the wisest of men by virtue of their laconic statements, such as "know thyself" and "nothing in excess." This account is in part a parody of Protagoras' opening account of the history of the *sophistai* (316D-17C), but it is also a humorous argument in favor of a serious preference for the short speech as opposed to the long.

<sup>36</sup> The quotation here is from *Iliad* 21.308-9, where the river Scamander, about to be overwhelmed by Achilles, appeals to his brother Simois for help. I am surprised that Friedländer ignores this quotation, for it presents an interesting elaboration of the suggestion in 315AC that Socrates is Odysseus. Here, of course, Protagoras is Achilles (who also appears to Odysseus in Book eleven of the *Odyssey*). This suggests parallels between the two epic heroes and the two heroes of this dialogue, which in turn may suggest some clues to Socrates' defense of Odysseus (wily and false) as against Achilles (true and simple) in the *Hippias Minor*.

<sup>37</sup> See 333C7-9, 348A5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Many modern attempts have been made to interpret the fragments of this poem. The most recent, by H. Parry, mentions many earlier treatments (*TAPA* 96 [1965] 297-320). [See also the article by W. F. Donlan in this volume: Ed.]

Socrates then reads into the poem some of his own views, which are plainly not there. Plato makes this clear throughout, especially in 345D, where Socrates changes the meaning of the poem from "I praise him who does nothing wrong willingly" to "I willingly praise him who does nothing wrong." Socrates justifies this switch by referring to his own maxim that "no one does wrong willingly," which Plato's readers would certainly have recognized as a Socratic maxim. In this whole section, in fact, Socrates' fallacies are so obvious that Plato must assume that the reader would recognize them, and his intention is clearly to parody this sort of interpretation of poetry by carrying it to a ridiculous extreme.

But Socrates' interpretation, wrong as it is, fits into the rest of the dialogue, for Socrates' basic theme in his analysis is the importance of knowledge. The courage and fighting ability of the Spartans depends upon *sophia* (342B3); a good deed depends upon *mathêsis* (345A2); the only wrong action is lack of *epistêmê* (345B5); and, of course, no one willingly errs (345E1). All these ideas, though not to be found in the poem, prepare for the next section, in which Socrates will show that *aretê* is *epistêmê*.

After Socrates finishes his interpretation, Hippias offers to give one of his own, and the reader breathes a sigh of relief when Alcibiades restrains him. Socrates then suggests that they leave poetry, for well-educated men do not need the help of the poets. The poets cannot explain or defend themselves, and so it is better that Socrates and Protagoras ignore them and test instead each other and the truth. Protagoras hesitates, but is finally persuaded by Alcibiades, Callias, and the others to resume the argument and let Socrates ask the questions.

## VI. SOCRATES' FINAL ARGUMENTS (348C5-360E5)

Section Six now begins with Socrates telling Protagoras that he only wants to examine those things about which he himself is not clear. He next quotes Homer to the effect that two heads are better than one,<sup>39</sup> and adds that all men are more resourceful (*εὐπορώτεροι*,

<sup>39</sup> *Iliad* 10.224. Diomedes is asking for help in his night raid, and he gets it from Odysseus. It is clear that on the basis of this quotation, further speculation about the Homeric identities of Socrates and Protagoras can only lead to endless confusion.

348D2) in pairs than they are alone. Socrates then says that he would rather converse with Protagoras than with anyone else, for he considers Protagoras the best man with whom to investigate other suitable matters, and especially *aretê* (348D5-E1). Two facts support the sincerity of this statement. First Socrates has constantly endeavored to confine the discussion to Protagoras and himself, refusing to let anyone else even act as referee. Secondly, Protagoras throughout the Great Speech does show a great concern for *aretê*. Thus Socrates' statement is true, and he must be seriously, not ironically, complimenting the sophist.<sup>40</sup>

The praise which follows (348E2-49A6) is an embellishment of these remarks, consisting mostly of allusions to earlier statements of Protagoras, especially to the history of the *sophistai* (316D-17C). The praise here is so lavish that there may well be some irony in it; in a way it is a parody of Protagoras' honest but naive manner. But here too Socrates' remarks, that Protagoras proclaims himself a teacher of *aretê* and is the first to charge a fee, are true, as is the conclusion that Socrates must discuss *aretê* with Protagoras and with no one else. Any possible irony does not negate what we know about Protagoras from the rest of the dialogue, which confirms the real praise. The echoes here of Protagoras' earlier speech are a humorous touch, but they do not necessarily imply any ill-feeling or hostility on Socrates' part.

Socrates now begins the questioning in the same way as he began right after the Great Speech, before his series of arguments attempting to prove that the parts of *aretê* are identical. What is the nature of *aretê* and its parts? Protagoras answers that wisdom, self-control, justice, and piety are all to some extent similar, but that courage is different because it is possible to possess it without possessing any of the others (349D2-8). Socrates next tries to show directly that courage is wisdom (349E1-50C5), but when Protagoras objects to his reasoning (350C6-51B2), Socrates then brings in the long "hedonistic" argument, which Protagoras accepts (351B3-58D4). Finally Socrates returns to courage and quickly proves that it is knowledge, and that therefore, by extension, *aretê* is *epistêmê* (358D5-60E5).

<sup>40</sup> One must not confuse this compliment with a superficially similar sentiment in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates praises Callicles for his sincerity and outspokenness (486E-88A).

The first step in this argument, the attempt to prove that courage is wisdom, is confusing, and has been discussed in great detail by several scholars.<sup>41</sup> The passage is indeed difficult, but if we keep in mind the context in which it occurs, it is fairly easy to see what Plato is trying to do. We need only remember that this argument is part of the whole argument of the last section, attempting to show that *aretê* is *epistêmê*. As a first step, Socrates tries to show, by a line of reasoning that is not strictly valid, that courage depends upon wisdom. His argument in brief is as follows:

- A. All brave men (*ἀνδρεῖοι*) are confident (*θαρραλέοι*).
- B. Confidence depends upon either wisdom or folly.
- C. Confidence dependent upon folly *is not* courage.
- D. Confidence dependent upon wisdom *is* courage.
- E. Courage depends upon wisdom.

The argument does not sound too unreasonable, but it is loosely constructed, and strictly speaking Socrates has not proved any direct connection between courage and wisdom. That which distinguishes courage from confidence may well be something entirely different.

This is the point that Protagoras does make forcefully, if a bit obscurely, in his objection (350C6–51B2). His first contention, that Socrates mistakenly identified confidence and courage, cannot be accepted, for it is impossible that Socrates would want to make this identification. He and Protagoras have already agreed that some confident men are utter fools, and if he then argues that all confident men are brave, these two statements together would result in the inevitable conclusion that some brave men are utter fools, and that therefore courage without wisdom is possible. Thus Socrates must never make the complete identification of the confident and the brave.<sup>42</sup> But Protagoras' second objection, when he draws an analogy from wrestling, is valid. Why is courage not primarily a matter of *physis* and *eutrophia* (351B2)? Since in the Great Speech Protagoras says that man does not possess *aretê* (of which courage is a part) by nature, in

<sup>41</sup> Notably Festugière, *BCH* 70 (1946) 179–86; Vlastos (above, note 24) xxxi–xxxviii; O'Brien, *TAPA* 92 (1961) 408–17.

<sup>42</sup> O'Brien (above, note 41) argues that this is just the identity that Socrates *is* trying to make, since he is only trying to trap Protagoras. From this point of view, it is apparently irrelevant that he undermines his own position at the same time.

the sense of automatically, *physis* here must refer to a capacity for acquiring courage, which differs from man to man. *Eutrophia* then refers to the process of acquiring this courage, and presumably means physical and social and moral training rather than intellectual education. This sort of training, according to Protagoras, rather than knowledge, is essential for a man to become courageous. This objection is valid, for Socrates has not proved that knowledge is the most important, or the only component of courage.<sup>43</sup>

Socrates' task is now well defined. He must show that all the so-called irrational or un-intellectual factors in life (he mentions passion [*thumos*], pleasure, pain, love, and fear in 352B7-8) are subordinate to knowledge, and that to overcome these factors one needs knowledge, and not something else such as physical training. Having proved this in one particular case, pleasure, Socrates assumes that the proof can be generalized to include all the other emotions. He thus redefines fear as the ignorant man's expectation of evil, which can be overcome by knowledge and knowledge alone.

The first step in this process is to show that pleasure, which is generally considered an irrational force, is subject to knowledge. To accomplish this, Socrates introduces his "hedonistic" argument, which has aroused a great deal of controversy, centering mainly on the question whether or not Plato (and/or Socrates) really believes the argument.<sup>44</sup> Now although this question may not be totally irrelevant to our understanding of this dialogue, we are in no position to answer it until we have a better idea of just what Plato is doing with the "hedonistic" argument, and why he uses it.

This necessarily brings us to the question of context, and if we look at the argument in the context of this last section, we see that Plato

<sup>43</sup> Note, however, that Socrates *has* disproved Protagoras' original contention, that some courageous men are ignorant (349D7-8), for if all courageous men are confident (349E2), and men who are confident and ignorant are not courageous (350B1-6, i.e. no courageous men are confident and ignorant), then it follows that no courageous men are ignorant. Socrates, however, does not draw this conclusion here because he is more interested in showing the complete dependence of courage on wisdom than in merely disproving Protagoras' assertion.

<sup>44</sup> Among those who argue that Plato does not believe the argument, but is merely using it to destroy Protagoras, are Cornford, *CAH* 6.313-14, and Sullivan, *Phronesis* 6 (1961) 10-28. Among those on the other side are Goodell, *AJP* 42 (1921) 25-39, and Hackforth, *CQ* 22 (1928) 39-42.

is not trying to convince the reader that pleasure is good, but rather is trying to prove that the most important thing in life is knowledge. Plato uses the terms "pleasure" and "pain" as equivalents for "good" and "evil," because this makes the argument more comprehensible and more meaningful for the reader. But the equation, pleasure is good, is not at all important in itself. It is merely a means by which Plato demonstrates that all decisions in life are determined by knowledge (or lack of it) and by nothing else. The "hedonistic" equation is thus a means and not an end, and must be understood as such.

Thus it is not important whether Plato or Socrates believes that the pleasant equals the good, or whether this equation is completely valid. It is important to note, however, that this "hedonism" is *not* the view of the *polloi*. It is most specifically introduced by Socrates *in opposition* to the views of Protagoras and the *polloi*. This fact is stated as explicitly as possible (351C), but some scholars still seem to overlook it.<sup>45</sup> This still does not prove, however, that this "hedonism" was Plato's or Socrates' view; as I have said, this question is relatively unimportant. What is important is how convincingly Socrates argues that everything is subordinate to knowledge.

This is made abundantly clear by the way in which Socrates introduces the argument (352A1-C7). He first says as an illustration that he wants to get away from the fingers and the face and look instead at the chest and back, or as we would say, "get to the heart of the matter." He knows what Protagoras thinks about good and pleasure; he now asks, "What do you think about *epistēmē*?" (352B1). When Protagoras says that he feels that *sophia* and *epistēmē* are the mightiest of human things (352C8-D3), Socrates answers that he has spoken well and truly, but that the *polloi* do not share his conviction. What they (Socrates and Protagoras) must do is convince the *polloi* that knowledge is supremely powerful (352D-53B). This introduction shows that the identification of good and pleasure is only of secondary importance, and Socrates and Protagoras may disagree on this point. But Socrates

<sup>45</sup> E.g. Friedländer, who argues that when Socrates praises the sophists in 357E, he is merely flattering them in order to get them to agree to his argument. "It takes a mere flattery," he says (p. 31), "to catch the Sophists off guard and push them back to the level of the many." G. Santas also argues recently that Plato only uses "hedonism" here to show that one belief of the *polloi* is incompatible with another (*Philosophical Review* 75 [1966] 8).



makes it quite clear that the essential question concerns the importance of knowledge, and on this point they are agreed.

If we may now look more closely at the argument itself, we find that it is complicated and occasionally elliptical, but if we keep in mind the context and the direction of the argument, it is considerably easier to follow.<sup>46</sup> What Socrates tries to show is quite simply that all factors which govern men's actions are rational. When men do not act rationally (in the view of the *polloi*), it is because they are influenced by something else, such as pleasure and pain (again, according to the *polloi*). But *all* such supposed non-rational influences are, according to Socrates, only a matter of knowledge, and therefore knowledge is the *only* factor influencing men's actions. They will, therefore, always do what they know is best for them. In short, the argument begins with the premise: Men always do what they know is best unless they are overcome by something else, such as pleasure or pain. From this it is proved that men always do what they know to be best.<sup>47</sup>

To the modern critic who objects that some people know what is best for them but do not do it, Socrates would reply, "For what reason?" Either there are no other factors influencing one's decision (and the *polloi* cannot think of any in 354D1-E2, or 354E8-55A2, or 356A7-8), or if there are any other factors, then, it is implied, they can all be reduced to knowledge or ignorance. Such reasoning, of course, would not satisfy a modern logician—just because no one can think of

<sup>46</sup> The best recent analyses of the argument are by Gallop, *Phronesis* 9 (1964) 117-29, and Vlastos (above, note 24) xxxviii-xlv.

<sup>47</sup> To trace the argument in detail: Socrates first says (352D) that the *polloi* feel that many people know what is best but do not do it. The reason people give for this is that they are overcome by pain or "some of those things which I just now mentioned" (this refers to 352B7-8, where he mentions *thumos*, *hêdonê*, *lupê*, *erôs*, and *phobos*). This is the basic assumption, that if people act non-rationally, it is because they are influenced by one of these factors. Socrates then takes up (353A) the representative example, "being overcome by pleasure." This phenomenon is then shown to be equivalent to being overcome by ignorance (357DE). It is also shown (358D-60E) that being overcome by fear is equivalent to ignorance (and therefore courage is knowledge). The unstated implication is that everything else which Socrates has mentioned as causing non-rational actions also can be shown to be ignorance. The only factor, therefore, which could cause someone not to do what he knows to be best would be ignorance, and in this case he obviously would not know. Therefore, one always does what one knows to be best for oneself.

a different reason, this does not mean that no such reason exists.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore the argument is, as I have mentioned, somewhat elliptical, for some of the steps in it are implied, but not explicitly stated. But compared to other Socratic arguments, and especially compared to his arguments earlier in this dialogue (328D–34C), this one is extremely sound; indeed it is as near to being completely valid as any argument in Plato.

I think we must conclude, therefore, that Plato intends the reader to accept it, and that he also intends the reader to understand that here (unlike in the earlier arguments) there is no objection which Protagoras could raise. He may be somewhat reluctant to agree at some points, but he never specifically objects as he has earlier, and we can only conclude that he does, in fact, accept the “hedonistic” argument.

In connection with Protagoras’ acceptance of this argument there is one more point which we must look at, for some critics feel that in accepting it Protagoras is undermining his whole position. Socrates says toward the end of the argument (356A–57B) that if the pleasant (good) life depends only on knowledge about pleasure and pain (good and evil), then one must correctly measure pleasure and pain in order to know which course to choose, and he calls this measuring a *technê* (356D4). The exact nature of this *metrêtikê technê*, however, is not explained. Some see it as a form of mathematics and say that Socrates is here challenging Protagoras’ earlier rejection of geometry and other *technai* in favor of *politikê aretê* (318E).<sup>49</sup> But although the comparing of pains and pleasures does in one sense involve a mathematical skill, the evaluating of each individual pleasure and pain is surely not entirely a mathematical process.<sup>50</sup> Socrates says that the nature of the *epistêmê* involved in the measuring art will be discussed later. Presumably this implies that it is not something simple or ordinary, but requires

<sup>48</sup> Santas (above, note 44) 7.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. Grube, CQ 27 (1933) 206.

<sup>50</sup> For example, a man who feels that eating a steak is worth 5 Pleasure Units and the indigestion that will follow is worth 2 Pain Units will eat the steak. But another man may feel that eating a steak is only worth 3 Pleasure Units and the indigestion is worth 4 Pain Units (he may actually have a weaker digestive system). The second man, of course, will not eat the steak.

further study, which may well result in the conclusion that this *epistêmê* is something very different from mathematics.<sup>51</sup>

Socrates does, however, make the statement that this art of measuring is directly opposed to the power of appearance (356D), which may at first glance appear to be a clear rejection of Protagoras' view, as presented in the *Theaetetus*, that everything is as it appears to each man. But the *Theaetetus* contains another even more basic tenet of Protagoras, that "man is the measure of all things," and if both of these statements are really Protagorean,<sup>52</sup> then Protagoras believes in both measuring and appearance. And in the context of the discussion in this dialogue Protagoras could easily say that each man is the measure of his own pleasures and pains, and must determine his actions on the basis of how they appear to him. Thus Socrates' argument here would seem to accord very well with what we know of the views of the historical Protagoras.

Furthermore, according to Socrates' argument, all men practice this *metrêtikê technê* to some extent, since everyone makes some estimate (however inaccurate) of pleasure and pain before choosing between them. Therefore, this *metrêtikê technê* which Socrates describes is quite similar to Protagoras' *politikê technê*, in that both are essential to life and are practiced to some extent by everyone, but both are also some sort of knowledge and can be taught. Thus the reference to *metrêtikê technê* supports rather than challenges Protagoras' views on *aretê* in the Great Speech. Since, therefore, Socrates' argument agrees both with the view of Protagoras in this dialogue and (as far as we can tell) with those of the historical Protagoras, in accepting the "hedonistic" argument the sophist is strengthening rather than undermining his position.

After Protagoras, Prodicus, and Hippias have all agreed to this central step in Socrates' argument, the final piece follows quite logically, and needs little comment. First it is argued that everyone goes toward

<sup>51</sup> This further study is, in fact, undertaken in the *Theaetetus*. It should be noted again that even if all the parts of *aretê* are each equivalent to *epistêmê*, it does not follow that they are all identical. See above, note 32.

<sup>52</sup> The "man-measure" saying is almost certainly authentic, but the explanation of this saying, that things are as they appear to each man, is nowhere in the *Theaetetus* explicitly labeled a quotation from Protagoras, and so both its exact phrasing and its origin are uncertain.

what he thinks is good, and avoids what he thinks is evil. Fear is then defined in rational terms. It then follows that the only difference between the brave and the cowardly is that the former know that fighting in battle is good, whereas the latter mistakenly think that it is evil, and so fear it. It should be observed that pleasure is introduced only briefly in 360A, and then quickly dropped. The hedonistic equation, that pleasure equals good, has no direct bearing, in fact, on the proof that courage is knowledge. As has been said, it is merely a demonstration of how one proves that "irrational" factors can be accounted for in terms of knowledge, and it is this general principle only which is necessary for the final argument.

Protagoras agrees reluctantly that the brave must be wise on the basis of the preceding arguments, which directly contradicts his earlier assertion (349D) that many men are totally ignorant, and yet courageous. This reluctance to contradict himself is quite understandable and should not be taken as a sign that Protagoras still has reservations. Throughout the dialogue, Protagoras never hesitates to object when he disagrees with what Socrates says, even if he is not sure why he disagrees; but now he does not object. It is hard to imagine, in fact, what objections Protagoras could raise at this point, for not only has he accepted the whole argument so far, but, as I have shown, the argument agrees with the basic principles which he has expressed earlier. For although Protagoras claims that courage and knowledge are very different, he also says that *sophia* and *epistêmê* are the mightiest of human things, and that the *polloi* are wrong to talk about men acting contrary to knowledge because they are "overcome by pleasure" or by something else. It seems, therefore, that Protagoras already thinks that knowledge is the controlling factor in life. Thus Socrates need only show him that courage is not an exception. Having accepted this, Protagoras can no longer maintain that there are men who are both very ignorant and very courageous.<sup>53</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION (360E6-362A4)

In the short concluding section Socrates returns to *aretê* and remarks upon the reversal of their positions with respect to its teachability

<sup>53</sup> There is, of course, a difference between saying that knowledge is the controlling

(360E-61C). Many critics, appalled at the thought that Socrates could ever change his mind about anything or contradict himself, have sought to deny this reversal, usually by asserting that Protagoras' type of (false) *aretê* cannot be taught (only instilled by indoctrination), whereas Socrates' (true) *aretê* can be taught.<sup>54</sup> But if one puts aside the view that Socrates must always be right and Protagoras wrong, then there is no difficulty with Socrates' paradox, and therefore no need to resort to such "sophistic" solutions. It was Protagoras' turn first and then Socrates' to prove that *aretê* is teachable, and each makes a very good case. Certainly they approach the question from different viewpoints, but there is no suggestion anywhere that the meaning of the word *aretê* changes.

Finally Socrates says that he would like to continue the investigation later to learn what *aretê* is, and whether it is teachable (361C4-6). He then says that he prefers Prometheus to Epimetheus, suggesting again perhaps the comparison between these two and Socrates and Protagoras (cf. 316C). The latter speaks first, but omits any discussion of the real nature of *aretê*, and then Socrates fills in this gap.

The dialogue ends with an exchange of compliments. Socrates wants Protagoras' help in continuing the discussion, and Protagoras says that he would be glad to discuss the matter with Socrates in the future. He predicts, moreover, that Socrates will become well known for his *sophia*, which reminds us of the testimony to Protagoras' reputation as *sophôtatos* in the opening lines of the dialogue. We are also reminded again of the age difference between the two (cf. 317C, 320C), and Plato seems to be suggesting that Protagoras, the representative of one generation, is passing on the torch of *sophia* to Socrates, the representative of the next generation. Finally, it is only fitting that a dialogue that argues that wisdom and knowledge are the basis of human life should begin and end with a testimony to the *sophia*, first of Protagoras and then of Socrates.

These references to wisdom at the beginning and end of the dialogue underscore the general structural symmetry in it. In Section Two,

factor and knowledge is the only factor. But even if Protagoras only accepts the first proposition, he can scarcely maintain that some courageous men are ignorant.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Taylor (above, note 3) 262.

Protagoras in a strong display of rhetoric demonstrates that *aretê* is teachable. This is balanced by the strong display of dialectic in Section Six, in which Socrates also shows the teachability of *aretê*. In between these two major sections, there are displays of weak dialectic and weak sophistic argument (Sections Three and Five). Both these sections deal in some way with *aretê*, but in neither section is the major emphasis on its teachability. In the center of the dialogue is the interlude, in which the differences in method are discussed.

This symmetry is indicative, it seems to me, of the equal stature of Socrates and Protagoras. I have already mentioned other indications that these two are in a class by themselves. Especially striking is the contrast between Protagoras and the other figures in the dialogue; no one else (except Socrates) is nearly so sympathetically treated. Consider, for instance, Prodicus and Hippias, whom one might expect to be about equal to Protagoras. They are presented, however, as quite ridiculous men—very learned, but with little, if anything, to add to the discussion. Aside from their speeches during the interlude, they say almost nothing. In contrast to these two Protagoras stands out strikingly.

Furthermore, if we look at Socrates' interlocutors in other dialogues, not one (except perhaps Parmenides<sup>55</sup>) has the stature of Protagoras. It is especially instructive to compare the figures of the two other sophists, Gorgias and Hippias, in the dialogues named after them. Gorgias is treated with respect, but his role in the *Gorgias* is minor, and he soon yields to his younger companions. And although Hippias in the *Hippias Minor* is Socrates' only interlocutor, his role is confined to answering questions, and thus allowing Socrates to develop his argument. He says almost nothing positive himself, and one feels that if another figure were substituted for Hippias it would make little difference.<sup>56</sup> The contrast between these two and Protagoras is another indication of Plato's attitude toward the latter.

A final indication of Plato's attitude is his portrait of Socrates here.

<sup>55</sup> The *Parmenides* presents a somewhat different situation, for Socrates is presented as a very young man, and he would, therefore, naturally be overshadowed by some other figure.

<sup>56</sup> Much the same could be said about the *Hippias Major*, which, however, is perhaps not Platonic.

As Vlastos says, "he is not a wholly attractive figure in this dialogue" p. xxiv). I have already mentioned several instances where Socrates is rather unsympathetically portrayed, such as his treatment of Prodicus. One other is significant, in that it presents a direct comparison with Protagoras. This is their treatment of the two sons of Pericles, who are actually present during the discussion. Socrates uses them as examples of sons who have not learned political *aretê* from their father, and in making this point he shows not the least consideration for their feelings (320A). When Protagoras, on the other hand, concludes the Great Speech, he too refers to these two young men, but he then adds that he ought not yet make such an observation about them, "for there is still hope for them; they are young" (328D1-2). The contrast in their attitudes toward these two boys is clear, and is distinctly favorable to Protagoras.

From all this evidence we must conclude, it seems to me, that Plato is trying to present a sympathetic portrait of Protagoras in this dialogue, and that he shows great respect, not only for the man, but also for his thought. To understand why this is so, we must keep in mind the fact that, despite the differences in the way they approach the problem of *aretê* and its teachability, Socrates and Protagoras arrive at remarkably similar conclusions. Furthermore, from the little evidence which remains, it seems that the views of the historical Protagoras were also consistent with those presented in this dialogue. In view of this, it is quite reasonable that in a dialogue dealing with *aretê* Plato would want to make use of the views of Protagoras, for he saw that he could use the arguments of the sophist as confirmation of his own views. To show two different people approaching a problem with two different methods, but both reaching the same conclusions, would be a very strong argument for the teachability of *aretê*. He would, of course, be careful to show that Socrates' approach was the more advanced, but he would also make sure that Protagoras' views received the respect which they deserved. The result would be a *tour de force*, which would not only show that *aretê* was knowledge and was teachable, but also would examine the relationship of Socrates to the sophists and reveal in what ways he had advanced beyond them. The dialogue would cover two generations of thinkers (three, if one includes Plato himself), and show that no matter what approach one

takes, the best thinkers are agreed on the supreme importance of *aretê* and knowledge.

In short, the *Protagoras* is a brilliant attempt to draw the reader toward a better life of virtue and knowledge. It presents an introduction to the Socratic method and shows just how Socrates differs from his predecessors. But Plato uses both Protagoras and Socrates to demonstrate that *aretê* is teachable. And finally, if the reader himself learns anything about *aretê* from reading the *Protagoras*, then the dialogue itself is direct proof that *aretê* is indeed teachable.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> I wish to thank A. T. Cole for his many valuable comments and criticisms, and T. Gould for his assistance on an earlier version of this paper.