

# Interpretation

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- 117    Kenneth Dorter    Freedom and Constraints in *Prometheus Bound*
- 137    Joseph Cropsey    Virtue and Knowledge: On Plato's *Protagoras*
- 157    Michael Davis    Politics and Poetry: Aristotle's *Politics*, Books VII  
and VIII
- 169    Marie A. Martin    Misunderstanding and Understanding Hume's  
Moral Philosophy: An Essay on *Hume's Place  
in Moral Philosophy*, by Nicholas Capaldi
- 185    Hugh Gillis    Kojève-Fessard Documents  
*Translator*
- 201    Glenn N. Schram    The Place of Leo Strauss in a Liberal Education
- Book Review*
- 217    Will Morrisey    *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, by John  
Locke

# Interpretation

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# Virtue and Knowledge: On Plato's *Protagoras*

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Given the dialectical character of the Platonic writings individually, it is not surprising that the Platonic corpus as a whole consists as largely as it does of engagements with one or another alternative to the understandings of Plato/Socrates. It belongs to the genius of Plato that he constructed a universe out of elements that exist in a condition of mutual (dialectical) tension, in a tacit, however limited, concession to the cosmology of Stress. Expecting always the triumphant Socratic finale, even if in the form of *aporia* and achieved through never so many baited deferences, we come nevertheless to appreciate the seriousness with which Plato scanned the world of available wisdom, and the care that he took to draw from Parmenides, for example, what that thinker kept in reserve against a rigid theory of Ideas, and from Protagoras, that chancicleer sophist, the wisdom that might lie in his version of the adage Virtue is Knowledge. Plato's sifting of Protagoras runs through *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*, the former dialogue addressing the climactic question of the coming to be of good and evil among men, the latter the companion question, What is knowledge. If virtue is knowledge, as Socrates must forever insist, then why is virtue not transmissible just as knowledge is transmissible in the act of teaching? And if virtue cannot be somehow "taught," what becomes of the moral pedagogy by which the best political constitution stands or falls? *Protagoras* on the bringing of good among men (if not by teaching, then how?) is a spacious portal into the Platonic edifice.

The dialogue is made to begin with an encounter between Socrates and "a friend," a chance meeting that occasions Socrates' recounting a discussion from which he has just departed. Since the dialogue itself, i.e., that very discussion, ended with Socrates remarking that he is already late for some business elsewhere, the fact that he is "now" volunteering to repeat the entire proceedings makes it as clear to us as it needs to be that, if he had indeed any affairs elsewhere, they must have been the opposite of pressing. His approach to Protagoras had been at the instance of another, but the impulse to leave him seems to have been more entirely his own. We may speculate that at the time when

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Socrates terminated it with the fabrication of another demand on his attention, the conversation had been squeezed dry of further benefit or interest.

As Socrates tells the story, he goes to Protagoras, who is visiting Athens, because a self-centered young bumbler named Hippocrates wishes to attach himself to Protagoras as a pupil and considers that an introduction by Socrates would be helpful in gaining him admission to the Protagorean circle. With a patience that thrives best in fiction, Socrates allows himself to be awakened by Hippocrates so long in advance of dawn that the young man has to feel his way around the bed in order to find a place to seat himself. Declaring to Socrates, of all people, that Protagoras was the only wise man, and that he, Hippocrates, aspired to be wise in the same mode, he gives Socrates an opening for some inquiry into the mercenary ways of the sophists. Of course he cannot do this without referring to the sophists as such and by that name. The revelation to Hippocrates that he would end by standing before the Greeks as a sophist raises a blush on his face that can be seen by the light of the barely breaking dawn. More passes as they make their way toward Protagoras, Socrates alerting the youth to the spiritual perils of trusting himself to poorly understood mentors. The wind of disparagement continues to blow against the sophists as the two reach the door of Callias's house, where Protagoras is lodging. Their knock is answered by an emasculated servant whose deprivation in no way inhibits the expression of his contempt for the sophists he takes Socrates and Hippocrates to be. Apparently, and as will soon be confirmed when the conversation develops indoors, contempt for the sophists is rife in Greece; and as we have seen at the door, it extends to the lowest of the low. That *Protagoras* acquired the subtitle "Sophists: Accusatory" is understandable, ultimately misleading though that indication will prove to be. We may well wonder why those virtuosi of rhetoric did not engender a better opinion of themselves in the world; whether their obloquy is not the unavoidable fate of those whose concern for the truth of their arguments seems subordinated to cleverness or advantage. But it would be well for us to reserve judgment on the sophists, for as will soon appear, so far as Protagoras is representative of them while being perhaps the best among them, their principles do not seem outrageous or absurd.

Having gained access to Callias's house, Socrates and Hippocrates come upon a telling scene: Protagoras in ambulatory discourse followed by a coterie of acolytes who form up behind him in twin columns, part before him as he reverses direction, and fall in astern once more, ears straining. The sophists Hippias and Prodicus are described in their respective peculiar postures, enlightening sundry adherents. If there is anything serious about the sophists, Plato will introduce it gradually.

Now it is time for Socrates to proceed with the introduction of the hopeful Hippocrates to Protagoras. Since it is the purpose of Hippocrates to advance

himself in Athenian life by deploying what he will learn from Protagoras, the latter is grateful for Socrates' delicacy in leaving it up to him whether he will hear Hippocrates' application in private or before the company: local citizenries do not always take kindly to the interference of a foreigner who claims a power to teach their young the arts of ambition. Evidently, Protagoras is alert to the danger of appearing to corrupt the young, even if the appearance attaches unjustly to an effort to improve them. It is out of vanity, Socrates suspects, that Protagoras now prefers that the proceedings go on before the whole company. In the course of declaring his preference for an open interview, Protagoras makes an important observation on the history of the sophists: they comprise an ancient esoteric order whose members include some of the most famous men of Greece: poets, seers, athletes, musicians, and many more—all of them teachers. Homer and Hesiod themselves, and Simonides, were of the number. All sought to conceal their sophistry. They hoodwinked the vulgar, of course, but could not conceal their purpose from the powerful classes. He, Protagoras, alone proclaims his sophistry from the housetops, not claiming for himself any superior honesty but doing so out of unwillingness to bear the humiliation of being caught in a deception he knows is bound to fail. This admitted calculation deserves the reader's respectful attention; the "consequentialist" principle that underlies it will play an important part in the moral doctrine that Socrates will later develop.

What suspect practice is it that Protagoras confesses to perpetrating as a sophist, and in which he by indirection implicates the entire brotherhood? Nothing less than "educating men" (*Protagoras* 317B). Why does this philanthropic impulse generate universal revulsion? Because it is a private usurpation of a public prerogative? Because it is done for gain? Because it is artful, using and communicating a profane sorcery? Every one of these possibilities is disposed of in what follows. Protagoras will argue persuasively that men are endowed but not sufficiently endowed with the arts of sociality, in which they do indeed need further cultivation. He charges no fixed fee for his instruction but permits his pupils to pay him whatever they declare on oath to be the value to them of his teaching. (And why should sophistry not get the benefit of the distinction of the teaching art and the moneymaking art?) Finally, Protagoras has exactly renounced secrecy and displayed himself before the Greeks for what he is. We know where our sympathies are supposed to lie, but we are less certain, at the moment, of their ground.

Socrates would like Protagoras to tell Hippocrates what the association the latter is seeking would do for him. The general answer is that it would improve him. Socrates wonders how. Protagoras now (perhaps one should say again) distinguishes himself from the herd of sophists, who do no better than purvey the usual arts—arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music—while he teaches how best to manage one's household and how to be most effective, in speech and deed, in the affairs of the city: in brief, "the political art, and making men

good citizens” (Socrates’ formulation, 319A). To this claim Socrates enters a famous demurrer: virtue is not teachable. He has seen on many occasions that, when the issue is a technical one, the knowledge of *trained* experts is respected in the Assembly, which defers to skilful people who can be trusted to have learned an art. In matters calling for political judgment, however, there is no recognized art in which a man can become an acknowledged expert through technical training, i.e., through undergoing a course of formal instruction, without which he is unqualified to pronounce or advise. In principle, anyone can be wise in the affairs of the city. It is as if Socrates is saying that political judgment is something like a natural gift, had by some and not by others, possessed without being acquired; and a “training” in it would be a transaction presided over by a fraud and practiced on the dim. The likelihood of this is supported by the manifest inability of even those most gifted with political judgment, or other virtues, to impart their endowment to the ones nearest and dearest to them. This is as true in the private realm as in the public. Within the home, Pericles was unable either himself to teach or even to find another who could teach the goodness he valued most to the beings he cherished most. The matter is simply not subject to pedagogy. Plainly stated, this argument traces moral character, and judgment as well, to a source that is not man, perhaps nature, perhaps something else, but in any event a power that conveys gifts to patient humanity. It is to this position that Protagoras must address himself. He will do so through one of Plato’s magnificent reconstructions of Protagorean doctrine, beginning at 320C (another is in *Theaetetus* 165E–168C).

Protagoras’s response will be guided by his immediate understanding that the unspoken premise of Socrates’ antipaideutic etiology of virtue is the proposition that the universe is of a certain kind, made or containing or perhaps ruled by What-Endows. We know that Protagoras understands this because he begins his lengthy statement with a zoogonic myth that traces us all, and therefore with the status of our virtues, back to the gods.

There was a time, he says, when gods were but the mortal kind was not. The gods made the animals and then charged Prometheus and Epimetheus, the prospective and the retrospective, to assign them their powers. Epimetheus distributes the powers so that each kind will possess means of preserving itself against annihilation by its natural predators. “Balance” (*epanison*) or “compensation” is the principle at work. Unity permeates and supervenes over aggressive multiplicity. Epimetheus seems to have stumbled on a working model of the One and the Many in the shape of the animal kingdom. It was left to Prometheus to see to the needs of man, whom Epimetheus had somehow overlooked. Prometheus provides for mankind by stealing, on their behalf, fire and the arts from the gods, who apparently would not willingly succor mankind, of whom they had washed their hands from the beginning.

Who, by the way, are Epimetheus and Prometheus, retrospect and prospect? Gods they are not; godlike powers they seem to be. Whose backward-looking

and forward-looking powers are they then if not man's himself? In the fable that Plato's Protagoras is spinning, Epimetheus is man's looking around himself and observing the manner of the coming to be and passing away of the living things, the compensatory balance of consumption and being consumed that comprises a bestial cycle from which forethought alone can liberate him. What the gods will not bestow on him to this end he will rape them of, and he will never cease to consider how far in this world his wellbeing must be his own farseeing care.

Protagoras now speaks of man as sharing in the divine, referring of course to the art and fire obtained from heaven through a force and fraud; and by virtue of this participation he became reverent of his own close kin aloft, setting up altars to them and making icons of them. We observe that without the contraband arts the human beings would have been both unable to honor the mean and myopic Olympians with works of art and also unmoved to do so, since the possession of arts encourages introspective man to see a god. As Plato fashions this skillful projection of Protagoras, the persistent tendency of the great sophist to link humanity to divinity through *techne* becomes clearer, and if we bear in mind that in the background of the discussion is the ever-present issue of teachability, more exactly the teachability of virtue, we can envision an important victory for Protagoras if he can produce the concurrence of divinity-qua-excellence and teachable art-qua-excellence. His pedagogy would then pass divinity from man to man, perfecting the philanthropy of Prometheus.

Protagoras continues. For all his art and worship, man still lived a solitary and dangerous life. His predators were the beasts, not his fellow human beings, and he found that his preservation depended on his joining together with his fellow men in order to deal with the brutes. According to Protagoras, men had been losing the war (*polemos*) with the beasts because humanity lacked "the political art, a part of which is (the art of) war." Now the remedy of association for defense produced a new disorder: in their novel proximity, the humans replaced the beasts as the source of danger to life, and the primitive society threatened to dissolve in mutual injury because men lacked the "political art." Plato will not imply any criticism of Protagoras as being inconsistent in saying that the political art is at the same time the art of war and the ground of peace. The assimilation of the warmaking art to the political condition is in the spirit of Socrates' own thought as set forth at the beginning of the *Timaeus* where he calls for an account of the exploits of the best city in its most characteristic activity, which is war in speech and deed. That peace is impossible without politics and politics is impossible without war seems to have been as evident to Protagoras as it was to Socrates.

To avert the self-destruction of our kind, Zeus consents to share political wisdom with the human beings. On what terms? Hermes is to convey to all men, not to some few who would be the experts or artisans of political art, the justice and conscientiousness that are at the core of the political art. The words

used are *dike* and *aidos*, the former with its accompanying meaning of righteousness and the latter a complex amalgam of respect and susceptibility to shame or disgrace. Everyone, in principle, participates in the political virtues; Protagoras seems to envision a democratic foundation for human existence. He does not make this into a formula for prescribing a regime as best or most natural, and he immediately makes provision for the capital punishment of those who are incapable of sharing in the decencies of common life. It is easy for us to see that if Protagoras had devised a god who had endowed all men with equal political virtue for the sake of human preservation in society, the sophist would have left little enough for himself to do as a teacher of political virtue. Conversely, the justification of a pedagogy in political virtue inevitably implicates the dispensing god in the gross imperfection of the human kind in which such a large residue of room for correction persists. Protagoras's myth is a standing demonstration that the image of a god who is chary of sharing with mankind his wisdom of good and evil is available outside the limits of revelation.

Protagoras considers himself to have explained why the assembled citizens will listen to anyone regardless of his profession if he discourses sensibly on matters governed by political virtue (*politikes aretes*) (323A1): the very existence of cities testifies to the distribution of the social disposition among men, in effect to the (almost) universal presence of it in the human kind. The observable practice of mankind is an index to profound truth.

It is obvious to us, and it immediately proves to be at least as obvious to Protagoras, that in making this argument he is a step away from arguing himself out of an honest occupation as a teacher of political virtue. Who would need a human provider where a divine one has gone before? Again, Protagoras takes his demonstration from the common practice of mankind. Whereas we blame no one for his ugliness or deformity, because these are seen to be truly involuntary, we blame injustice because we attribute it to the malefactor himself, and we punish it not to retribute it upon the guilty but to deter a repetition—and to deter is to train. As we are all imbued with sociality, so we all know it to be a thing acquired by learning. All that the reader of this myth need do to purge it of gross contradiction is to eliminate a supposition that the imbuing is the effect of the action of any teacher or imbuer who is not human. We are all sociable because we all teach one another sociability. Of course, some do it better than others. The very best teacher of virtue might be struck by the notion that he does for man what nothing else in the cosmos does. Protagoras will in fact go so far as to claim to be, himself, the best of all men at making others noble and good (328B).

Protagoras claims to have shown Socrates how it comes about that the Athenians in assembly listen willingly to any man of any occupation if he address them on civic matters in a sensible way, and Protagoras can claim to have done so through an argument that turns on the teachability of virtue. Abandoning

myth for straight speech (*logos*), he will turn next to Socrates' second point, which is that the good men have so much trouble and so little success when they seek means to have their very own sons made virtuous, a fact that Socrates adduces as evidence that virtue cannot be taught. Protagoras insists that the whole weight of the human environment comprises an unremitting pressure on a youngster from the beginning of his life, forming him in the mold of the virtues. His parents, his teachers of music and of gymnastic, and eventually the city itself through its laws, all are ceaselessly prompting him to virtue throughout his entire life, by coercion where admonition and persuasion fail. Protagoras does not neglect to consider why the relentless moral pressure of humanity upon itself can fail. Men, whose lives should follow the paradigm of virtue everywhere recommended to them, behave instead according to a model of their very own (326D1). What could explain this willfulness? The same cause that explains why a master flautist's son, taught by his father, need not prove to be a master flautist: the element of natural aptitude. As it were, our greater or less inclination to virtue is by nature, but virtue itself is by instruction and habituation. This foreshadowing of Aristotle is presented by Protagoras in the medium of rational discourse rather than myth, as he has declared, and we see the sign of that transition when he renders his final account of the distribution and cultivation of the civil virtues in the language of natural aptitude where previously he had spoken in terms of endowment by gods.

We must remind ourselves that it was out of a similar premise, namely, that the virtues are ours by reason of an endowment of some origin, perhaps nature, that Socrates appeared to argue to their incommunicability by teaching. To this point, the issue between Socrates and the great sophist appears to be this: the two agreeing that it is hard to know what makes, or how to make, a human being good, and agreeing further that the aptitude for virtue is largely by "endowment," which of them makes the stronger argument—the one who maintains that the virtues are not teachable or the one who argues that they are? It might be well to recall that this long exposition by Protagoras was prompted in large part by Socrates' requiring Protagoras to say in what way his instruction "makes men better." We are in a position to formulate his response thus: Protagoras helps to make his young pupils more sociable, to foster whatever natural inclination they have toward justice and the other virtues that make a man a good associate in the city. In brief, Protagoras makes, or at least aims to make, of young men good citizens, even if ambitious ones. By the end of his life, Socrates' doings as a whole will appear to his fellow citizens as a career of making the young into bad or skeptical citizens. The sophist appears in the honorable light, shed upon him by Plato, of one whose concern it is to civilize the human animal, that amazing being with so much capacity for good and evil, so much in need of his fellows if he is to live a fruitful life and so prone to abuse them if he believes he can do so with impunity. Not for a single moment unmindful of these truths, nor inclined to dispute them, Socrates looks so far

beyond them that he could appear to neglect and in the end despise them, and this notwithstanding that he is made the propounder of the true and good city. The engagement between the sophist and the philosopher gives us an occasion for wondering whether in a country like Athens the philosopher must choose between being mocked as a fantast or reviled as a felon.

Now (328D) Socrates begins his rejoinder. Politely but pointedly likening Protagoras's flow of speech to a book in its deafness and muteness in regard to questions, Socrates makes an issue, and not for the last time, of the difference between the presentation of argument in sustained speech and the exchange of questions and answers succinctly put. His reason for introducing this issue must be inferred from what follows, for no reason is given. Socrates declares himself to need clarification on one small point alone: are all those various virtues to which Protagoras had referred one single thing with many names, or are they rather parts of some one single thing? However the question will be pursued, its bearing on the disjunction of long speeches and short answers seems clear enough: this matter should have been taken up and disposed of early in Protagoras's discourse, and if it had been, the discourse would have taken a different, better direction. Reasoning and speech should not be allowed to proceed without continuous confirmation of the steps being taken, one by one, lest the whole inquiry prove in need of redoing. If this explains the introduction by Socrates of what looks like a cavil about methods, then it serves less to protect him from the blame he would deserve as a petulant quibbler and more to indicate that everything Protagoras had maintained stands or falls by the answer to the crucial question, namely, Is virtue one or many, which would have been raised near the outset if there had been an opportunity to raise it.

In response, Protagoras maintains that the virtues are parts of virtue, as the facial features are parts of the face. Socrates presses toward the assimilation of the virtues to one another. To make his point, Socrates extracts the admission that there is such a thing as justice itself, holiness (*hosiotēs*) itself, etcetera, and that, for example, justice is itself just. We would be easier in our minds if we could intervene at this point and ask how justice can be just without "participating" in some entity called justice, i.e., without "participating" in itself, whatever that might mean. We suspect that Plato's Parmenides, if he had been present, would have sensed Socrates' injection of the Idea of Justice here and would have reminded him of certain difficulties he once experienced when called on to be precise when speaking of "participation" in an "Idea" (*Parmenides* 131B); but Plato's Protagoras—and presumably the real Protagoras—is not oriented to the problems of the Ideas. Nor does he object when Socrates, taking high moral ground, asks, "Could holiness be not-just and therefore unjust?" (331A), as if it were impossible for anything (for example a bird) to be "not-just" without being "unjust." Protagoras does balk, however, at the notion that whenever two things have anything in common they must have everything in common and be the same. He goes so far as to say that it is not at all just to speak like that (331E). Should he have taxed Socrates with "injustice?"

Socrates moves off on another tack which will help to reveal his larger purpose. Having failed to obtain Protagoras's agreement to the unity of the virtues in Virtue, he will now argue the unity of the virtues in Wisdom. His key proposition is that to behave wrongly is to behave unwisely (332B). This granted, everything else falls into place: Since the violation of every virtue is a folly, each and all the virtues have one and the same single opposite; and having but one opposite, all the virtues are united through that common opposite, which is folly; and folly too itself has but one opposite, which would be called wisdom or, as we now see, virtue. Thus, all the virtues have collapsed into the opposite of their opposite, and the virtues are united in Wisdom, which is what was to be demonstrated. By this conclusion, the virtues cannot be "parts" of something in which they participate to form a whole, as the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears, each with its peculiar function, are parts of a face. Of course, Protagoras is not entirely pleased.

Summarizing the state of the question (333B), Socrates makes explicit that discretion (*sophrosyne*) and wisdom are the same, and justice and holiness are almost (*schodon*) the same. We have no clue to the reason for the "almost," but if we must devise one, it might develop around the thought that nothing can disturb the identity of two virtues except their failure to share fully the same opposite, namely, folly. We would want to hesitate at length before deciding which, as between justice and holiness, by failing to contradict folly participates in it to whatever microscopic degree. Unable to resolve this sensitive difficulty by ourselves, we go on to note the next step in Socrates' argument which does appear to bear somewhat on the vexing issue. Socrates inquires whether a man acting unjustly is, in his injustice, being discreet, practicing a moderation (*sophrosyne*). Protagoras says that he would be ashamed to agree to that, although the multitude among men say it. Protagoras does not take advantage of this opportunity to point out how this widespread turpitude increases the need for universal moral instruction of the kind he provides, and Socrates simply consents to take the deplorable popular view rather than any belief of Protagoras's as his target. Socrates explains his purposes in proceeding as he does: Mostly he wishes to try the argument; concomitantly, though, himself the questioner and his respondent will also be tried (333C). As it seems, the reader is expected to draw conclusions about Protagoras and Socrates as well as about truth, as the argument unfolds, which it will now do in the direction of clarifying the meaning of something being "good for" as a preparation for clarifying the meaning of "good." The drift of the developing thought is uncovered when Socrates moves rapidly (333D) to connect acting temperately (*sophronein*) with acting prudently (*phronein*) and advancing thence to prudent injustice, by the practice of which a man might do well, which is a locution for profiting. Now who could deny that the good things are those that are profitable (*ophelima*) to men? Ergo, it is prudent (i.e., right because prudence is a virtue) to do what is profitable, because to do the profitable means to obtain the things that are good. Protagoras, seeing what he has been inveigled into granting, exhibits an

irritability in which Socrates perceives a dislike for further questioning. Desiring nevertheless to push on, he asks in a way meant to be mollifying whether Protagoras means by those profitable things things that are profitable to no one or things that are profitable in no way at all, and whether things like that could be called “good.” Lurking in the question is the insinuated answer that virtues, for example intelligent prevision of the Promethean kind, might bring satisfactions not comprehended in the pious dictum that virtue is its own reward. Suspicions greatly aroused, Protagoras reacts with a speech long enough to leave no doubt that he has renounced the passivity of the mere respondent. He vents his view that “good” is a complicated thing, different things are good for different beings under different conditions, and what is good for this part of man may be bad for that, etcetera. Socrates confesses to having such a bad memory that he cannot remember what a paragraph is about by the time the speaker has reached the end of it. Answers must be short. Protagoras’s rejoinder to this absurdity is an implicit application of his offending speech: Short speeches are to your liking and are good for you; long ones or short ones may suit me better; and who is to say, you or I, what is good (presumably advantageous) for me. Socrates’ response shows no sign of recognizing the question of “good” as it is buried in Protagoras’s rejoinder. Instead, he lays it down that the conversation will proceed on his terms or not at all since he has no aptitude for long speeches—an assertion belied by his conduct on innumerable occasions, including his *Apology*, and soon to be belied in the present dialogue itself. What can the reader conclude except that, just as Protagoras had implied, men can contend as their respective “goods” can conflict; and that when they do so, the one who succeeds in facing down his opponent will prevail. That insight, which draws on a wisdom only too widely distributed, informs the action of Socrates, who simply threatens to leave. He has an engagement anyhow and really ought to go right now. (Not only does he not go, once he has got his way, but as we all know, he has time to repeat the whole affair verbatim before attending to his urgent engagement.)

Auditors protest the imminent breakup of the meeting and take sides. Callicles, their host, thinks it would be just if each speaker spoke as he wished. Alcibiades weighs in, aggressively of course, on behalf of Socrates. Critias favors cooperation over aggression. Prodicus contributes a paragraph of hair-splitting and sententiousness. Others, unnamed, expose themselves by approving Prodicus. Hippias spreads himself through a farrago of ruminations on nature and convention, the unmatched wisdom of the present company, and the vulgarity of squabbling, leading through notable byways of orotundity to a proposal that a chairman be appointed to moderate the proceedings. Applauded by all, the suggestion is vetoed by Socrates, who does not want Protagoras regulated by someone inferior to that sage and cannot imagine anyone superior to him. The entire scene, which emphasizes the irenic but blurry disposition of the sophists, must have brought enjoyment to many places in educated

Greece of Plato's day. More, though, than a witty pastiche of the foibles of eminent sophists, it illustrates the limits of mutual accommodation where, the parties differing over "good," clash consequently over what is good *for* each respectively.

Agreement is indeed reached, but it largely favors the preference of Socrates: over Protagoras's great misliking, they will proceed by the method of question and answer, but taking turns, Protagoras to be first to ask, and then Socrates will put the questions, to which Protagoras is bound to answer briefly.

Protagoras's proemium to his questioning (338E) marks the beginning of a long section of the dialogue which at first sight appears to lead the discussion in vagrant directions. The sophist announces that, in his view, the greatest part of a man's education is to be skillful (*deinon*) about poems, or poetry. If this is to be believed, then Protagoras's teaching of goodness proceeds through the interpretation of poetic texts like the one in which he hopes now to enmesh Socrates, namely, a piece by Simonides with which Socrates proves to be familiar, perhaps to the disappointment of Protagoras. Protagoras quotes, in effect, that it is hard to become good. Then he quotes Simonides, again in effect, as saying that Pittacus was wrong when he declared that it is hard to be good. The double negative puts Simonides in the position of maintaining both that it is hard to become good and it is not hard to be good. Protagoras prepares to gloat over Socrates from whom he has just extracted praise for the poem so marred by manifest contradiction. After a certain amount of business, Socrates drives home the difference between being and becoming, in general and in its relevance first to the consistency of the poem and then in its bearing on the matter of goodness: it is the becoming good that is hard, not the being. By this point, it has been made clear to us that the introduction by Protagoras of the poetic theme did not constitute a simple derailment of the dialogue qua inquiry into the goodness of the human beings, although it is true that a shift of emphasis has taken place: the teaching or making good of the human beings has at least for the moment given way to their being or becoming good. Whether the obvious relation between the difficulty of making someone good and the difficulty of becoming good will emerge we cannot yet foresee. In any case, Protagoras was apparently mindful enough of the central issue when he projected his assault on Socrates through the medium of poetry, although he seems to have underestimated his interlocutor's education in the epic literature. He surely did not anticipate the ease with which Socrates would humiliate his hermeneutic by proving that the poet had not in fact contradicted himself.

Protagoras is far from ready to admit defeat. Now (340E) he accuses Socrates of making things worse than ever when he denies that it is exceedingly hard to be virtuous. Socrates turns to Prodicus, the accomplished microscopist of meanings, to confirm that "hard," in the dialect of Simonides, meant "bad." Thus the true complaint of Simonides against Pittacus was that Pittacus, in saying that to be good was hard, meant in fact that to be good was bad. This

profoundly repulsive sentiment is saved from absolute obloquy by our recollection that good, at least in the understanding of Socrates, runs together with advantage or "good for." Thus to be virtuous or good might arguably be bad if being "good" brought losses and pain, which are not good for any human being although they might be overcome by the virtue that is its own incomparable reward (as Socrates is obliged to maintain in the *Republic*). It might go without saying that Socrates is not disposed to advertise any association of his own with the odious notion he has fobbed off on Pittacus, however much it might resonate with the peculiar "consequentialism" he himself will eventually promote.

Protagoras has his own no-nonsense way of clearing up the problem of the badness of goodness: when Simonides said hard he meant hard, not bad. Far from rejoicing that what is hard is, *as such*, bad, Socrates soothes Protagoras by agreeing with him, calling "good is bad" a joke, and supporting him by quoting Simonides' next verse, "Only god might have this privilege," that is, of possessing goodness. Granting that Simonides was not a mischief-maker who meant to depreciate the qualities of god, what was his true intention? Socrates volunteers to elucidate, and proceeds to do so in a speech that is many times longer than the one of Protagoras's that had brought him to his feet with the threat to leave. In passing, we wonder if his dedication to the method of crisp exchanges is more a matter of tactics in the circumstances than fidelity to some profoundly held heuristic principle. We wonder, in other words, whether he reveals in his doing that what is truly good must chime with a (good) purpose, or be "good *for*" the one who does well. We hesitate to draw a general conclusion that a good end justifies means of various kinds, but a situation dominated by polemic, such as the present one in which Protagoras seeks to outdo Simonides, Simonides seeks to overturn Pittacus, Protagoras and Socrates are striving to put one another down, and Sparta is said to master everyone, is a plausible setting for thoughts about prevailing.

Socrates' lecture begins (342A) in a comic vein, and light-years from the subject. Philosophy, he says, is most deeply and widely rooted in Crete and Lacedaemon, where sophists are more plentiful than anywhere else. (This trampling the distinction between philosophy and sophistry can be taken as a sign that he is enjoying himself.) The cunning Dorians, jealous of the wisdom by which they predominate in Greece, conceal their sapience behind a facade of militarism that they decorate with a muscular stupidity widely imitated by dupes elsewhere who dress in the athletic Spartan fashion and sport the cauliflower ears that advertise a vigorous regimen. The Spartans, too successful in their duplicity, see encroachment on the privacy of their communion with their sophists because their city is overrun by foreign mimics. Laws are made to restrict immigrant strangers and to inhibit the travel abroad of their own young. Self-satisfaction is at such a peak that even women are puffed up about their education in Crete and Sparta, and the heights of philosophy reached in the latter city may be discerned by anyone who converses with the simplest deni-

zens and reflects on the wisdom latent in the sententiousness of their speech. In Sparta it is known that verbal parsimony is the index of good education. Spartan peasants fire off maxims like shot from a sling (wrapping the terse in the military). The sages of Greece were patent laconizers who spoke in saws: "Know thyself." "Nothing in excess." And so on. (The unsettling thought intrudes itself that "Knowledge is Virtue" has a certain punch to it.) Socrates at last heaves into sight of the subject: Pittacus, an authentic sage, scored a hit with his "Hard to be good," and Simonides sang to make a name for himself by overthrowing Pittacus: "Hard to be good" is wrong; "Becoming good is hard" is the line. How did Simonides argue for his purpose? To show this, Socrates composes a discourse addressed by Simonides to Pittacus (343E). Pittacus having said, it is hard to be good, Simonides objects: what is true is that it is hard to *become* good. It is hard but possible to become good; it is not hard but impossible to *be*, i.e., remain good, except for god—as you yourself, Pittacus, say. And, Pittacus, you say in support of your belief (no man can remain good) that no man can withstand overwhelming mishap that besets him to compromise his virtue. Since you speak of overwhelming mishap, you must have in mind those men to whom "overwhelming" properly applies, men of such exceptional goodness that if they are to change at all—and their being overwhelmed means the alteration of their state—their change must be to bad. They are balanced on a cusp of virtue, they can only fall, and fall they inevitably must.

What, Pittacus, supports any man in his goodness, such as it is? The answer is, the good man's doing is favored and well done, and a bad man is one whose doing is ill done. These verses are so close to tautology that they demand to be rescued by interpretation. What is this decisive "well-doing?" The answer is "learning" (*mathesis*). What "well-doing" (*eupragia*) makes a good doctor? Learning or studying the cure of the sick. And what would make a bad doctor? Arguing that only a doctor who is a good doctor could be made a bad doctor, the pertinent ill-doing would be some kind of stripping away (*sterethenai*) of knowledge. Attractive as the surmise may be that this entire performance of Socrates' is nothing but a bravura travesty on the sophists performed in their garb, it is yet to be noted that he interjects in the course of his interpretation of the poem themes of his own that he undoubtedly adopts in his own name, such as this present one that goodness is knowledge, and the immediately following one, that no one does evil willingly. He brings the matter into order by summarizing Simonides' intent: There is no simply remaining good, but becoming good or bad is indeed possible. Then Socrates turns to a passage of the poem where he must anatomize the text delicately in order to make it come right. Simonides wrote words that could be read either "I praise willingly everyone who does no wickedness" or "I praise everyone who does no wickedness willingly." Socrates says that the poet means the former: he must mean the former, because no one does wickedness willingly. The poet writes that even the gods

do not fight against necessity. We are expected, perhaps by Simonides but certainly by Socrates, to conclude that mortals must surely give way to it, and their wicked doings are the sign of their subjection to it. This attribution of our wickedness to overwhelming necessity offers us a balm for which we soon realize we might have to pay heavily: if our vice arises out of a necessity that could appear to exculpate, how can we explain our virtue without compromising either reason (only wickedness, not goodness is dictated by necessity!) or freedom? The difficulty seems to have occurred to Socrates; the ingenuity with which he addresses it can only be admired. He maintains (345E–346B) on behalf of Simonides that a fine and good man (*kalos kagathos*), a thoroughly decent man, will often contrive his own necessity. If his parents or his country happen to fail him, he will force himself (literally, necessitate himself) to praise and love his own. That is, the real harm they may have done him will not constitute the “necessity” that would lead him into wickedness, but his decency will form an opposing “necessity” that will lead him into goodness and that we would call freedom. Socrates gives an example: Simonides knew that he had often praised and eulogized some tyrant not willingly but under necessity.<sup>1</sup> We presume that Simonides is apologizing for a deed he is not proud of, i.e., pointing to the necessity that is exogenous, rather than illustrating the autocompulsion of a decent man requiring himself to swallow his resentment of injury done him by his nearest, and replace it with praise and love.

The wrong that we do we do out of necessity, never willingly; but much that presents itself in such a way that we might excuse ourselves by calling it necessity is not of the overwhelming kind but is rather opposable by a “necessity” that we can generate out of our own decency. This preserves the power of necessity, but when is necessity irresistible and when resistible? Is it a matter of recognition, of knowledge: there is a simply irresistible necessity and it behooves us to acknowledge it? Simonides’ behavior toward the tyrants shows us wherein this truism is problematic, for it was not literally impossible for him to defy the tyrants, to blame and not eulogize them. It would have been easy for him to do so. What would have been anything but easy would have been the consequences. Has Socrates not led us to the conclusion that we denominate an outer pressure a necessity, and we accede to it, when we foresee and reject the consequences of resisting it, while we necessitate ourselves to resist an indecency when, or even because, the anticipated pains of behaving well are acceptable? What must a human being know then if he is to make his way through the thickets of being and becoming good? Is it the absolute nature of Necessity and its modes; or the good or bad consequences of his actions? How much the Socratic formula that Knowledge is Virtue has been enriched through Socrates’ exposition of the poem suggests to us that his interpretation of the ode was considerably more than a mocking demonstration that he can outdo the sophists at their own game.

To this point, we have been presented with two accounts of man’s ascent to

or falling away from virtue. One turns on knowledge and is exemplified by the good doctor's mathesis and his forgetting; the other turns, to begin with, on volition and necessity, but the diremption of necessity between external and internal lets necessity be replaced by considerations of consequences, which is to say, knowledge, such as it is, of the future. What men do "willingly" they do out of that self-imposed necessity that is governed by foresight, the Promethean excellence. A listener who had been present with Socrates when this conversation took place and not only at its present repetition (i.e., the reader who has already read to the end of the dialogue and is now reading it for the second time) will know how well the rest of the discourse will agree with this deduction from Socrates' gloss on Simonides.

Socrates would like to resume the exchange with Protagoras, but without further use of texts, even poetic ones, for it is impossible to question them about their meaning,<sup>2</sup> as to which the hermeneuts, inevitably differing, will argue endlessly. Serious people would rely on their own minds and powers, preferring to test the truth and themselves in direct exchange of speech. The reader of such words must pause to wonder whether the author of them is not admonishing him to put down the book he is holding in his hands and to seek out instead some companionable interlocutors with whom, testing one another and the truth about the being and becoming of good, he might profit more than by continuing to speculate on the inscrutable intention of his present author. Something, perhaps our waking to the difference between the attributive speaker of those words and the ostensive recorder of them in writing, keeps us at our reading. At worst, we will have been induced to think.

Protagoras, importuned by all, resigns himself reluctantly to a resumption of the questioning (348C). Socrates opens by flattering him so fulsomely that only a desperate egotist could miss the odor of sarcasm. Then the still lingering question: wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, piety (*hosiotēs*)—are these five words for one thing, or is there some distinct being with its own power that underlies each of these words and distinguishes them all from each other? You, Protagoras, answered that the virtues differ from one another, being parts in the sense that the parts of the face are parts of a whole which none of them resembles. Do you still think so? Protagoras continues to believe that the virtues are parts of virtue, but he singles out courage from the rest because people lacking the other four virtues are often very courageous. If we are in doubt about the reason for resurrecting this question after it had apparently been put satisfactorily to rest long before, our uncertainties will now be removed. Socrates will push forward from the earlier unification of the virtues by their reduction to knowledge to an intimation of the nature of that knowledge—a question that agitates the *Theaetetus*, that other "Protagorean" dialogue, as well as the present one. By the time Socrates has accomplished his purpose, Plato will have integrated the discussion of virtue and its teachability into his conception of the human condition.

The thread of the argument that begins (349D) with Protagoras's distinguishing courage from other virtues is as follows. Virtue and all its parts are very good things and belong to the possessors of knowledge. The courageous, as distinct from the merely rash, possess a knowledge (e.g., horsemanship) that is in fact a skill or art. If the courageous are wise and the rash are mad, then the wise are courageous. Protagoras objects (350C et seq.) that the knowledgeable virtuous being better at their function than their ignorant semblables does not translate into the identity of wisdom and virtue: Other causes are at work. He declares that courage, the virtue proper, comes to be in men by nature and the good nurturing of souls, whereas its inferior facsimile, rashness, comes to be out of art (*techne*, which is a knowledge) or anger or frenzy. To this apt recitation of the sophist's paideutic creed Socrates makes answer by changing the subject. What is "living well" (*eu zen*) if not living pleasantly and not painfully? Causing Protagoras to react against the implication that pleasure is the good, Plato gives himself the occasion to elaborate the far-reaching hedonism of Socrates, which starts with the innocuous thought that pleasant is good. Even so modest a proposition as that pleasure is better than pain would serve as a beginning.

That Socrates' hedonism is not of the garden variety is indicated by his opening question to Protagoras (352A): How is it with you about knowledge? Is it supreme in governing actions or is it, as most people think, pushed aside by anger, pleasure, pain, and often by fear? Protagoras is for the hegemony of reason, enabling Socrates then to ask what could be meant by anyone's being overcome by pleasure. Reason rules, yet it does not. How so? Well, everyone would admit that people sometimes seek pleasure in acts that they know to be wicked. Wherein lies the wickedness? Not in the pleasure of the act but in the ill of its consequences, which ill always comes down to pain. Also, what appears to us now as painful, like exertion or surgery, is good in the event, which is pleasant. Nothing is wrong with pleasure except that or when it produces a pain greater than itself. Socrates apologizes for being at such length over what look like banalities, but when he says that his entire demonstration turns on this point (354E), we do well to take him at his word. In fact, the structure of the argument as a whole is now virtually in place.

Knowledge is indeed decisive for good, for living well, for justly living by a truth that we cannot escape, namely, that living pleasantly is sweet and good. Why not agree with Protagoras, so far as what he means is that our natural inclinations are the soil in which our virtues grow. But what precisely is the crucial knowledge? It is the knowledge of the relative quantities of present pleasures and pains against the quantities of the future pains and pleasures that might be their respective consequences. The sovereign knowledge, the basis for our doing well, for us human beings the salvation of life, is the art of measure, of measurement, of comparing amounts—the art or knowledge of commensuration (*metrike*; 356D et seq.).

Socrates says (357B) that they will consider this art or science another time; and so one must. For the present, Socrates is willing to settle the earlier question about the overwhelming of knowledge by pleasure by remarking that it is indeed “ignorance,” the defect of knowledge, that leads men into evil: They fail to commensurate the present and the future. They do not willingly choose evil over virtue, they unwittingly choose the lesser pleasure or the greater pain. They do this under the influence of false opinion and being deceived (*ep-seusthai*) about very important things. To seek evil and avoid good would, if a man were not deluded, be as it seems to contravene human nature (358C–D). Now Socrates can begin his exploitation of the point made by Protagoras long ago, the assertion that courage, a distinguishable part of virtue, can be present when all the others are absent—a thought that in turn grew out of Socrates’ fascination with the unity or multiplicity of virtue. It will help us greatly to understand the dialogue as a whole if we make explicit the chain of reasonings from beginning to end, not only for the obvious reason but more with a view to seeing the work as an example of successful human prevision, the preparation and setting in place of elements conducing in their order to a culmination foreseen from afar. This might exemplify the only envisioning of future in which a human being can have perfect confidence. It happens to be a future, in fact the only future, that he alone controls.

Socrates brings up fear (*phobos*) and dread (*deos*): It is anticipation of bad or evil (*kakos*). Will anyone voluntarily pursue the dreadful, which is the same as the evil? What about the man who possesses courage, which Protagoras long ago said is a virtue distinguishable from the others and capable of being present where all the others are absent? The brave man could not possibly seek evil, i.e., the anticipated dreadful, for he is a man of virtue. While coward and brave are alike in facing what they can, it happens, as Protagoras points out, that the brave face death in battle and the cowardly do not. Protagoras’s unspoken premise is that death is an evil. Socrates would be caught if it were true that a virtuous man knowingly, not deluded or impressed by false opinion, sought evil. Socrates saves himself by introducing “the noble” (*kalon*). Facing death in war is noble, thus good, thus wittingly choiceworthy. Though the courageous and the cowardly may both know fear, the brave fears virtuously and the coward basely. According to conclusions reached earlier, this means that the courageous fears knowingly and the coward ignorantly. Knowingly and ignorantly of what? Of the truly dreadful. What has been proved is that courage, not unlike but exactly like all the virtues, is wisdom. Protagoras resigns from the discussion.

From the sidelines we notice that Socrates’ argument depends heavily if not absolutely on the power of the noble, clearly good, to outweigh death, clearly or unclearly bad. Unwelcome thoughts disturb us. What if “noble” translates into civic reputation and the arguments that make death perhaps not an evil have an origin in the good of the city? How much of an evil is a bad reputation

when measured against the good of survival? The art or science of comparative quantities, the knowledge of commensuration, saves us only when the quantities to be compared can be known. If the commensuration of quantities that can at least be guessed at poses difficulties, how insuperable must those be when there is no way in the world to estimate that future which must be discounted to the present if men are “knowingly” to commensurate present pleasures and future pains. How is an earthly life of pleasure (very knowable) to be measured against a Dreadful Future, something that a truly courageous man would rather die than confront, when that future is itself unknowable by us? If it be said that that future is not at all unknowable by us, it has been revealed to us by the poets, Socrates would tell us to be reasonable, to think for ourselves rather than construe the poets or other writers, whose works cannot be subjected to questioning and whose meaning will never come clear through interpretation. If we discover some aspect of the future that must necessarily be forever dark to us, we have in that act reached the outer limit of morally relevant commensuration. We have reached the moral equivalent of  $\pi$ , the symbol of the irrational in the universe. Just in passing, we may note that where something so important to virtue as the status of the deepest future must remain uncertain for us, the fact that virtue is knowledge confirms Protagoras in his view that virtue belongs to the class of teachables but refutes his claim that it is simply teachable. The science of commensuration is teachable, but it fails when it ignores that its objects include the incommensurable. Geometry reconciles itself to the presence of the irrational within its boundaries; sophistry has not seen far enough to do so. Perhaps it is the sophists’ naive confidence in reason, speech, persuasion that distinguishes them from the philosophers, whose claim is only to love wisdom, to prize the wisdom that sheds light on the limits of wisdom, and not to possess it, surely not to convey it on demand.

It would be supreme folly to conclude that if a transcendental basis for virtue has not been certified by the universe, a valid immanent one is unavailable. If living and commodious living and the pursuit of wisdom in peace depend on the flourishing of cities, why disparage as merely conventional the orders and rules that nourish the polities? And why revolt against the science of commensuration because it teaches us not everything, only almost everything? When Socrates injects the noble into the consideration of courage and makes it a counterweight to the dreadfulness of death, he wisely refrains from perturbing the discussion with high-flying reflections on the infusion of the rational universe with particles of incommensurability. Rather, he allows its full weight to the system of rewards and punishments, of scanning present and future, of deeds and their stochastic consequences, of what we might call in the end a rational hedonism in the service of goodness. If it serves goodness, why complain that it is hedonism? Is it thinkable that Socrates was a greater benefactor of the city than the rationalist who claimed to raise the human beings to a higher level of civility than the one on which nature left them?

The two interlocutors prepare to part. Socrates notes the confusion of their positions, he denying that virtue is teachable but proving that it is knowledge, Protagoras insisting that it is teachable but denying that it is knowledge. Aporia reigns and will continue to do so unless we pursue our inquiry to answer the question, what is virtue? While we stumble, we are victims of the heedlessness of Epimetheus who left us short of resources. I, says Socrates, prefer the Prometheus of the myth. I profit by him, looking ahead (*promethoumenos*) with a view to my whole life when I am engaged in these things. Has he weighed his philosophizing and his death and made the choice of a courageous man? Is not courage the characteristic philosophic virtue, and spiritedness the indispensable philosophic temper, considering that something about our future, on earth and wherever else, is and must necessarily be dark?

The two men exchange goodnatured civilities, and Socrates departs on the wings of a small myth.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. the place of Simonides in Xenophon's *On Tyranny*.
2. A repetition of the well-known critique of writing in *Phaedrus*.