

Interpretation

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Virtue, Art, and the Good Life in Plato's *Protagoras*

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In the dialogue named after him, Protagoras claims to surpass all human beings at teaching virtue (328b). So great is his skill that he even charges money for lessons, like any artisan. Protagoras does not speak of himself as an artisan—indeed he disparages those who force the young to learn arts or *technai* (318e)—but he speaks of sophistry as an art (316d, 317c), freely acknowledges that he is a sophist (317b), and allows the subject he teaches to be characterized by Socrates as “the political art” (319a). So we are naturally led to wonder whether virtue admits of such a thing: can virtue be made into an art and taught to others in the manner of other arts? Most will doubt that it can, and the reader encountering the *Protagoras* for the first time will expect Socrates to trounce Protagoras’ pretensions to the contrary. Indeed, after Protagoras makes his grandiose claim, Socrates challenges him to prove his premise that virtue is teachable, which Socrates doubts. However, though the expected victory over Protagoras does come, it does not come in the expected form. For Socrates actually goes much further than Protagoras in maintaining that virtue is an art, compelling Protagoras at one point to defend the claim that courage, at least, is very different from art (351a–b). Later, we even find Socrates advertising the sophists as teachers of the “art of measurement,” a sort of hedonic calculus, which he apparently considers to be the essence of virtue.¹ Why is Socrates more zealous than Protagoras in advancing the claim that virtue can be reduced to an art and that sophistry has achieved this reduction?

The thesis of this essay is that in reducing virtue to art, Socrates deliberately exaggerates the power of knowledge over human affairs in order to promote in his audience a stronger desire for knowledge than Protagoras’ presentation of sophistry would allow, and, moreover, to raise the audience’s expectations about what sophistry can accomplish so high as to subvert the intellectual complacency that it would otherwise instill in its students.² Socrates’ ironic proposal for a hedonic calculus as part of the “art of measurement” describes what a complete art of living might look like; it points to the transcendent limit of the sophistic enterprise or indeed of any similar attempt to create a practical science, a limit to which practical excellence can never, in fact, aspire. Socrates is certainly aware that such a calculus is beyond the reach of human beings, and he indicates as much in his strange interpretation of the ode by Simonides (338e–347a). In describing the art of measurement and arguing, in effect, that

virtue is knowledge, he lays the groundwork for a more thorough demonstration, should Protagoras wish to pursue the matter, of how far sophistry must fall short of a complete art of living. At the end of the conversation, when Socrates invites Protagoras to join him in the investigation of what virtue is, Protagoras naturally shows no interest. By proposing a dialectical investigation of the nature of virtue, however, Socrates leaves open the possibility of another orientation for knowledge and another kind of virtue. That other orientation is of course theoretical rather than practical, and the alternative to the sophistic art of living is Socratic virtue, which is visible mainly in Socrates' actions in the dialogue. We are not exposed to the full range of Socrates' way of life in the *Protagoras*, but several allusions to the *Symposium* invite us to suppose that the dialogue whose main subject matter is eros would fill out the picture of it. Socratic virtue, that is, the highest human virtue within the Platonic universe, is not an art and cannot be taught to another as arts are taught. It is portrayed in the *Protagoras* as the difficult, untidy, somewhat artless effort to balance the demands of duty and of philosophical eros.

Whether sophistry is anything like the arts is the underlying question of the conversation between Socrates and Hippocrates (311b–314b). Socrates repeatedly compares sophistry to other arts in order to force the impulsive Hippocrates, who wishes desperately for the wisdom of Protagoras, to think carefully about what sophistry is. Socrates first asks Hippocrates what he thinks he is going to become by paying Protagoras. Before the young interlocutor can reply, Socrates, in typical fashion, provides a few examples of the kind of question he is asking and the kind of answer he is looking for. Each example is offered in the form of two questions. The first question always uses a form of the verb “to be” (*onti*); the second, a form of the verb “to become” (*genesomenos*), verbs which acquire some importance later in the dialogue. Socrates asks Hippocrates what he takes his namesake, Hippocrates the Asclepiad, “to be.” Hippocrates replies, “a doctor.” Socrates then asks him what, by paying Hippocrates the doctor, he would expect “to become.” Again the reply is, “a doctor.” Socrates then goes through the same exercise with the same pair of verbs, this time using the example of sculptors. In this way, Hippocrates is induced to say that since Protagoras is said to be a sophist, Hippocrates must have it in mind to become a sophist. Hippocrates blushes and admits to Socrates that he would be ashamed to present himself to the Greeks as a sophist.

The outcome of this conversation points to a difference between art and sophistry, which points to a more significant difference between art and virtue: the sophists claim to educate men and to make them better in some way, as any teacher of an art does, yet their way of life is not so exemplary as to inspire great confidence in their ability to do so. Protagoras, for example, claims that he teaches good judgement in private and public affairs (318e–319a) and that

he surpasses all others in assisting men toward virtue or gentlemanliness (328b). Some must wonder, however, if he himself entirely possesses the virtue he claims to perfect in others, roaming as he does from town to town like any common merchant, involving himself in the political affairs of none. This discrepancy seems to be due not so much to some peculiarity of sophistry, but rather to its aspiration to the art. Art is always transportable, while virtue, as most people understand it, must be rooted in some particular soil: a good doctor is a good doctor anywhere, but a virtuous Athenian will not necessarily be virtuous in Sparta, partly because of the inevitable cultural differences between cities or nations and partly because of virtue's bonds to the city it is fostered in. Furthermore, as the discussion in *Republic* 333e–334b points out, virtue is always disposed toward some good end, whereas art seems neutral with respect to ends. Any effort to turn virtue into something so rootless and cosmopolitan as art, then, must always arouse suspicion. Now Socrates will eventually propose the all-purpose art of measurement as the salvation of human life, which would seem to subject him to the same suspicions to which the sophists are subjected, perhaps more so because of Socrates' bold hedonism. Before making that proposal, however, he will have inoculated himself against some of the odiousness of sophistry with his initial assertion that virtue is not teachable, implying that it comes to human beings from the gods or nature or some other way but in any case not from him or from sophists. It is certain, though, that the efforts of both Socrates and Protagoras to intellectualize virtue are perilous, at least to themselves.

Socrates rescues Hippocrates from his embarrassment by suggesting that maybe Hippocrates is not looking for a technical education in sophistry, but a gentlemanly one, such as he has received from his grammar teacher and harp teacher (312b). What Hippocrates wants to become, Socrates implies, is not a sophist, but a good man or a gentleman. Perhaps sophistry might be safely studied as merely part of a more general or liberal education. Hippocrates gladly assents to this characterization, but his blushing reveals a hope that sophistry might offer more than intellectual polishing.³ The ensuing conversation perhaps indicates why.

Socrates challenges Hippocrates to say what a sophist is and, more specifically, what the sophist knows. Again, Socrates offers artisans (carpenters and painters) as examples, pointing out what kind of knowledge they have, and learns from Hippocrates that sophists can make one clever at speaking. Socrates is still not satisfied: harp-players make one clever at speaking on the matter about which they give knowledge, which is harp-playing. What kind of knowledge does the sophist make one clever at speaking about? Hippocrates cannot say. The reason seems to be that sophistry aspires to be comprehensive, to be the art of all arts, so that its subject matter is naturally hard to define. But this is what makes it appealing to ambitious young men like Hippocrates, who see in sophistry's comprehensive power a means to political greatness.⁴ Hippoc-

rates' restless, unformed desire to distinguish himself is the outward expression of a natural desire to become a complete human being with a complete life. Now if human perfection or a complete life could be obtained through the mastery of a certain art, the way to "become" perfect would at least be plainly visible, even if it were an extremely difficult art to master and attainable by only the most talented. Assuming that one had the necessary native abilities, one would simply have to acquire this art, either on one's own or from a teacher. And it would be easy to determine whether someone "is" a complete human being by determining whether or not he has this art, as young Hippocrates could easily determine, for example, that Hippocrates the Asclepiad was a doctor. We can say what a given person is, if he happens to be an artisan of some kind, because he possesses a clearly identifiable art (a doctor, e.g., possesses medicine) with a clearly identifiable product (for a doctor, health). As a native Athenian, Hippocrates has an opportunity to obtain what many at the time (some even today) would consider a complete life or at least the very peak of human achievement: to be a *kalos k'agathos*, a gentleman or leading citizen, in the world's leading city.⁵ From the exchange between Socrates and Protagoras, it appears that what Hippocrates needs in order to achieve this goal is something like an art of statesmanship. Later, owing partly to the manner in which Socrates will question him, Protagoras will present his sophistry as the art of statesmanship or as the core of the art of statesmanship (318e–319a). About the arts of statesmanship and sophistry we can say that the former is the management of public affairs and the latter is cleverness at speaking. But such definitions are unsatisfactory because we also want to know to what ends or for the sake of what product these skills are applied, as with any art. However, these skills are unique: they aim not at some particular or relative good but at the comprehensive good, which is not easy to know or describe, never mind to attain.⁶ It is no wonder, then, that Plato wrote two long, intricate dialogues attempting to define the sophist and the statesman. Hippocrates' confusion, then, about what sophistry is and what he wants to become or be stems from this much larger difficulty about what a complete human being and a complete human life are. He no doubt hopes that the wisdom of Protagoras will shed more light on these vital matters.

Socrates, like many of his fellow citizens (see 316c–d), appears to have doubts about the value of a sophistic education. With admirable solicitude, he reprimands Hippocrates for subjecting his soul to the sophists without consulting family or friends (313a). Since the soul is fed on doctrines just as the body is fed on food and drink, and since the soul is more valuable than the body, Hippocrates should be more wary of sophists than of medical hucksters. Such men have a financial interest in promoting their wares: they may try to deceive potential buyers or may be deceived themselves. A doctor can avoid the deceptions of hucksters, but unless one happens to have "a doctor's knowledge of the soul"—Socrates' tone implies that the notion is preposterous—one will have

trouble determining which of the sophists' doctrines are good or bad for the soul. He says that elders should be consulted since he and Hippocrates are still rather young to unravel so great a matter. Now the difference between Socrates' wariness about the sophists and that of elders is decisive: the elders' advice would be based on the assumption that they know what is best for a young man, but Socrates, as he protests in the *Apology* perhaps too much, does not know what virtue is. Socrates' advice, then, would seem to be ironic. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Socrates does not always pass the responsibility of looking after young men's souls to elders. For example, in the *Charmides* Socrates claims to know a charm for engendering temperance in the soul of the beautiful Charmides (155b–158e). Indeed, Socrates seems to have starkly different ways of dealing with companions like Hippocrates, who seek his advice, and those like Charmides, in whom Socrates shows an erotic interest. To Hippocrates he plays the role of the cautious fellow citizen, but to Charmides he is an inciter to greater ambition.⁷ Does Socrates have an art of treating souls after all? Can he make at least the most beautiful and promising young men virtuous? We must wonder about this question as we wonder about the significance of Alcibiades' presence in the dialogue, whose importance to Socrates' erotic life is underscored by the opening conversation of the work (309a). Perhaps Socrates does have such a treatment, but the fact that eros somehow determines to whom he will apply his art would suggest that Socrates' art is not governed by what the city elders would recognize as virtue.

When Socrates and Hippocrates arrive at the house of Callias where Protagoras is staying, Socrates asks the great sophist to say what benefit the young man will take away from the lessons (318a). Protagoras at first says only that Hippocrates will improve on every day that he attends classes. But Socrates demands more accuracy from Protagoras, just as he had from Hippocrates. Again he uses examples from art. If young Hippocrates should ask Zeuxippus of Heraclea to explain the benefit of lessons from him, the reply would be that Hippocrates would become better with respect to painting, and a similar reply would come from Orthagoras the flutist. Pressed in this way, Protagoras explains that he does not teach arts like other sophists. By attending his lessons, he says, Hippocrates will learn good judgement or *euboulia*, both in domestic affairs—how to manage his home—and in public affairs—how he might be most powerful in the city with respect to action and speech. Protagoras seems somewhat reluctant to characterize his expertise as an art. It is Socrates who insists on using the word *techne*, asking Protagoras if he is talking about “the political art” and endeavoring to make men good citizens. Protagoras emphatically agrees that this is what he purports to teach. Protagoras' initial wariness about identifying *euboulia* as a species of *techne* could stem from his awareness of the suspicions likely to be aroused by any effort to render virtue into art. It is more likely, however, that Protagoras wants to appeal to the aristocratic disdain his auditors might have for the arts. He claims that he teaches a special intellec-

tual virtue that reaches far beyond the limited scope of any art. *Euboulia* is certainly among the most highly regarded intellectual virtues, partly because of the breadth of its scope, which extends in some mysterious way even into the future, partly because of its supreme usefulness to politics, and partly because of its elusiveness and rarity. That Protagoras teaches some kind of art, however, is fairly certain since he characterizes sophistry several times as an art (316d, 317c; see also 328a–b). How the art of sophistry could be said to be equivalent to *euboulia* is at this point unclear. Socrates, on the other hand, persistently uses art as the model for virtue in order to drive home his well-known principle—not yet revealed to his audience—that virtue must be knowledge or, to use terms more suited to our current purpose, that the virtuous man must act with as much knowledge about what he is doing as the artisan acts with in the performance of his art.

Socrates now proclaims his doubt that the political art can be taught or furnished to men by men, and he offers two reasons, based on the difference between this skill and other arts (319a–320c). First, the Athenians, whom Socrates considers wise, will allow only artisans to advise their assembly on technical matters like building or ship manufacture, but in matters of state, anyone can speak. No one is rebuked for lack of schooling in the subject. Such behavior, Socrates says, implies that the wise Athenians do not consider such matters teachable. Second, the wisest statesmen in Athens take care to educate their children in all the arts they deem important, yet they seem unable to bestow their own excellence on their children or to find teachers capable of doing it for them. Socrates' position implies that the wisdom of great statesmen is a mysterious quality that comes from the gods or nature or some other way. With respect to practical affairs, from the Socratic position, man would seem to be at the mercy of whatever power in the universe bestows this quality.⁸

Against this apparently pessimistic doctrine, Protagoras offers a more optimistic view of the human condition through his well-known version of the myth of Prometheus (320c–323a). The purpose of the myth is to explain the difference between political wisdom and the other arts and to show that political wisdom is unique, not by virtue of being unteachable, as Socrates maintains, but by virtue of being taught to everyone by everyone. Man, he intends to show, is far from being helpless in practical affairs. According to Protagoras' myth, when mortal creatures had been created and were about to emerge into the light, the gods charged Prometheus and Epimetheus with the task of distributing powers to each. Epimetheus, after prevailing upon Prometheus to let him do it alone, provided a different salvation for every creature—claws, thick hides, bulk, speed, or something similar; but he exhausted his supply of saving powers before providing for the human race. Disturbed by his brother's predicament, Prometheus stole fire and wisdom in the arts from Hephaestus and Athena for human beings to use. He could not steal political wisdom, however, since that was kept by Zeus. As a result of not having the political art, which

included the art of war, human beings could not withstand the attacks of wild beasts. Their efforts to band together were futile without this art and resulted only in feuds and civil wars. Zeus, fearing for the destruction of the human race, ordered Hermes to distribute “Respect and Right,” not in the manner of other arts, with one artisan sufficing for many, but to all, since cities cannot come into being if only a few have this virtue. This myth, according to Protagoras, accounts for the differences which Socrates observed between the political art and the other kinds, but it makes virtue out to be more rather than less accessible to human beings than the rest of the arts. Protagoras concludes the myth by alluding to the fact that Prometheus was supposedly punished for his theft, suggesting that human beings live in a world whose formidable hostility is mitigated partly by Jovian piety and partly by the Promethean—i.e., rebellious—acquisition of technology.

It would appear that Prometheus’ gift serves the purpose of survival on an individual basis, while Zeus’s gift enables human beings to cooperate with each other. Now Protagoras claims that he teaches not some Promethean art, but the higher, more respectable Jovian art of virtue. A number of considerations, however, could arouse the suspicion that Protagoras’ art partakes more of the character of the fire-thief’s gift. I mention just two such considerations here. In the first place, he claimed to teach good judgement in *private* affairs, and, with respect to politics, he claimed to teach, not how to cooperate with others, but how one might be “most powerful in the city (318e–319a).”⁹ Second, since Zeus ordered his gift of Respect and Right to be distributed among all, we must wonder what need there is for specialized teachers of it. It would seem that Protagoras teaches a Promethean art (an art whose end is salvation on an individual basis) which masks itself as Jovian virtue, an art that even exploits cooperativeness among others for the benefit of the individual who possesses it. This suspicion receives further support from Socrates’ interrogation of Protagoras, which follows the so-called Great Speech.

Socrates wonders (329c) about a claim Protagoras made in the course of his speech that virtue is one thing (324e–325a). Through Socrates’ questioning, Protagoras is induced to say that justice, holiness, and temperance are actually parts of the whole, namely virtue, but not as pieces of gold are, with no difference between them except size, rather as the parts of the face are (the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears). Socrates challenges Protagoras on these claims, apparently maintaining that all these virtues are really the same. What reasons he has for thinking so are not yet clear: he has not disclosed his principle that (all) virtue is knowledge. First, Socrates argues that justice is holy and holiness just and that therefore these virtues are the same or very much alike. Protagoras admits that they resemble each other in some small respect, as even the parts of the face resemble each other, but, he says, one cannot conclude that such things are therefore “alike.”¹⁰ Socrates, surprised by this answer, pursues another line of questioning. After getting Protagoras to admit, somewhat hastily,

that every opposite has but one opposite, Socrates forces him to agree that both temperance and wisdom are opposite to folly. It follows, then, that temperance and wisdom are the same thing.

Surely Protagoras can see that he has been tricked somehow by Socrates' questioning,¹¹ but he cannot now retract or modify any of his previous admissions in front of this crowd of potential pupils. In addition, Protagoras must be irritated by the fact that Socrates has apparently taken the moral high ground away from him by implying, contrary to Protagoras' statements, that no one can be wise who is not also holy, just, and temperate. Protagoras maintains that the virtues are distinct partly because this claim accords with common sense, which he does not want to violate too readily while making his pitch for students, and partly because he wants to show that he can offer more to his students than lessons on how to be just. He knows that only the most ambitious young men are likely to seek him—those, in other words, who wish to get the better of their peers in private and public affairs. He must appeal to the ambition of the young while not alarming their elders. Consequently, Protagoras says in the Great Speech that the citizens need justice, holiness, and temperance for the sake of the city (324d–325a), not because such virtues are intrinsically choiceworthy. He also says that the justice and virtue of each person toward the other benefit “us,” not that these qualities benefit the one having them (327b). Later, he allows that someone might be just, but not wise (329e); and he distinguishes wisdom as being superior to the other virtues (330a, 352d). Protagoras, it seems, wants to indicate, without being offensive, that he can teach young men how to be superior to the merely just through wisdom. But Socrates is making it extremely difficult for him to accomplish this task.

Socrates next asks Protagoras whether a man who acts unjustly is acting temperately or mindfully (*sophronein*) (333b–c). Protagoras finds this line of questioning disconcerting, but finally allows that such a man might well be acting mindfully. Socrates forces Protagoras to admit that one can even be well advised and prosper while acting unjustly. Now Protagoras was willing to admit previously that someone might be just but unwise; here, however, he is being asked to admit that someone might be wise but unjust. Protagoras has had enough. When Socrates starts to question him about the good, Protagoras resorts to a somewhat lengthy speech maintaining that the good is motley and manifold (334a–c): what is good for some things is bad for others and vice versa. In this way, perhaps, Protagoras hopes to escape the harsh light of Socrates' reasoning; he will not have to maintain that justice is either absolutely good or absolutely bad for the just man. In any case, it must be clearer now to his audience that Protagoras is not only in the business of teaching Jovian Respect and Right.

By turning to the *Theaetetus*, where Protagoras also figures prominently, we get a fuller picture of Protagoras' relativism and of the art he teaches. According to Protagoras, as represented in that dialogue by Socrates, each man is the

measure of what is and what is not; so the wise man is he “who by bringing about a change makes things that seem and are bad to any of us into things that seem and are good” (166d). Doctors are wise because of their ability to induce changes in the perceptions of their patients by administering drugs to them; farmers, because of their ability to do likewise for plants; and orators, because of their ability to do likewise for cities (167a–c).¹² The good, then, is relative to the city as well as to the individual. Protagoras’ art is not intended to determine what the good is. Rather, his art is a tool by means of which the individual may achieve his own relative good by making what seems good to him seem good to whomever he addresses in public or private.

How, then, can Protagoras claim that the art he teaches is equivalent to *euboulia*? We venture the following tentative suggestion. The statesman trained in the Protagorean oratorical art can, in the first place, make his policies appear to be the wisest course of action to his fellow citizens. And second, even if his policies appear to have failed, he has some ability to make those policies seem like successes (cf. *Rep.* 361b). Through the Protagorean art, then, one can appear prudent and even prescient without having to be so in fact. But this statement must be modified. Education in sophistry, if we understand it correctly, would entail abandoning the whole idea that “good judgement,” in the sense that most people understand it, is possible or necessary: judgements can be made to appear good through the application of the orator’s art, just as sensations can be made to appear good through the application of the physician’s art. In reality, according to Protagoras, no one has good judgement; the only wisdom there is consists in the ability to make judgements seem good. On the basis of such doctrines, Protagoras could reasonably think that he has indeed reduced “virtue” to an art. Of course, he cannot declare such doctrines, if these are indeed his doctrines, to the crowd of listeners at the home of Callias. Aside from the cautions imposed by the public situation, Protagoras wishes to appeal to the ambitions of potential students who may eagerly wish to acquire the elusive intellectual virtue of *euboulia*. He does not wish, at this point, to disillusion his potential pupils by undermining the grandeur that attaches to this or indeed any virtue which his art mimics.

How much of Protagoras’ art Socrates is acquainted with in the *Protagoras* is not certain, but in any case, what Socrates evidently objects to is not the hidden Promethean aims of Protagoras’ sophistry. Indeed, later on, Socrates proposes a much more comprehensive art of living with an unmistakably Promethean character, one that seems to go far beyond sophistry in its ability to produce the relative good of the individual because it does not rely on appearances or on the susceptibility of others to rhetorical persuasion. He advances this proposal in order to support his case against the Protagorean doctrine that the virtues are not one. By this late point in the dialogue, Protagoras had modified his claims somewhat and had asserted that while justice, temperance, holiness, and wisdom are close to one another, courage differs very much from

them (349d). When Socrates tried to show, again through the example of artisans, that courage must be wisdom, Protagoras argued—and quite persuasively—that boldness, which Socrates attributed to professional divers, horsemen, and peltasts, may come from art or rage or even insanity, while courage arises from the nature and good nurturing of souls (349e–351b). Here Socrates embarks on a long, circuitous line of reasoning, which includes his proposal for a hedonic calculus, in order to establish that all virtues amount to knowledge, all vices to ignorance. Socrates claims that the weakness the many feel in the face of overwhelming pleasure or pain really amounts to an inability to see or judge accurately the future consequences of actions (353c–354e, 357d). In fact, he says, it is possible to measure the good and the bad artfully or scientifically, assuming, for the moment at least, that the good and the bad ultimately amount to nothing more than pleasure and pain, respectively. Apostrophizing “the many,” Socrates declares to them that “the art which saves our life is measurement,” recalling the salvation of man attempted but not perfected by Prometheus in Protagoras’ myth. The sophists, he says, can teach this art and enable their students thereby to judge accurately which pleasures to indulge in and which pains to endure so as to procure the most pleasure and the least pain in life. As Socrates presents it, the art of measurement seems to be the very essence of all the virtues (359a, 361a–b). But instead of enabling the possessor of this art to merely appear prudent and virtuous, as Protagorean sophistry probably does, Socrates’ hedonic calculus actually reduces *euboulia* to an art. The Socratic proposal would seem to represent the transcendent limit of sophistry or any such practical art or science. By delineating that transcendent limit, Socrates could be said to have revealed the *telos* or final form to which practical sciences such as sophistry aspire. To the extent that any practical science falls short of that limit, it falls short of being the art that would truly ensure a complete life. Of course, what gives the hedonic calculus so much power are several absurd, unexamined assumptions. Since there is not room to uncover them all, we point out two of them: that all pleasures are commensurable and that the future consequences of one’s actions can be known. (For more extensive discussions of these assumptions, see Goldberg, pp. 250–77; Coby, pp. 251–61; and Cropsey, pp. 152–54.)

Socrates is evidently willing to abandon now the reservations he had showed about sophistry while conversing with Hippocrates in the early morning. Now we find him joining Protagoras and the rest of the sophists in denouncing *hoi polloi* for being stingy and not submitting themselves or their children to be cured of their ignorance by such teachers (357e). Socrates, it seems, is not in principle opposed to the Promethean effort to improve man’s estate with art, at least not on the grounds that such effort amounts to hybriistic revolt against the gods or nature. Indeed, Socrates seems willing to risk associating himself with this endeavor of the sophists in opposition to the many. Socrates will always endorse the proposition, held as well by Protagoras, that virtue at least requires knowledge.

Now after making this proposal and establishing that courage and all virtues really amount to knowledge, Socrates admits, at the end of the dialogue, that this conclusion contradicts his previous assertion that virtue is unteachable, since the reduction of virtue to knowledge is the best way to make virtue appear teachable (361a–b). Plato does not show us how Socrates would clear up this contradiction. However, earlier in his conversation with Protagoras, Socrates was compelled to clear up another, related contradiction, pointed out in this case by Protagoras, in a poem by Simonides which Socrates professed to admire (339d). Perhaps Socrates' resolution of the contradiction in the Simonidean ode will be of use in resolving the larger contradiction of the Platonic dialogue.

Protagoras introduces the ode after being forced by his audience to forego longwinded speeches and to question Socrates closely or, if he should prefer, to submit to the same treatment by Socrates (338c–e). Adopting the former course, Protagoras challenges Socrates to a contest in literary criticism. Now possibly Protagoras selects this ode merely because he thinks it will provide him with the best opportunity to show his prowess at detecting flaws in famous poems, but there is probably more to it. Protagoras, at this point in the discussion, must be baffled by Socrates' line of questioning. Socrates has not yet revealed his doctrine that virtue is knowledge, so Protagoras finds himself contending with a man who seems to consider the virtues of holiness, justice, moderation, and courage as important as wisdom and who has thereby shown himself to be a greater supporter of the civic virtues than Protagoras. Indeed, Socrates' initial reluctance to grant that virtue can be taught might appear to stem from a civic-minded wariness about foreign teachers who claim to be able to make the young better through "wisdom." In these circumstances, Protagoras' criticism of this particular ode by Simonides appears to be an appropriate one for taking an indirect shot at Socrates' moral stance. Simonides' ode asserts that "it is hard for a man, indeed, to become truly good, in hands and feet and mind foursquare, fashioned without reproach." Simonides doubts he can find a "blameless man" anywhere:¹³ "For my part," the ode continues, "I am content with whoever is not evil or too intractable. He who knows city-supporting justice is a healthy man" (346c). Such sentiments nearly express the moral stance that Socrates seems to be currently assuming: virtue is rare and almost impossible to acquire by any means; man is at the mercy of the gods; political justice is all that can be hoped for.¹⁴ Protagoras may doubt that Socrates' moral pessimism is anything more than a cloak or covering such as he said Simonides was accustomed to use (316d), but he must find a way to bring Socrates down to his level.

Socrates admits that he has especially studied this ode and that he considers it beautifully and correctly composed (339b). Protagoras then points out that the ode contradicts itself, since it begins with the claim that it is hard for a man "to become truly good," but adds later: "Nor does that Pittacean speech ring true for me, though it was spoken by a wise man, 'Hard,' he says, 'to be

fine.” Socrates feels as if he has been struck by a good boxer, blinded by the argument and by the applause of the audience. But he soon recovers and maintains that the poem does not actually contradict itself since “to become truly good” (*agathon men alatheos genesthai*) is not the same as “to be fine” (*esthlon emmenai*). He might have focused on the difference between the predicatives “truly good” and “fine,” but he chooses to focus instead on the difference between the verbals “becoming” and “being.”

Since Socrates has expressed admiration for the poem, he is committed to defending Simonides, but he alters the poet’s meaning in his interpretation and so reveals the extent of his own pessimism and optimism: man, it turns out, is able to help himself in a severely limited way. According to Socrates, the poem was written in order to undermine the saying of Pittacus (343c). Pittacus, he explains, was a devotee of Spartan culture, along with the rest of the seven sages (343a). The superiority of Spartan culture is due not to fighting skill and courage, as everyone supposes, but to wisdom (342a–e). With most of the sophists of the world in their midst, the Spartans never let on that this is the source of their success, but they sometimes reveal their perfect education by uttering short, memorable phrases. Pittacus’ Spartan education, then, is evident in his famous saying that to be good is hard. Socrates’ absurd attribution of Spartan superiority to sophistry seems to be in itself an ironic indictment of the idea that sophistry could teach virtue or that virtue could become an art (cf. *Lach.* 182e–183b).

Simonides, Socrates says, wished to overturn Pittacus’ Laconic saying and make a name for himself, so he corrects it, allegedly on the grounds that “to be” a good man is, not hard, but impossible and inhuman; God alone can have this privilege (344c). However, “to become” temporarily good is possible for human beings, though even one who has become good, according to Socrates’ reading, can be overthrown by an “irresistible mischance.” Now a private person or layman (*idiotēs*), says Socrates, can be overthrown at any time, so when Simonides speaks of someone being overthrown by an “irresistible” (*amechanos*) mischance, he must be thinking of one who is “able to resist” (*eumechanos*). A pilot can be overwhelmed by a great storm, says Socrates, a farmer by a rough season, and a doctor in a similar way. Artisans, because of their knowledge, are able to resist, but an irresistible mischance will compel even them to be bad. As Socrates unpacks the meaning of the next verse, he suggests that the source of all difficulties is ignorance. Simonides says: “For when he does well (*praxas . . . eu*), every man is good, but bad if he does badly.” What makes a man good, Socrates now says, is learning, *mathesis*. This is as true in grammar as it is in medicine. Speaking now about “the good man” and not just about artisans, Socrates asserts that there is only one way to do badly: to be deprived of knowledge either through time, labor, disease, or some other calamity. Human welfare, it seems, depends almost entirely on the acquisition and retention of knowledge.

Socrates' interpretation of the ode reveals two things about his position on the relation between art and virtue. First, it shows to what extent a certain rhetorical purpose determines that position. By attributing Laconic virtue to sophistry and philosophy rather than to nurtured courage, by surreptitiously equating bad fortune with ignorance and thus implying that all misfortune might be resisted with knowledge, he shows that he is trying to convince others—let us be bold and say by fair means or foul—that knowledge is the one thing needed for the improvement of man's estate (cf. *Euthd.* 279d–280b). This rhetorical strategy accounts in part for the apparent contradiction in his position on art and virtue. Socrates wants to maintain, on the one hand, that virtue is knowledge, just as every art amounts to knowledge of some kind, and on the other, that the knowledge of which virtue consists has not been fully discovered. Put another way, he wants to convince others that human beings have no teachers of the knowledge that is virtue, but that despair is not warranted: partial knowledge is available and with much effort more and more of it will come to light. Human beings must be satisfied with a state of becoming regarding such knowledge.

Second, and more important, Socrates' depiction of the artisan and the good or virtuous man within the context of the whole, in conjunction with his use of the verbs “being” and “becoming,” point to fundamental differences between art and virtue as well as to the limitations of both. The artisan, such as the doctor or farmer, aims at some specific good, such as food or health, and knows certain means by which that good can be brought about. Such knowledge distinguishes the artisan from the layman. It amounts to partial foresight, for the artisan can predict what consequences will follow upon what actions, and work accordingly (cf. *Theaet.* 177e–179b, *Lach.* 198d–199a). Of course, the material that the artisan works on is never entirely within his control. As Socrates explains, he can be overthrown by an irresistible mischance. Nevertheless, the artisan's contribution to his product is usually distinguishable, at least to other artisans, from the contributions of external factors or “irresistible mischance.” The artisan's *work*, in other words, is for the most part apparent. If a doctor fails to produce health in a patient, for example, other doctors can be consulted to determine if the doctor in question is liable or not, that is, if he acted incompetently or if extraneous factors, which he could not anticipate or control, caused the patient's health to fail. It is this visibility of the artisan's work, perhaps, which gives the artisan a clear identity and which allows us to speak reasonably of not only “becoming,” but also of “being” an artisan. Of course, the conventions that establish how much knowledge one must have to be called a doctor change with the improvement of medical science; nevertheless, some specified amount of knowledge, however limited that may be, is what distinguishes him from other human beings and enables us to say without any hesitation that this or that person is a doctor and will remain so as long as he has that knowledge.¹⁵ The good or virtuous person, however, does not aim at

a limited good for himself or his country but at the comprehensive good. The virtuous person is expected to consider, insofar as a human being can, all the factors or causes that could affect the results of his actions; he is expected to exercise as much comprehensive foresight as possible. The etymology of our word “prudence” reflects this expectation. In work performed by the virtuous person, it is very difficult to distinguish the contribution of his foresight from that of fortune. His *work*, the evidence of his virtue, is harder to see because it is too intricately interwoven with the fluctuations of surrounding forces; so for this reason as well as for others alluded to in Socrates’ conversation with Hippocrates, we do not think of the virtuous person as an artisan, and we do not say so readily that this or that person is virtuous. Nor is there any obvious way to “become” and then “be” virtuous as there is to become and be a doctor or carpenter. Thus, the restriction of the virtuous or good person to a state of becoming, in contrast to the state of being that the artisan enjoys in some sense, is not unreasonable. Of course, there are arts that involve the use of this more comprehensive foresight, but the more such foresight is required for the artisan’s product, the more the artisan’s skill seems to partake of virtue or prudence rather than of art (cf. *Phil.* 55d–56c). A general, for example, possesses the art of war, but we also expect him to have virtue, to show aggressiveness or restraint according to the dictates of his prudence or foresight. If he loses a battle, we have trouble distinguishing bad luck from a failure of virtue; so in critical situations, no matter how murky they may be, an unsuccessful general is usually replaced without much hesitation just in case he does lack virtue. The same thing happens to coaches, administrators, business executives, and, of course, statesmen in democracies. Those who assume such roles are rarely brought to court to face charges of incompetence, unless their blunders are especially gross, because we recognize that the artisan’s accuracy in determining what consequences follow from what actions is not available when the range of causes and effects that such men are expected to manage is so large and complex.

To summarize, when Socrates interprets Simonides’ ode to say that knowledge can be overwhelmed by irresistible mischance and that the good person can be deprived of his knowledge by the effects of time or other accidents, he indicates the limitations imposed on man’s capacity to help himself. The partial foresight of the artisan can produce a limited good (assuming that what he produces is good), though the artisan and the product are subject to the blows of unforeseeable mischances. But comprehensive foresight is needed for producing the comprehensive good, even supposing that it amounts to nothing more than maximum pleasure and minimum pain. Since the light of human knowledge concerning practical affairs is surrounded by immense darkness, since, in other words, comprehensive foresight is dim at best, practical knowledge can never be productive in the way that arts are. Virtue, it seems, is partly “improvisatory”—a second-best, albeit vital, substitute for an art of living.

Thus, we resolve the larger contradiction of the dialogue concerning the question of virtue's teachability as follows: in fact, virtue cannot become an art such as Socrates describes and so cannot become teachable in the way that arts are teachable. Socrates' initial assertion, never repudiated by him, that virtue is not teachable, is correct. The Socratic doctrine, stated at the end of the dialogue, that virtue is knowledge describes an unattainable goal which underscores the human need of knowledge and which ultimately points to the limitations of the practical life. Consequently, other virtues besides knowledge, especially courage and temperance, are required. They inform what Aristotle will call *phronesis* (*Nic. Eth.* 1143b–1145a).

Protagorean sophistry, then, must fall short of its promise. It cannot make human beings truly good; it can only make them adept in some limited way. The skilled sophist, like any artisan, can always be overwhelmed by circumstances beyond the range of his knowledge or be stripped of knowledge altogether. Socrates' hedonic calculus, by contrast, seems capable of putting its possessor into a state of being and remaining good. The art of measurement, he says, "by making clear the truth, would cause the soul to have rest and to remain by the truth, saving its life" (356d–e).¹⁶ But his interpretation of the ode by Simonides declared this to be impossible for human beings. Why, then, does Socrates maintain so forcefully that the sophists teach this art? Clearly Protagoras does not teach such an art, since he must be led to say that he teaches it. He goes along with Socrates' claim, it seems, simply because he does not wish to oppose Socrates' effort to encourage the many to seek lessons from the sophists. Evidently, Socrates is inducing Protagoras to make claims that reach beyond what he actually teaches and beyond what is even attainable for human beings. If adopted as the goal of sophistic learning, the hedonic calculus seems designed to compel the students of sophistry to feel, in the end, the deficiency of human knowledge with respect to practical affairs. But if, as is more likely, Protagoras does not adopt such a proposal, he will have to lower the expectations of his students about what his art can do for them: Protagorean sophistry cannot make them godlike masters of their fortunes. The art of manipulating the perceptions of others, however, if that is the extent of what Protagoras teaches, will probably seem inadequate to those awakened to the need for a truly efficacious practical science. In either case, Socrates has upset the complacency of the sophistic enterprise.

Moreover, the hedonic calculus, even if we suppose for the moment that it were attainable, would necessarily leave at least some of its practitioners unsatisfied. The *Protagoras* does not treat this problem explicitly, for reasons which will become apparent later; however, we are certainly entitled to infer Socrates' awareness of it from a host of other dialogues. The endeavor to teach such an art of living would seem to encourage intellectual preoccupation with the practical good of the individual, depriving human beings of the happiness that comes from knowing per se.¹⁷ The attainment of such happiness as is available

to human beings would seem to entail the recognition that human beings, as Aristotle says, are not the noblest things in the universe, not the worthiest objects of human knowledge (*Nic. Eth.* 1141a). This is not to deny that human beings must act with as much prudence as is available to them; but if practical knowledge has unavoidable limitations and if happiness entails looking beyond human affairs, then perhaps the highest attainable practical virtue will be some ability to improvise toward contemplation of the highest things in the universe.

Socrates succeeds in thwarting Protagoras' hopes of demonstrating the superiority of sophistry, but Socrates' devotion to knowledge puts him, no less than sophistry puts Protagoras, at odds with the political life of Athens. Protagoras teaches an art that exploits society for the satisfaction of whatever desire the artisan may have. He has to mask this from city elders who naturally do not want individuals (except perhaps themselves) exploiting society. Socrates, not presuming to know what the good is, always maintains that virtue is knowledge, but he does not pose as a teacher of an art that would give his students reason to think that they know enough for all practical purposes. Seeking knowledge of the good and enjoining others (even Protagoras at 361c–d) to accompany him in the quest, which carries unavoidable political risks, he strives not to bend society to serve his own individual good, but to minimize, nevertheless, the political constraints imposed on that quest.

In order to get a better understanding of the Socratic alternative to a Promethean art of living, we turn now to a re-examination of the early parts of the dialogue, paying especial attention to the actions of Socrates. If there is a good life and if virtue is a part of that life, we would expect to find it in the example of Socrates, who is reasonably taken to be the most complete human being in any Platonic dialogue in which he figures prominently.

The opening conversation of the dialogue is between Socrates and a nameless companion, who are the only *dramatis personae* in the work. To this companion, after ten or so exchanges, Socrates relates the day's events. The very first statement by the nameless companion serves to inform us of Socrates' current habits. The companion asks Socrates where he is coming from (309a). The companion evidently does not know what Socrates has been doing, but he declares his suspicion: Socrates has come from chasing the youthful beauty of Alcibiades. The companion could surmise this only if he had seen Socrates pursuing Alcibiades recently. The action can be dated, then, at about the same time as the action in the *Alcibiades*, in which Socrates, as a prospective lover, approaches Alcibiades for the first time.¹⁸ In view of this, the events described in the *Protagoras* seem to be a digression from Socrates' erotic pursuits. The companion remarks that Alcibiades is now a man, with some beard. Socrates asks in reply if the companion does not agree with Homer, "who said that youth has the highest grace in him whose beard is appearing." This reference is to either *Iliad* 24.348 or *Odyssey* 10.279. In each of these passages, Homer is

describing how Hermes disguises himself as a young man in order to help someone who is about to face a very difficult task: in the *Iliad*, he helps Priam, who is on his way to recover the body of Hector from Achilles; in the *Odyssey*, he helps Odysseus, who is on his way to rescue his men from Circe. This comparison of Alcibiades to Hermes is on the one hand fitting because Alcibiades does indeed help Socrates in his discussion with Protagoras (see 336b, 347b, 348b), and there is a story that Alcibiades posed for some of the sculptors who created the Hermae.¹⁹ It is, on the other hand, an odd comparison because during the Peloponnesian War, Alcibiades was suspected of having been connected with the desecration of the Hermae (Thucydides 6.26–29). This suspicion forced Alcibiades to withdraw from Sicily, undermining the campaign there, and it did not help Socrates' reputation in Athens. Socrates claims that he is not a professional educator and that, indeed, virtue is not teachable, but the Athenians must have wondered what effect Socrates' philosophy had on his companion Alcibiades, whether Socrates wanted to avoid using the word education or not. Alcibiades, it seems, was of temporary help to Socrates at best; at worst, a singular disaster. The opening exchanges, then, allude to the erotic impulse that engendered Socrates' fatal conflict with Athens. Indeed, the tension between Socratic eros and civic duty seems to be a subtle motif in this dialogue.

When Socrates reveals that he had just had a lengthy conversation with the more beautiful Protagoras—more beautiful because of his wisdom—the companion invites him to relate it. Socrates now proceeds to describe his day in some detail from the time Hippocrates roused him from his bed. Now if Socrates was chasing after Alcibiades at the time, Hippocrates' abrupt appearance in the early hours of the morning cannot have been entirely welcome to Socrates. And Socrates' description suggests as much. Hippocrates knocks violently on Socrates' door with his stick, rushes in when the door is opened, and asks Socrates loudly whether he is awake or asleep (310a–b). Socrates' greeting is not the warmest; something like “This is Hippocrates” or “Hippocrates there” (*Hippocrates . . . houtos*). Hippocrates, having just heard that Protagoras is in town, is eager to see Protagoras right away, but Socrates, aware that Protagoras has been in town for two days already, seems to have little or no interest in seeing him. Socrates, it seems, is forced to curtail his own plans for the day, which probably involved Alcibiades primarily, in order to help Hippocrates.

The sense of compulsion or constraint that characterizes the beginning of Socrates' day is heightened, almost to the point of drollery, by the setting of his conversation with Hippocrates. It cannot fail to remind everyone of the beginning of the *Crito*, which takes place in the prison where Socrates was awaiting his execution. The conversation in the *Protagoras*, like that in the *Crito*, begins in the dark hours just before dawn with Socrates either asleep or, in any case, not yet out of bed. In the *Protagoras*, Hippocrates enters rudely, rouses Socrates, and announces the good news that Protagoras has come to town; Socrates replies that Protagoras actually came two days ago. In the *Crito*, Crito ap-

proaches Socrates silently, waits for Socrates to wake up, and tells him very delicately the distressing news that the ship from Delos will arrive tomorrow, after which Socrates will have to die; Socrates replies that, owing to a prophetic dream he has just had, he does not think the ship will arrive tomorrow but on the following day. In each case Socrates is unflappable; he is neither elated at the good news nor distraught at the bad, having already anticipated the news somehow. And in responding to the subsequent requests made by Hippocrates and by Crito, he has a sobering effect on each of them, showing himself to be the very model of good citizenship. In the *Protagoras*, Hippocrates wants Socrates to speak with Protagoras on his behalf so that he (Hippocrates) might become Protagoras' student and partake of some of Protagoras' wisdom; Socrates expresses concern about wise foreigners coming to town to sell their doctrines and urges Hippocrates to consult with his elders before doing anything rash (313b, 313d, 314b). Crito wants Socrates to escape from prison and flee to Thessaly; Socrates persuades Crito that the laws of Athens are to be respected and obeyed, and that the punishment must be endured.

As we have already observed, Socrates seems to be disposed differently toward Hippocrates and toward beautiful, promising young men like Charmides or Alcibiades. One senses that with the former (as with Crito), Socrates is acting under constraint, while with the latter he is acting more spontaneously and freely. In view of this indication, let us label these two dispositions or modes of operation (toward someone like Hippocrates and toward someone like Charmides or Alcibiades) Socrates' constrained and erotic modes.

That Socrates is operating for the moment in a constrained rather than an erotic mode seems to be emphasized by some striking parallels between certain features of the *Symposium* and the sequence of events that occur as Socrates and Hippocrates make their way to the house of Callias, where Protagoras is staying. To begin with, almost all of the major figures who appear in the house of Agathon in the *Symposium* are present in the house of Callias in the *Protagoras*.²⁰ In the *Symposium* (174a–175b), after having bathed and dressed appropriately, Socrates follows up an invitation to the house of Agathon. But before he enters, he stands by himself for quite a while thinking over some undisclosed matter while his host anxiously awaits him inside. In the *Protagoras*, as Socrates and Hippocrates approach the house of Callias, with no invitation, they discuss some undisclosed question in front of the door of the house and come to an agreement before trying to enter (314c). They knock on the door until a eunuch appears, who answers gruffly that his master is unavailable and then slams the door shut. Socrates has to knock again and insist on being announced before he is finally admitted. Such imagery seems to emphasize the lack of erotic buoyancy in the gathering at Callias' house.

Socrates attempts to correct this state of affairs, and Plato has provided an unmistakable indication of this. At the beginning of the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras, Callias expresses his desire to have a "meeting"—he uses the rather formal word *sunerdion*—to discuss the question about the teach-

ability of virtue (317d); later, Socrates compares the gathering at Callias' house to a "banquet" (*symposion*) and asks that Protagoras and he try to imitate such a party of educated men (347c–348a). Socrates tries, in other words, to make the current gathering resemble as much as possible the kind of gathering we see in the *Symposium*. The overall movement in the conversation, as it comes increasingly under the control of Socrates, is from an atmosphere of constraint toward one of liberty and pleasure: as Socrates talks with Protagoras, he gradually ceases to be concerned with his duty to Hippocrates and becomes engaged in the conversation for its own sake. Indeed, by the end of the dialogue, Socrates seems to have forgotten about Hippocrates and his needs altogether: we never learn whether Hippocrates decides to study with Protagoras or not.

This motion from an atmosphere of constraint to one of liberty and pleasure is paralleled by a shift in the conversation from one about strictly practical matters to one about more theoretical ones. Socrates first wants Protagoras to explain what benefit Hippocrates would get from attending his classes (318a), a strictly practical question since it concerns the particular needs of Hippocrates and the particular art of Protagoras. When Protagoras obliges, Socrates asks him to explain how virtue is teachable (319a–320c), a practical question but not particularly concerned with Hippocrates or Protagoras. After Protagoras' long reply, Socrates thanks Hippocrates for bringing him to Protagoras—this is the last we hear of Hippocrates—and asks Protagoras the question that dominates the rest of the discussion: are the virtues one or many (329c)? This question could be considered practical but more remotely so. At the very end of the dialogue, Socrates asks the question which he would be most delighted to have Protagoras' help in investigating: what is virtue (361c)? This question is theoretical at least in form insofar as it can be asked of any object. This ascent from practical questions toward more theoretical ones has been made to correspond closely, in Socrates' narration, to the ascent from an atmosphere of constraint toward one of pleasure.²¹ The conversation ends, however, before it can become truly theoretical. The dialogue never breaks through to the freedom and erotic levity of the *Symposium*, which is perhaps why Socrates never broaches the matter of whether knowledge should serve human welfare or something higher. The environment at the distinguished home of Callias, where political ambition and self-importance weigh heavily on the conversation, could hardly permit an ascent to the ideas (cf. Coby, p. 24).

Socrates concludes his conversation with Protagoras by saying that he prefers the character of Prometheus in Protagoras' myth to the character of Epimetheus, adding that he consults Prometheus and is "thoughtful" (*promethoumenos*) about his whole life when he occupies himself with these matters (361d). He asks Protagoras for help in investigating the nature of virtue, but Protagoras has other business to attend to. The Socratic way of life is indeed thoughtful, but it is hard to see how that way of life could be rendered into a Promethean art teachable to others. In Protagoras' myth, Prometheus attempted to provide a salvation for man by giving him fire and the arts, but this attempt

proved to be inadequate. The arts needed to be supplemented by Zeus's gift of Respect and Right (322c). Zeus's gift might be surpassed by something like Socrates' art of measurement. We have seen, however, that this art is not attainable. Man must be content either with Jovian Respect and Right or with the thoughtfulness displayed in the words and deeds of Socrates. Socrates' thoughtfulness, as he indicates here, arises from his dialectical investigations into the nature of virtue and related matters, a lifelong, even infinite project. Though Socrates has not reduced virtue to an art, there can be no question that dialectic has made Socrates more thoughtful in practical matters. One need only look at how he uses dialectic to help thoughtless friends like Hippocrates. Inquiry into the nature of virtue will not automatically yield prudence, but it does seem to foster and improve prudence, at least insofar as it instills the habit of thinking before acting.

Socrates' thoughtfulness, however, naturally lacks the accuracy and control evident in the skill of good artisans. He maintains an uneasy balance between his constrained mode and his erotic mode. Toward those who make demands on him, whether just or not, Socrates assumes the role of the cautious fellow citizen, especially when their ambition is not accompanied by intelligence or other gifts. But toward those who appeal to Socrates as potentially great conversationalists, he is less reserved, and this appetite for good conversation even leads him into trouble with the city, as the references to Alcibiades hint at. These two modes, then, are in conflict with each other. The action of the *Protagoras*, viewed as a whole, is a perfect illustration of this: Socrates' erotic pursuit of Alcibiades is interrupted by the necessity to take care of Hippocrates, and then Hippocrates' needs are subordinated as Socrates becomes engrossed in the fascinating conversation with Protagoras about virtue.²²

The portrayal of the good life in the *Protagoras* seems compatible with the teachings of Aristotle in book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where happiness is said to consist first in contemplation and *second* in the practical activities with which prudence and the ethical virtues are concerned. According to Aristotle, contemplation is a leisurely activity, while practical activity, even of the highest order, in politics or war, is toilsome (1177b). Indeed, the contemplative life of the philosopher may be best, but it would seem that the best life must be conducted without the lucidity evident in the meanest arts. The tensions and conflicts of that life, which are portrayed more richly in the drama of the *Protagoras* than in the treatise of Aristotle, are considerable. Even so, the Socratic tradition in ancient philosophy would not grant that human life could be complete without these conflicts.

NOTES

1. See 357e, where Socrates says that the many refuse to take lessons in the "art of measurement" on the grounds that it is "unteachable." He had said earlier that the Athenians consider virtue unteachable. I infer, then, that Socrates is equating the art of measurement with virtue.

2. Larry Goldberg, *A Commentary on Plato's Protagoras*, American University Studies (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), and Patrick Coby, *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1987), from whose work I have benefitted a great deal, emphasize too much, it seems to me, the desire on the part of Plato or his character Socrates to protect the city from sophistry. Socrates opposes sophistry not so much because of the harm it might inflict on the city, but because it encourages the young to seek no more knowledge than is required to gain power in the city. Socrates' rhetorical purpose in the *Protagoras* is, first, to protect the philosophical potential of the young from the deadening intellectual complacency of sophistry and, second, to avoid unnecessary harm to the city.

3. Hippocrates' blushing seems to be due to the fact that he has not entirely ruled out the prospect of becoming a sophist. Hippocrates is clearly divided between his desire for the wisdom of Protagoras and his respect for Athenian gentlemanliness. Cf. Goldberg, pp. 80–82.

4. Socrates tells Protagoras that Hippocrates is eager to become famous in the city and that Hippocrates supposes he would best achieve this by associating with him, Protagoras (316c).

5. Plato has set the action of the dialogue at about 433 or 432 B.C., by the reckoning of most scholars, at the height of the Periclean Athens. See C.C.W. Taylor's notes in his translation of Plato, *Protagoras*, Clarendon Plato Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 64.

6. The best illustration of this difficulty occurs in the *Euthydemus* 291b–293a, where Socrates is asking Crito to identify what the political art produces. Crito can easily say that the art of medicine produces health and that the art of farming produces food from the earth, but he cannot do the same for the art of statesmanship, "which steers the whole, rules the whole, and makes the whole useful." And neither can Socrates, who refers to this difficulty as an *aporia*.

7. *Charm.* 159b–161b. Compare Socrates' reaction to the blushing of Charmides at 158c with that of Hippocrates in *Protagoras* 312a. Socrates' disposition toward Alcibiades in the *Alcibiades*, where again Socrates' eros is salient, is quite similar to his disposition toward Charmides. See *Alc.* 105e and 119b–124c.

8. See Joseph Cropsey, "Virtue and Knowledge: On Plato's *Protagoras*," *Interpretation* 19, No. 2 (1991–92):140.

9. See Coby's (53–70) and Goldberg's (13–56) discussions of this myth for much more intricate analyses than I am able to provide here. The word *dynatotatos* (319a1), though perhaps not as impersonal in connotation as our expression "most powerful," does not exactly connote sociability, especially in the superlative where rivalry is clearly implied.

10. C.C.W. Taylor's notes (pp. 110–11) are helpful here, but I do not agree that Socrates has "failed" to distinguish between the different senses of the word "alike," which could mean "identical in all respects" or "having some characteristic(s) in common." If Socrates is assuming that the virtues are one because they all amount to knowledge, then he has no need to make such distinctions: throughout his argument, "alike" means identical in all respects.

11. Taylor points out (pp. 122–31) that Socrates' argument rests on an equivocation in the use of the word opposite, but I doubt Plato was unaware of this, as Taylor maintains (p. 129). Socrates' (as yet undisclosed) assumption that virtue is knowledge allows him to consider virtue and vice as polar opposites, not just incompatible qualities.

12. It is true that Protagoras, as Socrates presents him, waffles a bit, since he maintains that wise orators make the good seem good, whereas his principle does not allow that anything could be good apart from how it is perceived. He adds, however, that one must follow not his words, but his meaning (166d–e). I infer, therefore, that according to Protagoras, wise orators make anything they want seem good to the city.

13. For parts of this ode I have used W.R.M. Lamb's translation in the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Protagoras*, in *Plato*, vol. 4 (London: William Heinemann, 1924), pp. 185–209.

14. These sentiments bear some resemblance to those of Aristophanes in *The Clouds*. Socrates maintains that the entire ode by Simonides was composed for the purpose of overthrowing the saying of the wise man Pittacus, who Socrates claims was a student of the art of "short speeches." Similarly, the entire poem *The Clouds* was written in order to overthrow the wise man Socrates—the historical Socrates, not the character in Plato's dialogues—and perhaps especially the Socratic dictum that virtue is knowledge.

15. Socrates' language is very precise in this respect. He does not avoid implying that one

might “be” a doctor, only that one might “be” a good doctor or a good man (see 345a). The possession of knowledge, however limited, distinguishes the artisan as such; the extent of the artisan’s knowledge, which is necessarily in a state of flux, determines how “good” an artisan he is. The more knowledge he has about his art and about everything else, the better his chances for success in any medical action he undertakes.

16. The art of measurement does not seem capable of making human beings immortal, as Coby points out (p. 159). This shortcoming is one reason why the practical orientation of the art of measurement is ultimately unrewarding.

17. To mention just one—probably the most pertinent—passage dealing with this matter, see the striking interlude in Socrates’ critique of Protagoras from *Theaet.* 172c–177c.

18. That Alcibiades is not visible at the time of this exchange is evident from the fact that the companion says that Alcibiades appeared to him to be a noble man “the other day” (*proen*, 309a3).

Scholarly opinion on the authenticity of this dialogue has been divided since the nineteenth century. See Paul Friedlander, *Plato*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff, Bollingen Series (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), pp. 348–49 n. 1, for a useful, though not comprehensive, bibliography on this question. Most arguments against its authenticity boil down to objections against allegedly unplatonic style and artistry, allegedly unusual behavior on the part of Socrates and Alcibiades, and a few instances of allegedly unplatonic language. Since a definitive solution is probably out of reach, it seems best to adjust our understanding of Plato rather than to reject a work traditionally accepted as part of the canon and highly esteemed by both Hellenistic and Medieval commentators.

19. Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptika* 53. I have this from Plato, *Protagoras*, with a commentary by Hermann Sauppe, trans. James A. Towle (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1889), p. 27.

20. The only major exception is Aristophanes. If, as Goldberg observes (p. 329), Aristophanes’ presence is felt nonetheless because his comedy supplies the impulse for the whole *Protagoras*, then perhaps his presence in the *Symposium* is partial and subordinate because the action and speech of that dialogue take place on a higher level.

21. It is interesting to follow the uses of the word *hedone* and its cognates throughout the dialogue. Among them: Socrates takes a detached pleasure at watching the parade around Protagoras at the house of Callias (*hesthen*, 315b3); Protagoras then expresses his extreme pleasure at the prospect of speaking before others (*hediston*, 317c4); when Socrates threatens to leave, he adds that he would listen to Protagoras not without pleasure (*ouk aedos*, 335c6); later, Socrates says he would be pleased to converse with Protagoras rather than with anyone else (*hedeos*, 348d6); finally, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates expresses extreme pleasure at the prospect of having a joint inquiry into the nature of virtue (*hedista*, 361d6). As Socrates’ pleasure in the conversation increases, Protagoras’ diminishes.

22. See Coby, p. 202 n. 83 for an interesting argument that at the end of the dialogue, when Socrates leaves for his supposed appointment, Alcibiades, not Hippocrates, accompanies Socrates. If this reading is correct, it would support the claim that for Socrates eros overrides duty.