

PHIL 31: Ancient Philosophy
Fall 2005; David O. Brink
Handout #4: Plato's Protagoras

Protagoras is a prominent sophist who promises to teach virtue but who famously says that "a man is the measure of all things, of those that are, of how they are, and of those that are not, of how they are not" and that "as things appear to each of us, so they are" (Theaetetus 152a). An important question is whether Protagorean relativism is compatible with the sort of expertise to which Protagoras lays claim. This is the first of three main topics in the Protagoras.

Topic #1: CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?

The Protagoras both begins and ends on the subject of the teachability of virtue. Socrates and Protagoras are represented as each changing his mind, but as disagreeing initially and subsequently. Initially, Socrates appears skeptical whether virtue can be taught (319a-320c), but later argues that it can (361a-c). Protagoras's situation is reversed; he begins by defending the teachability of virtue and ends by questioning whether it can be taught. It's not surprising that Protagoras would begin by claiming that virtue is teachable, because teaching virtue is his professed vocation. And it's not surprising if Socrates should doubt that Protagoras can claim to teach virtue. For Protagorean relativism appears to undermine the sort of objectivity and expertise required if the sophists are to justify their claim to be especially good teachers of virtue. What would be more surprising is if Socrates himself thought virtue could not be taught. For his inquiries and his craft analogy suggest that that is precisely what he is searching for. Of course, he might think that virtue is not in fact taught. After all, teaching virtue requires moral knowledge, which requires an ability to specify the form of the virtues, and so far his attempts to find someone who can satisfy these conditions have been unsuccessful. But that virtue is **not yet taught**, does not entail that it **cannot be taught**. Socrates offers two grounds for skepticism about the teachability of virtue.

1. On moral and political matters the Athenians let everyone speak and do not appeal to experts (319b4-e1).
2. Those who are acknowledged to be good citizens produce offspring who are not virtuous (319e1-320b4).

Protagoras replies in the Great Speech (320c9-322d6) and directly (322d6-328d3).

1. All Athenians are experts or knowledgeable.
2. Justice (virtue) is a necessary condition of political community (323a1-4, 324d8-325a3).
3. Native affective and cognitive differences enable some to benefit more from training in virtue than others (327b8-c4).
4. The Athenians' belief that virtue can be taught is evidenced by their practices of punishment (323d6-324d1) and their concern with private training in virtue (325ac5-326e5).

Protagoras's first two claims address Socrates's first ground for skepticism, and his third claim addresses Socrates's second ground for skepticism. But it's not clear that Protagoras's replies are mutually consistent. In particular, it's not clear if (3) is compatible with (1) and (2). Moreover,

we might wonder whether the virtue of justice is necessary for community. Perhaps social stability requires some fairly general but minimal conformity with norms of non-aggression and cooperation, but this seems compatible with selective but significant injustice. Especially if we distinguish between genuine justice and mere conformity with the requirements of justice, we might wonder whether social stability really presupposes justice.

TOPIC #2: THE UNITY OF THE VIRTUES

At 392b5 there is a fairly abrupt shift to the topic of the relationship among the virtues. But this new topic is connected with the old one so long as the prospects for teaching virtue depend upon the nature of virtue, especially its cognitive aspects. Socrates asks Protagoras to choose between two conceptions of the relationship among the virtues (329c6-d1).

1. The various virtues stand to virtue as parts stand to the wholes of which they are parts.
2. The various virtue terms all name the same thing.

Protagoras prefers the part-whole conception to the unity thesis (329d3-4). Socrates then offers him a choice between two part whole analogies (329d).

- (1a) The face analogy
- (1b) The lump of gold analogy

It's an interesting question what the lump of gold analogy would imply about the virtues. In some ways, it would be close to unity, inasmuch as it might imply that the virtues (the smaller lumps of gold) are qualitatively identical. Yet it would apparently still imply that they are numerically distinct. In any case, the debate centers instead on the choice between (1a) and (2). Protagoras opts for the face analogy (1a) (329e1-2) and explicitly denies inseparability, claiming that people can be courageous without having the other virtues (329e5-6, 349d3-8). Socrates begins to examine Protagoras's claims, apparently with the aim of defending inseparability and unity.

Socrates's "argument from opposites" is meant to establish that the virtues other than courage (wisdom, good sense, justice, and holiness or piety) are either identical or very similar (330a1-334a3, 349d3-5).

1. The opposite of wisdom is folly (332a4-6).
2. The opposite of good sense is folly (332e4-5).
3. Properties are distinct iff they have distinct opposites (332c3-8).
4. Hence, wisdom = good sense (333b4-5).
5. The opposite of justice is folly (333b7-334a2).
6. Hence, justice = wisdom = good sense.

Is (5) plausible if "folly" is understood in the same prudential way that makes (1) and (2) plausible? Is injustice always imprudent? This question is addressed by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Republic ii.

Rightly or wrongly, Protagoras accepts this argument. Yet he resists inseparability and unity by resisting this cognitive conception for the virtue of courage. At Socrates's suggestion, he offers a purely noncognitive definition of courage as daring (349e2). At this point, Socrates

relies on his argument, familiar from the Laches (192cd), that knowledge is necessary for virtue (349e1-350c5).

1. The virtues are admirable.
2. Foolish daring is not admirable.
3. Hence, courage \neq daring.

As in the Laches, Socrates takes this argument to establish a purely cognitive conception of courage (350c). However, Protagoras does not let Socrates get away with this move here. He rightly responds that the argument establishes only that courage requires a cognitive component, not that courage just is wisdom (350c-351b). Protagoras insists on a noncognitive component, as well as a cognitive component (351a1-b3), the sort of affective or conative component for which Protagorean moral training would be appropriate (325c-326e). Here, Plato seems to register a shortcoming in the argument of the Laches.

TOPIC #3: THE DENIAL OF AKRASIA

At 351b the discussion makes another abrupt transition to the topic of hedonism and ultimately to a discussion of akrasia or weakness of will. But, again, there is continuity of concern if the prospects for the unity of the virtues depends on the adequacy of a purely cognitive account of virtue, which itself depends upon the possibility of akrasia. Socrates can defend a cognitive account of the virtues, unity, and the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue (KSV) by denying the possibility of akrasia.

- Akrasia occurs when A knows (or believes) that some action y is all things considered (and not just morally) better than some alternative action x, it is in A's power and he has the opportunity to perform either x or y, and he does x.

Socrates denies the possibility of akrasia by appeal to hedonism -- the doctrine that pleasure is the only intrinsic good. He seems to suggest that we do not in fact act against our knowledge of what is best, but instead act out of ignorance about what is in fact best or most pleasurable. Our miscalculation appears to be the result of the influence of proximate pleasure (357de).

Hedonism is the thesis that pleasure is the good and pain evil. Protagoras and the many initially deny hedonism (351c), asserting that there are bad pleasures and good pains. Hedonism is Socrates's thesis (351c4-5, e5, e10). But Socrates claims that their beliefs commit them to hedonism (354c), inasmuch as bad pleasures are short-term pleasures that cause more pain or less pleasure overall and good pains are short-term pains that cause more pleasure or less pain overall.

How does hedonism support the Socratic denial of akrasia? Here is one reconstruction of a central part of Socrates's argument.

1. Evaluative Hedonism: goodness = pleasantness.
2. If A intentionally does x rather than y, because he is overcome by the F in x, then A believes x is more F than y.
3. Sometimes A knows (believes) x is worse than y but still chooses x, because he is overcome by the pleasure in x (the many's claim).
4. Hence, sometimes A knows (believes) x is worse than y but still chooses x, because he believes that x is more pleasant than y. (By 2 and 3)
5. Hence, sometimes A knows (believes) that x is worse than y but still chooses x, because he believes that x is better than y. (By 1 and 4)

Socrates's ultimate conclusion -- the denial that akrasia is possible -- is strongly counter-intuitive. Before accepting it, we might ask whether his argument is sound and has the significance he supposes.

SO WHAT?

It is not uncommon to read the argument as offering a reductio ad absurdum of the many's hypothesis that akrasia is possible. But this can't be quite right, because the conclusion takes the forms of contradictory beliefs, rather than an outright contradiction. The conclusion is

B(P) & B(not-P)

not

B(P) & not-B(P)

Only the second is a contradiction. However, the many's position might be thought to be absurd in another sense if it they are committed to inconsistent beliefs. Indeed, if one can only maintain inconsistent beliefs through ignorance, this might still suggest that putative akrasia really rests on ignorance.

OH YEAH?

Is the argument sound? One issue concerns its validity. In many contexts, co-referential terms can be substituted for each other without changing truth values. Would the truth of hedonism make the substitution in (5) legitimate, or does the intentional context mean that the substitution of co-referential terms is illicit? Compare

- (a) Spike likes a hot bath.
- (b) Spike likes a bath with mean kinetic molecular energy x.

Here the substitution seems ok, even if Spike would not assent to a sentence expressing (b) because, say, he is ignorant of the fact that heat is mean kinetic molecular energy. But what about the following pair?

- (c) Spike believes his bath is hot.
- (d) Spike believes his bath has mean kinetic molecular energy x.

Here the substitution does seem problematic, and this may seem to wreck Socrates's argument. However, if the substitution failure depends on the agent's ignorance -- in the case of Socrates's argument, ignorance of hedonism -- this may vindicate Socrates's cognitive account after all.

Other questions concern the plausibility of the premises. One obvious question concerns hedonism. Does Socrates really endorse hedonism, or is the hedonist denial of akrasia merely ad hominem or ironic? Here are some reasons to think that Socratic hedonism is authentic, not ad hominem or ironic.

- Hedonism is introduced as Socrates's thesis, not an explicit commitment of his interlocutors or conventional Greek ethics.
- Socrates needs hedonism if he is to have an argument for his otherwise puzzling theses about the unity of the virtues, the cognitive account of virtues, and the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue.
- Hedonism promises to satisfy Socratic constraints on definition from the Euthyphro; it provides a decision procedure that eliminates disputed terms in the definition of the virtues and identifies the property that makes something good.

A different question concerns the assumption implicit in (2) and (3) that all action reflects desires based on beliefs about what is best. Call this thesis **psychological eudaimonism**. Is this a reasonable assumption? Are all desires optimizing? Alternatively, we might recognize non-optimizing desires in one of two ways.

- completely good-independent desires
- good-dependent but non-optimizing desires

If such desires exist and can influence action, then akrasia seems possible. In fact, it is just here that the moral psychology of the Republic (book iv) apparently disagrees with the psychological eudaimonism of the Protagoras.

TEMPORAL BIAS

The argument we have been considering does attribute an error to putatively akratic agents, but it does not need to invoke Socrates's actual diagnosis of the error, viz. a miscalculation of the pleasurable and painful consequences of an agent's options due to the temporal proximity of pleasures and pains (356a-357e). Socrates suggests that the putative akrates suffers from a temporal bias: the proximity of certain pleasures and pains leads the agent to an inflated estimate of their value. On a diachronic interpretation, the putative akrates toggles back and forth between a "cool" and a "hot" judgment; however, at the time of action, he does not act contrary to his optimizing desires. On a synchronic interpretation, the agent holds both hot and cold judgments simultaneously.

Note that this argument is compatible with hedonism, but does not seem to presuppose it; temporal proximity might distort our judgment of the magnitude of goods, whether the goods are pleasure or something else.

AKRASIA AND UNITY

Socrates takes the denial of akrasia to support the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue and to undermine Protagoras's reasons for resisting the inseparability and unity of the virtues (358d5). While the Protagorean conception of courage, which recognizes independent affective

or conative components, would allow for akrasia, Socrates appeals to the denial of akrasia to reject this conception and thereby support unity.

1. Courage is good (indeed, best).
2. Cowardice is being overcome by pleasure.
3. Hedonism.
4. If A intentionally does x rather than y, because she is overcome by the F in x, then A believes x is more F than y.
5. Sometimes A knows that y is courageous but chooses some action x that she recognizes to be cowardly.
6. Hence, sometimes A knows that y is most pleasant, yet believes that x is more pleasant than y.
7. Hence, (5) is false.
8. Hence, knowledge is sufficient for courage.
9. Hence, courage = knowledge of good and evil (i.e. knowledge of pleasure and pain).
10. Hence (with 330a1-334a3, 349d3-5, 359a8-b1), the virtues are identical (i.e. virtue = knowledge of pleasure and pain).

(9) represents a cognitive conception of courage, which can now be combined with the conclusion of the Argument from Opposites to respond to Protagoras and defend the unity of the virtues. Since Socrates has now defended a cognitive conception of the virtues, he concludes that virtue must be something that can, at least in principle, be taught (361a-c).