

PROTAGORAS 317e-333b and 349a-351a

Protagoras (P), a renowned sophist, offers to teach young men the art of citizenship, promising to make them good citizens (319a). Socrates (S) understands P to mean that he can make men virtuous, and finds himself disagreeing with P on this point. As he puts it: “I just don’t think that virtue can be taught” (320b).

[Notice that S simply assumes that being a good man just is being a virtuous man. This assumption follows from the commonly held belief that the virtue of X is what makes X a good thing of its kind and the Socratic assumption of Causality, namely that the F is what makes F things F (see handout on the Socratic Theory of Definition). By Causality, what makes good humans good is the good, which, according to the commonly held belief, is to be identified with virtue. And from the fact that virtue is the good, it follows that all virtuous men are good and all good men virtuous.]

S gives two reasons for this. First, concerning public life, S points out that no one (whether he be rich or poor, merchant or craftsman, well-born or low-born, educated or uneducated) is ever criticized for advising his fellow citizens on how best to manage the city-state. And this suggests that Athenian citizens do not consider virtue to be teachable. Second, concerning private life, S points out that the children of many virtuous men (including, most notably, Pericles – see also *Meno* 94b) are not themselves virtuous, despite the best efforts of their parents to teach them to be virtuous. And this strongly suggests that virtue can’t be taught.

S then asks P to explain how (in P’s opinion) virtue is teachable (320b). P obliges, first by means of a story (*muthos*) (320d-324d) and then by means of an argument (*logos*) (324d-328d).

In the story, Zeus dispenses justice, temperance, and all the other civic virtues to humanity, giving each human being a share of each of the virtues, in order to prevent the human race from being wiped out (by internecine strife or conflict with powerful non-human animals) (322b-323c). P then argues that humans generally (and Athenians in particular) believe that virtue is teachable. P says that humans distinguish, among evils, between (on the one hand) those that are the result of nature or bad luck, and (on the other) those that are the result of inadequate training. If someone displays the first sort of evil, he is pitied but neither criticized nor punished; but if someone displays the second sort of evil, he is criticized and punished, but not pitied. Now Athenians take for granted that someone who is unjust, impious, or displays any other sort of civic vice is a proper object of criticism and punishment. Thus, according to P, Athenians take for granted that civic virtue is something one can acquire through training, i.e., that civic virtue is teachable. [This part of P’s speech is meant to answer S’s first argument to the effect that Athenians do not believe that virtue can be taught.]

In his argument, P claims that the explanation for the fact that the children of virtuous parents often turn out vicious (despite their parents’ best efforts to teach them virtue) is that some children are not “naturally disposed” toward virtue, just as some children of excellent flute-players are not “naturally disposed” toward flute-playing (327b-c).

S reacts to P's speech by picking up on P's claim that "justice and temperance and piety and all these things [are] somehow collectively one thing: virtue" (329c – see 324e-325a). S takes this claim to be ambiguous. It could mean that "virtue is a single thing, with justice and temperance and piety its parts" (**Parts Thesis**) or that 'justice', 'temperance', and 'piety' are "all names for a single entity" (namely, virtue) (**Identity Thesis**) (329c-d). S asks P whether he meant to be stating the Parts Thesis or the Identity Thesis. P plumps for the Parts Thesis (329d). S then points out that, assuming the truth of the Parts Thesis, there are two ways in which the parts of virtue might be interrelated: (i) each part might differ significantly from each of the others (in the way that the parts of a face differ from one another), or (ii) each part might be rather similar to each of the others (in the way that the parts of a piece of gold are similar) (329d); and S asks P whether he accepts (i) or (ii). P plumps for (i) (329e). In particular, P accepts that each part of virtue has its own unique power (330a-b), and consequently that "none of the other parts of virtue is like knowledge, or like justice, or like courage, or like temperance, or like piety" (330b).

The rest of the dialogue consists in an extended examination of P's claim that the parts of virtue (i.e., knowledge, justice, courage, temperance, and piety) differ from each other in such a way that none is so much as like the others. S clearly rejects this claim of P's, but there is scholarly debate over whether S accepts the Identity Thesis (namely, that knowledge=justice=courage=temperance=piety) or the "parts-of-gold" version of the Parts Thesis (namely, that each of the virtues is numerically different from, but very similar to, each of the others).

For those of you who are interested in the details of the debate, here are some references:

Vlastos, G. 1972. "The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*." *Review of Metaphysics* 25: 415-58.

Penner, T. 1973. "The Unity of Virtue." *Philosophical Review* 82: 35-68.

Rickless, S. C. 1998. "Socrates' Moral Intellectualism." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79: 355-67.

S constructs four *elenchoi*, the first three of which are analyzed in this handout. The fourth elenchus is analyzed in the next *Protagoras* handout (351b-360e).

The Argument from Resemblance (330c-331b)

1. No part of virtue is like any other. (330b, 330e-331a) (P's thesis)
2. Justice is just. (330c) (Self-Predication: see handout on Socrates' Theory of Definition)
3. Piety is pious. (330d-e) (Self-Predication)
4. If X is not pious, then X is impious. (unstated)
5. Justice is not impious. (unstated)
- So, 6. Justice is pious. (331b) [4, 5]
7. If X is not just, then X is unjust. (331b)
8. Piety is not unjust. (unstated)
- So, 9. Piety is just. (331b) [7, 8]
- So, 10. Justice and piety are both just and pious. (unstated) [2, 3, 6, 9]
11. If X and Y are both F and G, then X is like Y. (unstated)
- So, 12. Justice is like piety and piety is like justice. (331b) [10, 11]
13. Justice and piety are both parts of virtue. (329d)
- So, 14. Some part of virtue is like another. (unstated) [12, 13]

Contradiction at 1 and 14. It follows that at least one of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, and 13 is false.

Faced with the contradiction, P appears to retract his claim that no part of virtue is like any other in favor of the weaker claim (uncontradicted by the Argument from Resemblance) that no part of virtue is *importantly* like any other (see 331d-e).

The Argument from Opposites

1. Wisdom and folly are opposites. (332a)
2. Acting temperately is the opposite of acting foolishly. (332b)
3. Whatever is done foolishly/temperately/strongly/weakly/quickly/slowly is done with folly/temperance/strength/weakness/quickness/slowness. (332b)
4. Acting strongly/quickly is the opposite of acting weakly/slowly. (unstated)
- So, 5. Whatever is done F'ly is done with F-ness, and whatever is done in the opposite way is done with the opposite of F-ness. (332c) [2, 3, 4: by induction]
6. Beauty/goodness/shrillness has only one opposite: ugliness/badness/depth. (332c)
- So, 7. To each thing that can have an opposite, there is only one opposite. (332d) [6: by induction]
- So, 8. Folly and temperance are opposites. (332e) [2, 3, 5]
- So, 9. Temperance is wisdom. (333b) [1, 7, 8]
10. If X is Y, then X and Y are alike. (unstated)
- So, 11. Temperance is like wisdom. (unstated) [9, 10]
12. No part of virtue is like any other. (330b, P's thesis)
13. Temperance and wisdom are parts of virtue. (329d-e)
- So, 14. Temperance is not like wisdom. (333a) [12, 13]

Contradiction at 11 and 14. It follows that at least one of 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 12, and 13 is false.

S then launches into an *elenchus* that is meant to establish that justice and temperance are alike (333b-334c). But P gets hot under the collar, and the *elenchus* is aborted. There follows an interlude on the proper interpretation of a poem by Simonides (334c-348c). After the interlude, S gets P to accept that four of the virtues (namely, knowledge, justice, piety, and temperance) "are reasonably close to each other" (349d). But P continues to insist, in line with his previous claims, that "courage is completely different from the rest" of the virtues, including, most notably, wisdom (349d). S then goes on the attack.

The Argument from Confidence

1. Courageous men are confident. (349e)
2. All (i.e., each part) of virtue is fine (kalon). (349e)
3. Those who dive confidently into wells are divers (i.e., those who know how to dive); those who fight from horseback confidently are riders (i.e., those who know how to fight from horseback); those who fight with shields confidently are shieldmen (i.e., those who know how to fight with shields). (350a)
- So, 4. Those with the right kind of knowledge are always more confident than those without it. (350a) [3: by induction]
5. Those who dive/fight-from-horseback/fight-with-shields confidently without having knowledge of diving/fighting-from-horseback/fighting-with-shields are acting with something contemptible. (unstated)
6. Those who act F'ly act with F-ness. (unstated)
- So, 7. Confidence paired with lack of knowledge of the relevant sort is contemptible. (350b) [5, 6]
8. Courage is a part of virtue. (unstated)
- So, 9. Courage is fine. (unstated) [2, 8]
10. Whatever is fine is not contemptible. (unstated)
- So, 11. Courage is not the same as confidence paired with lack of knowledge of the relevant sort. (350b) [7, 9, 10]
- So, 12. Those with the right kind of knowledge are more courageous than those without it. [1, 4]
- So, 13. Courage is wisdom [of the relevant sort] (e.g., courage in diving is knowledge of how to dive). (350c) [11, 12: inference to the best explanation]
14. If X is Y, then X and Y are alike. (unstated)
- So, 15. Courage is like wisdom. (unstated) [13, 14]
16. Courage is not like wisdom. (349d) [12, 13]

Contradiction at 15 and 16. It follows that at least one of 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, and 16 is false.

The upshot of these three arguments is that, at the very least, S takes all the parts of virtue to be (importantly) *alike*. Do these texts suggest, in addition, that S takes all the parts of virtue to be *the same*? What do you think?