

Pleasure and the Good in the *Protagoras*

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“‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ cried Alice.” Alice’s body had opened out “like the largest telescope that ever was,” right after having been shut up like the tiniest telescope. Sometimes when reading the *Protagoras* I begin to think I know just how Alice felt. This particular dialogue, even more than any of the other Socratic dialogues, moves by starts and stops, twists and turns, and flips and flops, alternately compressing us with stifling displays of pedantry and petulance and expanding us with far reaching disquisitions on morals and motivation. Now I think we can agree that those critics who would find a lesson or two buried within Lewis Carroll’s dark and spirited nonsense are best ignored; to enjoy the story most fully, one must remain on its surface, taking its incidents for what they are as they come. Perhaps, then, we should equally try to limit ourselves to engaging with the surface of the *Protagoras*, enjoying its personalities and plot, and examining the specific claims and arguments spoken by its characters, without seeking to uncover a philosophical or pedagogical point hidden underneath it all. Perhaps—but, also, perhaps not. The risks that accompany a search beneath the surface are, I am aware, very great. They include those of reading into the text what is not really there and of missing what really is there; but, above all, they include the risk of ordering everything so neatly that there’s no room left for the fun. Nonetheless, I think it worthwhile to take these risks. I intend to develop in this paper an interpretation of the *Protagoras*, one that looks beneath the spoken positions and arguments and beyond the caricatures and the jibes, in the quest to discover a unifying philosophical thesis and an edifying lesson regarding that thesis. I hasten to assure the reader, however, that I don’t think

uncovering its source does, in the end, have the effect of spoiling the curious sensation we take from the dialogue.

The major themes of the *Protagoras* are two. One is the theme of the unity of virtue or the excellences, the question whether courage, temperance, wisdom and the rest are really, at root, the same thing; the other is the theme of the promotion of virtue, the question whether virtue itself or individual virtues can be acquired either from example or through explicit teaching. Protagoras, the Sophist, makes his living by instructing sons of wealthy and powerful fathers in the proper care of their personal affairs and the affairs of the city. His initial position is that the virtues are distinct, and that each is no less, and maybe even a little more, teachable than any other set of skills or system of knowledge. Socrates, for his part, proposes that virtue is one, and expresses doubts that it can be acquired through either example or teaching. But what are the stops, starts, twists, turns, flips, and flops that mark the discussion of these themes?

Along with a very few other Socratic dialogues, the *Protagoras* is not an omniscient narrator's presentation of a conversation, but rather is Socrates's own retelling of events to a person who had not participated in them. Socrates tells this unnamed person that he had taken a young friend, Hippocrates, who was excited by the idea of becoming one of Protagoras's students, to the house where Protagoras and other Sophists are staying during a visit to Athens. Four curious features of the dialogue that, I think, point to a philosophical lesson are these: 1) Socrates himself at different times engages in the most shameless sophistry possible—for instance, by offering a wrenchingly wilful misinterpretation of a poem by Simonides, even insisting that the word “hard” as it occurs in it means whatever Socrates wants it to mean; 2) Socrates early on objects to examining a position when Protagoras does not claim it as his own, only later to ask Protagoras to answer in the position not of himself but of “the many”; finally, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates himself presents, as his target, the views of the absent common man; 3) Socrates concludes his remarks in the discussion by noting that the position he has arrived at seems

to imply that virtue is teachable after all, precisely that which he had doubted at the beginning; 4) often topics under examination get dropped and are left unresolved as the conversation changes quickly in response not to the demands of argument but to hurt feelings and perceived insults on the part of participants.

Blame for the change of conversation that leads to the most serious disruption of the flow of the discussion is entirely Socrates's own. Socrates complains that Protagoras's answers are so long that he, Socrates, not only loses sight of the point Protagoras wishes to make but forgets the question to which Protagoras is responding (334D). The answer Protagoras gave to the question Socrates posed that occasioned this complaint, however, was both simple and short (334A-C), and, as Alcibiades notes, no one really believes Socrates's memory is faulty (336D). Socrates's accusation that Protagoras is a windbag is, at least at the time it was made, patently unjust, his claim to have a poor memory a transparent ruse. But Protagoras, instead of pointing out that his answer *was* brief, and then repeating it to refresh Socrates's memory, bristles at the suggestion that he has resorted to a debater's trick to get out of a tight spot. This brings on the dialogue's longest digression. First the participants discuss the etiquette of discussion, and they plead with Socrates to stay when he threatens to quit the conversation. Then Protagoras and Socrates examine a poem. Protagoras, it is true, introduces the poem because of his view that discussing it will promote the general discussion of virtue, but really the key point Socrates draws from the poem, that while it is difficult to become a virtuous person, it is either easy or impossible simply to be one, is a point that could have been made much more succinctly than it is. It's not until many pages later (at 349B) that Socrates and Protagoras resume explicitly their discussion of the dialogue's central topics.

Before coming to this major impasse in their discussion, Socrates and Protagoras had met with two minor impasses. Protagoras had said early on that he believed that the virtues are distinct (329D), resembling each other only a little (331D). Socrates first tries to show Protagoras that he

is wrong, that the virtues in fact are one, by noting that justice is holy and holiness just (331B). Protagoras responds that this fact does not establish the identity of justice and holiness (331E). Protagoras, of course, is quite right about Socrates's argument. We might put the point this way: the fact that any just action is also a holy action and any holy action a just action (if this is a fact; Protagoras rightly has his doubts) does not mean that the concept of justice is the same as, or is included in, the concept of the holy. At most, this sort of argument can establish that the two concepts are coextensive. Socrates, however, does not address Protagoras's point, though doing so at that moment in the discussion would seem both appropriate and timely. Instead, he proposes to abandon this line of argument as one disagreeable to Protagoras (332A), and to take up another. Socrates overcomes the first minor impasse, then, simply by switching to another argument.

The second argument Socrates offers to show that the virtues are one begins with the premise that each thing has but one contrary (332C). Folly, however, seems to have two contraries, wisdom and temperance. Socrates would maintain his generalization about contraries by drawing the conclusion that wisdom and temperance are the same (333B). He asks Protagoras how Protagoras means to avoid the contradiction looming here (333A). Protagoras is unsure what to say, so Socrates proposes that they examine another argument, the argument that since a person could act unjustly while nonetheless acting temperately, justice and temperance must be different. (This argument Socrates is glad to assign to "the many," after Protagoras says that he himself "should be ashamed to agree to that" (333C).) Again, Socrates overcomes an impasse in the conversation by changing the subject, abandoning a promising line of investigation even though nothing has been resolved.

The major impasse in the *Protagoras* described above follows on this introduction of a view assigned to the many. In the course of examining the contention that a temperate act could be unjust, Socrates had asked Protagoras whether what makes something good is that it is beneficial to humans (333D-E). Protagoras, in the speech for which Socrates unfairly chastises

him for being long winded, indicates that there are two points Socrates should have considered before framing his question. The first, explicitly stated by Protagoras, is that while it might be that anything beneficial to humans is on that account good, the good and the beneficial to humans are not coextensive, since that which is indifferent or even harmful to humans (or to some humans) can be beneficial to other animals (or to other humans) and, thus, still be good. The second point Protagoras thinks Socrates should keep in mind, implicit in his remarks, is that if one is to analyse the good in terms of utility or benefit, one must admit that goodness is a relative notion. Nothing is simply good in itself, not health, wealth or happiness, but anything that can sensibly be described as either good or bad is only good or bad relative to some purpose or desire. Ultimate ends, then, because they are ultimate and not in the service of anything else, can never sensibly be described as either good or bad. They just simply are. That which promotes an end or satisfies a purpose is good, relative to that end or purpose, and that which frustrates an end or fails to fulfil a purpose is bad, relative to that end or purpose; but ultimate ends or purposes are neither good nor bad.

These two points are in harmony with the theses Protagoras defends in his opening long speech (beginning at 320D), the speech in which he relates a myth concerning the origin of justice and the political arts. According to Protagoras, people have two reasons for wanting to come together to live in organized cities. One is their desire for safety. Living in a city, a person finds protection from both wild beasts and hostile tribes (322B). The other is their desire for comfort and leisure. Cities make possible large public works initiatives, and these raise the standard of living for individuals far beyond what they could manage on their own or in small groups (322A). People have good reasons for coming together in cities, but do they also have the skills required to come together successfully? Successful city living, Protagoras proposes, requires that individuals respect others and, when appropriate, guide their actions by their sense of justice (322C). People incapable of respecting others or unmoved by considerations of justice simply

could not make a go of city living. Now the fact that in Greece there exist many successful cities proves, Protagoras's words imply, that people do have the ability to respect others and are able to take guidance from a sense of justice. Of course, he adds, some people will have very well developed political skills, while others will have just rudimentary skills, and he grants that this might be to some extent a result of differences in people's natures. But the fact that fathers can often improve their sons through example and training, and, when all else fails, through punishment, shows that nurture makes a significant difference to one's political skills as well (325C).

In his opening speech, Protagoras identifies virtues with political attitudes and skills, and praises political attitudes and skills not as ends in themselves, but only as conducive to the satisfaction of certain desires. For Protagoras, virtue is not its own reward. Moreover, nowhere does Protagoras seek to show that it is good or right in an ethical sense for people to have those specific desires that are served by virtuous conduct, the desires for safety and comfort; he says only that people do in fact have them. Any person lacking these desires would have no need for political skills, and thus could not be faulted for not having them. Such a person would have to be put to death as a plague to the city (322D), of course, but doing so would be neither just nor unjust, merely of practical necessity. The person without the desires served by virtue would simply be a person at home in a way of life different from that of the city dwellers. Protagoras leaves us with no means to valorize our city-dwelling way of life as ethically proper, or to condemn any other conceivable way of life as immoral or evil.

The position Protagoras sketches is one frequently described as relativistic, but I am not sure that it is right to describe it as such. After all, Protagoras does not say that what is just for some people is unjust for others. He says merely that respect for others and a sense of justice, while they might suit some people well, being indispensable to the successful living of these people's way of life, might well be irrelevant or a burden to people attempting to live in some

other way. Protagoras is not saying that what counts as virtue is relative to culture, but that some cultures have need of virtue while, perhaps, others do not. Further, the claim that ultimate ends are not morally evaluable is not the relativistic claim that a person's or culture's ultimate ends are the right ends for that person or culture. I take Protagoras here to espouse not a relativistic conception of value, but a pragmatist conception.

Why does Socrates first switch arguments a couple of times, and then unfairly censure Protagoras for speaking at too great a length? No better evidence of a character's purposes in any literary work can exist than the reader's appreciation of the effects of that character's actions. To discover what Socrates intended to do by what he did, we should look to see what in fact came about as a result of what he did. The first two changes of argument certainly had the effect of putting a couple of weak arguments quickly behind us, before they were exposed as weak by any of the dialogue's characters. To avoid having them exposed as weak might well, then, have been Socrates's purpose in abandoning them so quickly. Accusing Protagoras of speaking at too great a length had the large effect of derailing the conversation entirely. Perhaps Socrates meant this to happen. But why would Socrates want to derail the conversation? When the themes of the unity and teachability of virtue are resumed in the dialogue, neither Socrates nor Protagoras mentions the points Protagoras had made either in his offending speech or in his initial speech about the origin and use of virtue. Indeed, from this point on Socrates avoids the issue of the relation of goodness to benefit entirely, and when goodness reappears in the conversation, Socrates proposes to examine the analysis according to which *pleasure*, not benefit, is the good. Socrates had lamented his own bad memory while chastising Protagoras, but it seems that Protagoras himself owns the worst memory of the two. Socrates, it seems, has engineered the discussion so that Protagoras and everyone else present would forget the points Protagoras had made earlier.

To understand why Socrates would want to encourage everyone to forget what had gone before, we must keep in mind Protagoras's pragmatist position while following the drift of the

discussion once the issues of the unity and teachability of virtue are resumed. Socrates's reintroduction of the question whether the virtues are one (349B) leads Socrates and Protagoras to the question whether courage is confidence or daring together with knowledge of the risks and benefits of taking daring action, or is simply that knowledge by itself (350B). Protagoras affirms that he thinks that underneath both courage and rashness there lies the personal quality of confidence or daring, such that a person lacking this quality will never be either courageous or rash in her actions (351A-B). That is to say, if courage requires a daring or confident temperament, then someone who lacks that temperament will not act courageously, even though she might very well know the risks and appreciate the benefits of acting daringly in the situation in which she finds herself. Further, if she knows the risks and benefits of acting daringly in some situation and judges that it would be good to act daringly in that situation, then, since her lack of daring makes it impossible for her to act daringly, she will know the good and yet not seek to do the good; she will not, that is, act courageously. But to know the good and yet not do the good is, for Socrates, paradoxical if not impossible.

To overcome the paradox threatening to arise here, Socrates revives the issue of the nature of the ethically good (351C). This time, however, instead of asking whether the beneficial is good, he asks whether pleasure is good. There are two streams to Socrates's argument over the subsequent pages. On the one hand, Socrates attempts to show that pleasure—the experience of pleasure itself, that is, conceived independently of any other consequences produced by the action that produced that experience—is good. On the other hand, he attempts to show that whenever we act, we act intending to bring pleasure to ourselves—in fact, he contends, we choose only that course of action we believe will, on balance, bring us more pleasure than any other action open to us will. Should the argument succeed, Socrates thinks, he will have demonstrated that since we always aim in our actions at producing the greatest pleasure, we always aim at producing the

greatest good. When we fail to produce the greatest good, it must be because we did not know how to produce the greatest pleasure. Virtue, then, is simply knowledge of the good.

There's at least one obvious hole in Socrates's reasoning. Suppose it's true that we always aim at pleasure in our actions. Then, clearly, knowledge of what is most pleasant will produce action directed toward what is most pleasant—action, moreover, that will succeed in realizing its intention. Now suppose also that pleasure has the property of being ethically good. Then, again, knowledge of what is most pleasant will produce the most good. But this is not to say that knowledge of what is most pleasant will produce action *directed* toward producing good, in the sense of action *intended* to produce good. We, as agents, intend simply to produce pleasure. That we produce good is an unintended, though perhaps not unwelcome, consequence of our pursuit of good. This means, though, that, even granting Socrates's premises, knowledge of the good is not sufficient for virtuous behaviour. One needs also knowledge of the identity of the good and the pleasurable. Without the knowledge that the two are the same, one would have no reason to pursue what one recognizes as good, for to recognize it as good is not in itself to recognize it as pleasant; and even with this knowledge, one would still be chasing the good only under its aspect of being pleasant, for what motivates one are thoughts of pleasure, not thoughts of goodness. Perhaps Socrates could argue further that we all do have knowledge of this identity; perhaps he could argue that this identity is a conceptual truth such that no one could have true beliefs about what is good without also knowing what is pleasant is good. Short of some such argument, though, an argument no trace of which can be found in the *Protagoras*, Socrates can conclude only that knowledge of the most pleasant is sufficient for right behaviour, not that knowledge of the good is.

But this gap in his argument is merely by the way. What's most at stake here are Socrates's conclusions that action aims at pleasure and that pleasure is ethically good. Does Socrates arrive at them legitimately? Socrates argues that all actions aim at pleasure by

considering an opinion he ascribes to “most men” (“the common man,” whom, according to Protagoras, “says whatever comes into his head” (353A)). The opinion in question is that a person can be so overcome by the thought of the pleasure waiting at the end of one course of action that she will forgo pursuing what she (correctly) understands to be the right course of action. It is, in other words, the opinion that incontinence in action or weakness of will is possible—that one can perceive the good, but, out of desire for pleasure, do the worse. According to Socrates, those who hold this opinion are confused about what they believe, for, when asked how pursuing pleasure can be bad, they reply that it can in the long run lead to an imbalance of pain over pleasure. Socrates finds this confused, for if the agent is motivated by thoughts of pleasure, and realizes that at the end of the day what she contemplates doing will produce an imbalance of pain over pleasure, then that agent will not be motivated to do what she contemplates doing. Thus, it is impossible for an agent seeking pleasure to be dissuaded from taking the path she believes will bring her the most pleasure by thoughts of the pleasure to be had elsewhere. That an agent does what we realize leads to pain when she could have done something that would have led to pleasure instead must, then, Socrates says, be explained by that agent’s not realizing that she took the path leading to less pleasure. There are no incontinent actions, no weak-willed actions, even on the common man’s own conception of the nature of motivation; there is only ignorance of the best way to gain pleasure.

The argument to this point, though, supposing it succeeds, establishes only that an agent cannot choose to follow a path he believes will lead to his experiencing less pleasure than he will experience should he follow some other path. People motivated by thoughts of pleasure cannot, that is, forsake what they believe will be more pleasant in favour of what they believe will be less pleasant. But that people who know the most pleasant path will always take it does not itself imply that people who know what is the ethically sound thing to do in a situation will do the ethically sound thing in that situation. Here Socrates needs to remind us of his conclusion that pleasure has

the property of being ethically good. One who knows that the most pleasant path is also the ethically sound path to take, and who is motivated by thoughts of pleasure, will indeed take the ethically sound path. Setting aside the point that this result implies that knowledge of ethical soundness will inevitably engender right action only if the agent is aware of the identity of pleasure and the good, we need at least to ask here just what brings Socrates to identify pleasure and the good.

Socrates gives two arguments, both very quickly. The first begins with the claim, which Protagoras immediately accepts, that a man who passes his life in pain and vexation does not live well, while a man who lives his to the end with enjoyment lives well (351B). From this claim Socrates concludes that to live pleasurably is good, to live painfully bad. But, of course, this argument works only if it is good—that is, ethically sound—to live well. Socrates’s argument is really a non sequitur. That it is good to live well in the sense that it is pleasant to live well does not mean that it is good to live well in the sense that it is ethically good to live well. This is precisely what Protagoras notes when he responds that living pleasurably is good if one’s pleasure is in what is honourable. Protagoras is not unaware of the distinction between the ethically good and the instrumentally good, a distinction Socrates has here elided.

Socrates’s second argument is that the common man can find no reason to call something evil except that it promotes disease or poverty, or other unpleasant things. Nothing else but pleasure seems to be in the running to count as ethically good (353D). This argument, it is true, is made in the context of examining the beliefs of the common man, but it is the only other reason Socrates gives for identifying the pleasant with the good. Even in the context of the beliefs of the common man it is troublesome, though. Socrates gets his conclusion, it seems, only by ignoring many other views that can plausibly be ascribed to the common man. Most important among these, I think, is the view that ethical value attaches mainly to those actions that promote the general or the common well-being. What makes an action honourable is that it is in service to and

promotes happiness in the community and not merely in the individual who performs it. The common man can still, I think, distinguish between those actions that bring pleasure and are honourable and those actions that bring pleasure but are not honourable. The first bring pleasure to or further the interests of members of the group beyond the individual agent himself.

Neither of Socrates's arguments to the conclusion that pleasure is ethically good is entirely successful, then, not even in its own terms. But Socrates has, at least, got Protagoras and the others to see the issues with which they are dealing in his, Socrates's, terms, and that is no small accomplishment. Protagoras, recall, had introduced a pragmatist view of the nature of value, a view according to which goodness is merely an instrumental property—anything that is good is so in virtue of its efficacy in bringing about some end—, not a property that final ends themselves can have. On Protagoras's pragmatist view, then, the question whether pleasure itself, the experience of pleasure itself, is good, makes little sense. In fact, no question about whether something is good in itself can make much sense. It might very well be the case that all of us have pleasure as our ultimate end, that everything we do we do in order to attain pleasure, but for Protagoras this would be a natural fact about us, like the fact that typically we have ten fingers, not something open to ethical evaluation.

Socrates, on the interpretation of the *Protagoras* developed here, was, then, aware of the pragmatist implications of both Protagoras's long speech and his answer to the question about the relation between benefit and the good. These implications disturbed him, for he realized that were they to come to the fore, they would put him and Protagoras at too great a distance from each other for his argumentative strategies to have much effect. But Socrates came to the discussion with a clear goal, to dissuade his friend Hippocrates from taking up with the Sophists. Thus, Socrates, in order to defeat Protagoras in argument and, thereby, to save Hippocrates from corruption, must manoeuvre to ensure that Protagoras argues on his, Socrates's, terms. One way in which he kept Protagoras from questioning his terms was to ask him to represent the views of

the many. Most important, it is also for this reason that Socrates accused Protagoras of speaking at too great a length, counting on Protagoras's vanity to cause him to rise to the bait. It did. First came the discussion of whether and how to proceed, then came the discussion of Simonides's poem. When the main themes of the dialogue were rejoined, what he had said earlier was far out of Protagoras's sight and mind. Rather than question Socrates's questions and the ways in which they were formulated, as he had before, Protagoras served as a compliant foil for Socrates's irony.

This interpretation enables us also to appreciate the major reversal in the dialogue. By the end of their discussion, Socrates has come to the conclusion that all the virtues are identical to wisdom, and he notes that wisdom, or at least that part of it that consists in knowledge, is teachable, if anything is. That virtue is teachable is, again, something Protagoras himself contends, and that Socrates had originally doubted. Just before his long speech early in his discussion with Socrates, Protagoras had said that he would not waste Hippocrates's time by teaching him mathematics or science or music, but would start straightaway to teach him the arts of caring for oneself and for the city (320C). Protagoras, Plato here suggests, thinks of virtue not as bearing any important connections to theoretical knowledge at all, for knowledge of math and science is no part of it, but simply as a form of practical know-how, a set of skills. Now, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates says that were virtue something other than knowledge then "obviously it could not be taught" (361B), or at least, "this would make it least likely to be teachable" (361C). Socrates here implies that Protagoras, since he lacks a clear understanding of the relation of virtue to theoretical knowledge, has an impoverished conception of virtue, and thus must not be much of a teacher of it. Protagoras is at best a trainer, one who trains young men in proper comportment, not a teacher of the art of living, an art that requires one to have a true understanding of the world.

I said at the beginning of this essay that my interpretation of the *Protagoras* will uncover a unifying philosophical thesis and an edifying pedagogical lesson. The unifying philosophical thesis

that has emerged is, I think, that if we are to hold that virtue is teachable, as Protagoras does, and that it is of ethical and not just practical significance, then we had better be prepared to say that virtue is theoretical knowledge, as Protagoras isn't, and, moreover, that it is knowledge of the ethically good. To state the edifying pedagogical lesson, we need first to consider Plato's own relationship to this unifying thesis. Again, our motivation in asking about Plato's relation to the *Protagoras* is our concern to understand the strange feeling of being squashed and stretched that we take from reading it. There's an experimental quality to this dialogue, as if Plato is trying out certain ideas, seeing how far they can be made to travel. Maybe the failure of Socrates's arguments to establish any of his theses is instructive, just as the failure of a scientific experiment to produce a hypothesized result is. Now whatever we say about Plato's relationship to the *Protagoras* will, of necessity, be somewhat speculative, but so long as our speculations draw on what we actually find in the dialogues, they should remain within acceptable bounds. One thing we find is that while in later dialogues Plato returns to some of the themes found in the *Protagoras*, he never again employs its main arguments. Socrates continues to maintain that knowledge of the good is sufficient for ethically sound behaviour, but he does not do so on the basis of the argument that we inevitably seek pleasure in all we do. Also of note is that Socrates in later dialogues in fact argues *against* some of the important theses he had argued for in the earlier dialogue. In particular, at least beginning with the *Republic* and the introduction of the early theory of forms, Socrates argues against identifying the good with the pleasant. All this suggests that Plato discovered through writing the *Protagoras* that one could not base an ethics either on sociological reflections about what makes possible the existence of human communities and then sustains them, as Protagoras seeks to do, or on the psychological doctrine that all actions aim at their agent's pleasure—or, at least, that one cannot do so with sound arguments. The pedagogical lesson of the *Protagoras*, then, is that it is futile to look only to ethology, sociology, psychology or any other

empirical science to find the origin and nature of ethical value. One must, that is, look beyond this world to another.

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