

Sophia kai epistēmē ... kratiston: Protagoras on Knowledge and the Virtues

At the conclusion of Protagoras's long speech on the teachability of aretē, Socrates raises three disjunctive questions (Pl. Pr. 329b-330b). Protagoras's successive responses reveal his exact position on the disunity of the virtues (justice, temperance, piety, courage and wisdom) and their easy separability. This much is clear. But neither this dialogue, nor its companion the Laches, "give[s] us a clear, unambiguous account of how [in Socrates's view] the virtues are supposed to form a unity... He clearly holds that these virtues form a unity in the sense that one cannot have one of them without having all the rest, but whether he intends to make the stronger claim that the virtues are identical with each other is not clear" (Devereux 2006).

But if we cannot with confidence identify the Socratic position, we can nonetheless discover further details of Protagoras's conception of the virtues and aretē (Hemmenway 1996). There is first his heated response to Socrates' probing the relation of goodness and benefit (Pr. 334: agatha, ophelima): "the very same thing," exclaims Protagoras, is good for an entity like man when applied in one way but detrimental when applied in another way. This shows, says Protagoras, how "varied and many-sided a thing is goodness." This Relational Thesis (as Taylor 1991 terms it) establishes, at the very least, Protagoras's propensity for viewing what is good as what is good for, that is, useful or beneficial to, an entity. As we shall observe, it is also our first indication that *knowledge* of the good is, in Protagoras's view, purely utilitarian (cf. Weiss 1990).

Much later we find Protagoras agreeing with Socrates "that [knowledge] is something fine (kalon) and such as to rule man, and that if someone knows what is good and bad, he would never be conquered by anything so as to do other than what knowledge bids him." Indeed, when Protagoras voices this agreement, he adds: "it would be an especial disgrace to me of all people not to maintain that wisdom and knowledge is the mightiest of human things" (352c-d: sophia

kai epistēmē ... kratiston; cf. 330a). Later still, when Socrates is putting the final touches on his refutation of the contrary view, held by the common man, that “knowledge is not anything strong” (352b), he urges the common man to betake himself to Protagoras and the other sophists, who can impart to him their powerful knowledge of the good and bad. But by this time Protagoras has embraced the hedonic thesis: what is pleasant is good—indeed, the pleasant *is* the good. Since Protagoras has further agreed (despite initial misgivings) that “having a pleasant life to the end” is good, and that the actions leading to that end are praiseworthy (*kala*), the hedonic calculus is the knowledge that confers the greatest human benefit *and* the greatest praise. When Socrates next returns for one last time to the question of courage, we find that courageous actions are those that best evince the knowledge of the hedonic calculus. In fact, courage turns out to be nothing other than the right-thinking hedonist’s knowledge of what is to be feared and what not (360d5).

From one perspective, we see here the culmination of a Socratic argument for the unity of the virtues (or virtue). Perhaps we also find reason to believe that the Socrates of the Protagoras himself holds a hedonist position. But if we view the matter from another perspective, wisdom and courage have emerged as the finest illustration of what the sophist is able to teach others. Regarding wisdom: at 334 Protagoras declared *his own* expert knowledge of the circumstances determining whether a thing may be good for or harmful to a man. And just as Protagoras there celebrated the physician’s knowledge of what is beneficial or harmful for his patient, so at the end of the hedonic argument Socrates establishes, with Protagoras’s approval, that he, the sophist, is the one whose knowledge is the “cure” of unhappiness in life. As for courage: here we may take up Hemmenway’s observations about the Great Speech and the conversation that precedes it,

and then further suggest how to kalon, the praiseworthy, figures in the discussion. This promises in turn to shed light on Protagoras's promise to make his student kalos kai agathos (328b).

Bibliography

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