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978-1-107-04665-8 - Plato's Anti-Hedonism and the Protagoras

J. Clerk Shaw

Excerpt

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Introduction

Hedonism – the view that pleasure is the good – offers a perennially tempting account of human flourishing. Plato is generally thought to resist the temptations of hedonism; his Socrates persistently argues against identifying pleasure with the good. The *Protagoras* is a mysterious outlier, though. There, Socrates introduces hedonism without any apparent prompting, argues for it, and uses it to defend further claims central to his larger goals in the dialogue. This anomaly obscures Plato's considered ethical position, so it provokes consternation and debate. Existing scholarship typically seeks to reconcile the passage in which Socrates presents hedonism with the rest of Plato's corpus in one of two ways. Some argue that we need not attribute hedonism to Socrates even in the *Protagoras*, while others argue that relevant passages in other dialogues do not actually conflict with the hedonism found there.¹

This book takes a more ambitious tack. I side with those who deny that Socrates endorses hedonism, but existing arguments for that position can often seem *ad hoc* and philosophically uninspiring. I improve on existing views in two main ways. First, I do not focus narrowly on the passage in which Socrates presents hedonism. Instead, I offer a reading of the wider *Protagoras* that gives hedonism a crucial role in that work without attributing it to Socrates. Placing hedonism into this wider interpretive context avoids the whiff of special pleading that attaches to much current scholarship on the issue. Second, the resulting picture not only reconciles the *Protagoras* with other dialogues, but harmonizes it with them and even illuminates their anti-hedonism.

More specifically, my main thesis is that the *Protagoras* depicts Protagoras as having internalized, through shame, an incoherent complex of popular evaluative attitudes. Hedonism lies at the core of that incoherent complex. Plato's Socrates elsewhere describes how sophists internalize popular

¹ For a partial survey of existing approaches, see the introduction to Chapter 1.

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attitudes, but he remains vague about what those attitudes are and how they fit together. The *Protagoras* dramatizes Plato's critique of sophistry; in so doing, it fleshes out that critique by helping to specify the content and structure of the popular views that sophists and most other intellectual and political elites internalize. Thus, my reading upholds the unanimous scholarly opinion that the *Protagoras* critiques sophistry, but resists inadequate readings on which Plato either depicts sophists as manipulative corruptors or simply expresses animus toward competing intellectuals.

If I am right, then the *Protagoras* is so far from being an outlier that it perfectly illustrates and deepens Plato's critique of hedonism. It seems to be an outlier because Protagoras tries to conceal his internalized views, out of shame. But Plato signals both his shame and his concealment, and in the *Protagoras* and other dialogues, he offers the resources to explain that shame and concealment. Thus, my reading of the *Protagoras* also has implications for Plato's ethical thought more generally. Indeed, the negative side of Plato's ethical project, especially as found in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*, consists largely of attempts to diagnose and undermine (i) hedonism and the complex of popular evaluative attitudes that stem from it, and (ii) the mechanisms by which those attitudes are socially reproduced and maintained.

Such claims call for an extended defense, which this book provides. Before I sketch my main line of argument, though, it will be useful even for seasoned readers of the *Protagoras* to recall what the dialogue contains and how the problems I discuss arise in context. So, I begin with a brief, anodyne summary of the whole work. Later discussions will naturally fill in many details glossed over here in the interests of brevity.

Outline of the *Protagoras*

The *Protagoras* opens with banter between Socrates and an anonymous friend, who teases him about his love for Alcibiades. Socrates soon mentions that Alcibiades aided him earlier that day – as it emerges, in a conversation with Protagoras. His friend, previously unaware that Protagoras was in town, is keen to hear more, and Socrates agrees to describe their encounter (309a–10a). The rest of the *Protagoras* consists of Socrates' uninterrupted narration.

Socrates first describes how he came to talk to Protagoras. His story begins before dawn, as his young friend Hippocrates wakes him with the news that Protagoras is in Athens – which Socrates already knew. Hippocrates is keen to learn from Protagoras, and he wants help from

Outline of the Protagoras

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Socrates in approaching him (310b–11a). Socrates uses the early hour as an excuse to delay his friend and examine his aims. Hippocrates finds himself unable to say just what he wants from Protagoras, and Socrates urges caution in educational matters (311a–14c). The two of them then set off, talking all the way to Callias' house, where Protagoras is staying. There, an irritable doorman initially takes them for sophists and denies them entry, but he is eventually persuaded to let them in (314c–e).

Socrates and Hippocrates take in the scene, and then they approach Protagoras. Socrates and Protagoras discuss whether to talk alone or in front of the others, and finally they settle in to converse before everyone present (314e–17e). Socrates first asks what Hippocrates has to gain by studying with Protagoras – the very question Hippocrates could not answer. Protagoras eventually claims to teach general skill at deliberation; with a little prompting he identifies this with political expertise (318a–19a). Socrates, though, doubts whether this can be taught at all, first because the wise Athenians listen to any citizen on political questions (whereas if politics could be taught and learned, they would consult the experts), and second because excellent politicians often fail to transmit their virtue to their sons (319a–20b).

Protagoras replies to these objections in his “Great Speech.” His account of virtue's teachability begins with a myth about the origins of humanity and human society, but he soon reverts to direct exposition. Briefly, Protagoras argues that everyone must have some political excellence for human society to exist and benefit its members, so everyone can – and wants to, and does – teach this to everyone else. Hence the Athenians listen to anyone speak about politics. However, people vary in their abilities both as learners and as teachers. Variation in ability to learn explains why great politicians often fail to transmit virtue to their sons; those sons had less natural ability. Variation in ability to teach salvages Protagoras' special role as a teacher of virtue (320c–28d).

Socrates pauses to admire Protagoras' answer, but tries to turn their conversation to brief question-and-answer for an apparently new line of inquiry: is virtue one or many (328d–29d)? Protagoras contends that it is many (329d–30b), and Socrates offers a series of arguments that seek to unify justice and piety (330b–32a), wisdom and prudence (332a–33b), and justice and prudence (333b–34c). Diversionary tactics in the form of a longer speech from Protagoras leave this last argument unfinished and even imperil the entire conversation. Socrates refuses to engage further, even at Callias' behest, unless Protagoras adheres to the short question-and-answer format and answers the questions actually asked of him (334c–36b). Alcibiades first

intervenes to take Socrates' side at this point, but Critias, Prodicus, and Hippias all offer their own thoughts about how to proceed, and they agree to Hippias' idea of establishing a supervisor to enforce a compromise (336b–38b). Socrates, however, objects to this notion and proposes instead that he and Protagoras take turns questioning each other, starting with Protagoras as questioner. Protagoras initially resists the idea, but in the end he can hardly refuse (338b–e).

Protagoras uses his turn as questioner to challenge Socrates' grasp of a poem by Simonides. He quickly puts Socrates in the position of defending the poem's coherence against an apparent contradiction: Simonides says that it is hard to become good, but he also criticizes Pittacus for saying that it is hard to be good (338b–39d). Socrates appeals to Prodicus for help in drawing distinctions that might remove the apparent contradiction. First, they distinguish being from becoming. However, Protagoras objects that this puts Simonides in the untenable position of saying that virtue, though acquired with difficulty, is easily retained. Second, they distinguish two senses of “hard” (χάλεπόν) – “difficult” and “bad” – and Prodicus says that Simonides means “bad.” Both Protagoras and Socrates reject this proposal, though (339e–41e). Socrates then offers an extended interpretation of the poem as challenging Pittacus throughout. On his reading, Simonides says that it is truly difficult to become good, but not properly speaking difficult for a human being to be good, as Pittacus says; rather, this is impossible for a human being (341e–44a). The contrast between the difficult and the impossible removes Protagoras' objection to the initial solution – that by criticizing Pittacus' claim that it is hard to be good, Simonides commits himself to saying that it is easy to be good. Socrates then interprets the rest of the poem accordingly. Along the way, he reads into it characteristically Socratic claims about knowledge, action, and the good (344a–47a).

Socrates now encounters more procedural difficulties. Hippias wants to present his own reading of Simonides' poem, and when Socrates tries to return to question-and-answer inquiry and abandon poetry, Protagoras again resists (347a–48b). Finally, with help from Alcibiades, order is restored. After some conciliatory words, Socrates restates his earlier question about the unity of virtue. At this point, Protagoras concedes that the rest of virtue is one, but he insists that courage is distinct (348b–49d). Socrates responds with a thorny initial argument that courage is wisdom (349e–50c), to which Protagoras objects (350c–51b). Socrates seems not to respond to his objections; instead, he suddenly introduces hedonism into the discussion (351b–e) and then just as suddenly shifts to the question whether wisdom is strong (352a–53b). In these two initial skirmishes, Socrates mentions

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popular claims that some pleasures are bad and that wisdom is weak. Despite Protagoras' protests, the ensuing conversation notionally seeks to persuade the many first that they are committed to hedonism (353c–55a) and then that hedonism undermines their view that wisdom can be ruled by pleasure (355a–57e). After Protagoras, Prodicus, and Hippias agree to these arguments (358a–d), Socrates draws on this material, or extends the same strategy, in a final argument that courage is wisdom (358d–60e).

The conversation closes with Socrates' reflections on the argument, especially the relationship between virtue's unity in wisdom and its teachability (361a–d). He wants to keep inquiring, but Protagoras has had enough. Protagoras makes a few closing remarks, whereupon Socrates and Hippocrates depart (361d–62a).

Overview of the book

As this summary shows, it is difficult to see why Socrates introduces hedonism into the conversation if not simply because he endorses the view. Nothing else in the dialogue obviously indicates another reason for introducing it. Again, though, if Socrates endorses hedonism, then the *Protagoras* seems to conflict with the rest of Plato's dialogues. Scholars who attribute hedonism to Socrates usually argue that those other discussions, or at least some relevant range of them, do not conflict with the particular form of hedonism found in the *Protagoras*. So, before offering a positive account of hedonism's function in the *Protagoras*, I show why this approach fails.

Chapter 1 undermines efforts to reconcile hedonism in the *Protagoras* with other Platonic dialogues – even those that do not overtly reject hedonism, such as the *Apology* and *Crito*. Proposed reconciliations fail in the first instance because the *Protagoras* presents a specifically bodily hedonism that is utterly out of step with Plato's views everywhere else. One might hope to remove this problem by abstracting away from the bodily focus of the hedonism Socrates presents. However, this response fails in two ways. First, none of the proposed abstractions successfully remove the tensions with other works. Second, this strategy abandons the best argument for attributing hedonism to Socrates in the *Protagoras*: that doing so takes the text at face value.

Chapter 2 defends a novel claim needed as a premise for Chapter 3: Protagoras thinks that wisdom is weak, and in particular that it can be ruled by fear. I argue for this claim through a close reading of Socrates' initial argument that courage is wisdom and Protagoras' objection to that

argument (349d–51b). First, I reinterpret a key term in the passage, *μᾶνία*, and I apply familiar Platonic claims about causation and opposition to yield a plausible argument. In light of this reading, I then turn to Protagoras' objection, where I reinterpret a second key term, *θυμός*. This second reinterpretation reveals the real force of Protagoras' complaint: wisdom can be ruled by fear, i.e., it is weak. This reading of the passage ultimately helps to explain otherwise puzzling features of the ensuing discussion about hedonism and the strength of wisdom (351b–57e).

Chapter 3 presents the larger reading of the *Protagoras* in which I situate Socrates' discussion of hedonism. This account is partly inspired by Charles Kahn's classic article, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*." Kahn contends that the *Gorgias* can only be understood by attending to the role of shame in three crucial refutations: Gorgias is ashamed to deny that he teaches justice (461b); Polus is ashamed to deny that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it (482d–e); and Callicles is ashamed to approve the life of the *κίναϊδος*,² as his hedonism requires (494e–95c, though Callicles perseveres through his shame).³ I argue that the *Protagoras* must be understood as containing similar moments of shame. Protagoras thinks that injustice can be prudent, that wisdom is weak, and that pleasure is the good. However, he is ashamed to profess these opinions openly, so he tries to conceal them (333c, 352c–d, 351c–d). When these passages are so understood, the dialectical exchanges containing them can be seen to covertly address Protagoras' own views, thereby resolving many stubborn interpretive puzzles.

Chapter 4 turns to the *Gorgias* and fleshes out the striking parallels between that dialogue and the *Protagoras*. Shame figures prominently in each, and in broadly the same ways. Most notably, the particular topics that shame Protagoras closely resemble those that shame Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. It takes some argument to establish these claims; in particular, it takes a somewhat different reading of shame's role in the *Gorgias* from those given by Kahn or others who have discussed the topic in his wake. Once these similarities between the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* are revealed, an obvious question presents itself: why are these dialogues similar in these particular ways?

Chapter 5 begins to explain the similarities. It departs from a striking feature of Protagoras' three moments of shame: the many figure prominently

² Partially following Davidson 1997, I take a heterodox view of the *κίναϊδος* as a general sexual profligate.

³ See Kahn 1983. I disagree with Kahn on some points, but agree with him against Cooper 1999 that Socrates' interlocutors feel shame at these three moments; see Chapter 4.

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in all three cases as the nominal subject whose views Socrates examines. These repeated references to the many reflect Socrates' deep criticism of both sophists and orators: their views are derived from popular opinion. The many inculcate popular opinion both within that class and at large through shame and the threat of punishment (*R.* 493a–c; *G.* 510a–d, 513a–c). Protagoras manifests his assimilation to popular views when he calls these mechanisms of social control *education* (320c–28d). The views that shame Protagoras and others are legacies of their internalization of popular opinion. As one might expect, the larger Platonic corpus does in fact represent the many as holding those same views.⁴

Chapters 6 and 7 describe and critique the complex of evaluative attitudes held by the many and internalized by elites (including sophists). Chapter 6 explores the central commitment of popular morality, hedonism. While we will “do and acquire and believe” whatever is merely reputed to be just or noble, everyone seeks what really is good (*R.* 505d).⁵ So, hedonism must be intrinsically plausible. Hedonism is intrinsically plausible because pleasures and pains exhaust our empirical evidence about the good. Without an alternative, this suggests pleasure as a natural candidate for the good. However, much of our empirical evidence is distorted. Context effects like those affecting color perception divorce real from perceived hedonic magnitudes. In particular, context effects make bodily and reputational pleasures seem greater than they are, and, more importantly, greater than the soul's pleasures. (Thus, Socrates connects hedonism with strong desires for bodily and reputational goods and presents a specifically bodily form of hedonism in the *Protagoras*.) Correcting these errors requires proper measurement of pleasures, which requires in turn a non-hedonic standard of measurement.

Chapter 7 explains how hedonism distorts conceptions of virtue. First, it generates a conception of justice as helping friends and harming enemies, together with the idea that injustice can be prudent. Again, Plato thinks that hedonism makes our happiness seem to depend on bodily and reputational goods. Those are competitive goods, and prudence in pursuing competitive goods produces multiply-embedded and multiply-overlapping pleonectic alliances (including friendships, families, and

⁴ Kamtekar 2005 makes part of this case by arguing that Callicles has internalized the many's hedonism. As with Kahn, I disagree with Kamtekar on some points, but her reading inspired key parts of my own.

⁵ Except where otherwise noted, translations of the *Protagoras* are my own, translations from the *Republic* are taken from Reeve 2004, and translations from other dialogues are taken from Cooper 1997, sometimes with light revisions.

cities). That produces the view that one should, as a matter of justice, help friends (pleonectic allies) and harm enemies (pleonectic rivals). Injustice toward enemies is thus enshrined as a part of justice. Hedonism distorts attitudes about piety in related ways. Further, it generates the view that wisdom is weak in the face of pleasure and fear (even though it actually entails that wisdom is strong). If wisdom is weak, then it is distinct from courage and temperance, which allow one to resist pleasure and fear, respectively; hence, virtue is many. These misconceptions of wisdom, courage, temperance, and virtue in general are closely connected to the notion that virtue cannot be taught. Chapter 7 also describes intense social pressures to engage in double-think on all of these topics.

Chapter 8 discusses enduring popular hostility to sophists (even though they have internalized popular morality) and to Socrates. Each seems to threaten certain pleonectic alliances, whether by strengthening rivals, forming new rivals, or eroding the allegiance of talented youth to the group and to its structuring commitments. Members of pleonectic alliances think their happiness depends upon the group's success and upon their allies' allegiance to the group and its structuring commitments. Naturally, then, they are hostile to anyone who challenges the group in any of the ways just described. Thus, Protagoras is ashamed to openly express several views that he has previously internalized through shame.

Plato's depiction of Protagoras manifests his lifelong obsession with how natural elites are corrupted by internalizing popular opinion through shame before the many and previously corrupted elites. Further, the contents of popular opinion – hedonism and the misconceptions of virtue stemming from it – remain roughly constant across the dialogues. The present book traces these commonalities, revealing coherence – not mere consistency – among treatments of pleasure in the *Protagoras* and other dialogues, especially the *Gorgias* and *Republic*. It thereby establishes, at long last, an intelligible and harmonious place for the *Protagoras* in the Platonic corpus – one that also sheds significant light on Plato's anti-hedonism and its central role in his ethical thought.

Note on methodology

I hope this summary piques the reader's interest enough to see whether its claims can be made good. However, some readers may already worry about *how* its claims will be made good. Those attuned to scholarly debates about how to read Plato may have noticed that my interpretive methods are ecumenical. For the most part, I assume little about the chronology of

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Plato's dialogues; the development or unity of Plato's thought; the roles of argument analysis and literary analysis in understanding a Platonic dialogue; whether we can straightforwardly regard Socrates as speaking for Plato, and so on. However, I will also describe my actual interpretive practices so that readers know roughly what to expect.

First, I generally talk as though the character Socrates speaks for Plato, and as though Socrates has and expresses positive commitments. Still, I hope that those who sharply distinguish Plato from Socrates, or who think of Socrates and Plato as skeptical inquirers, can abstract away from this way of talking and consider my main claims (or suitably adjusted versions of them) from within their own interpretive perspectives.

Second, I refer freely to any Platonic text that seems relevant to the interpretive questions at hand. Some who believe that Plato's views developed extensively over time may wince when, for example, I cite the *Sophist* to inform my understanding of Protagoras' character. My first interpretive instincts are unitarian, but I neither assume nor argue for any general unitarianism here. Such larger questions must be approached piecemeal. I do claim to identify an important common thread that crosses widely-accepted developmental lines (especially the line between "early" and "middle" dialogues). However, even if my reading is persuasive, it neither entitles me to claim, nor does it commit me to finding, more general continuity. Developmentalists accept that there is some continuity across Plato's dialogues, and so may well be able to accept my main claims (or, again, suitably adjusted versions of them) without abandoning their larger views.

Third, this project involves both argument analysis and literary analysis. There may be some few partisans who agitate for one of these interpretive modes to the exclusion of the other, but they are few and far between. Almost everyone recognizes that both modes of analysis are legitimate tools in the interpretation of Plato. Disagreement concerns how to combine them, either in general or on particular occasions. As with questions about development or unity across the dialogues, I prefer to start from particular cases rather than mounting a general argument for the priority of one or the other mode of analysis, or for their equal footing. Naturally, I do not expect that my judgments about how to proceed in particular cases will meet with universal assent. In my experience, though, progress in these debates occurs precisely in discussions about particular cases, not in those about grand theories. Hence, I simply proceed as seems best to me and hope that those who disagree with my judgment in particular cases will engage precisely at that level.

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The best possible interpretation of a Platonic dialogue would make optimal sense of everything: every explicit claim and argument in the text; every characterization and dramatic detail; its relation to evidence of all sorts from elsewhere in Plato; even its relation to all parts of the larger historical record, both philological and archaeological. That is the work of an entire scholarly community, not of a single book, which must inevitably be more selective along every one of those dimensions. Questions of what to focus on and how to proceed on particular occasions cannot be answered by general, true, informative interpretive principles, but are inevitably matters of judgment. (Call this “interpretive particularism.”) The best way to make the case for my ecumenical approach and my choice of particular approaches in particular contexts – probably the only way – is simply to argue as seems best to me, and to produce a compelling interpretation. I proceed now to that task.