

Protagoras

Platon

September 15-16, 2016

Once again the issue whether virtuousness can be taught is brought to the fore. The great sophist Protagoras is in town and Socrates curious and intrigued seeks him out, where he is the guest of a rich citizen along with disciples, supporters and hangers-on. Socrates and a friend gain admission, but not without some initial difficulty. They make their way to the great man himself and state their mission. When it comes to the choice of a private meeting and a public spectacle, Protagoras naturally decides for the latter as he is after all a showman, more concerned about making an impression than to pursue truth. He opens up with telling a story to make his point that virtue can be taught, after all this is what education is all about. True it also involves the transmission of specific skills, but such skills, of which he gives a few examples, need not to be mastered universally. Hence when it comes to specific questions, only the advice of experts are enlisted and listened to, while in matters of virtue everyone is an expert. After that Socrates starts to ask questions in his usual style of a relentless interrogator with the seeming intention of tripping his partner in the discussion. Obviously Protagoras is uncomfortable with the situation, after all Socrates has the lead and he is reduced to a secondary position. But he re-enters into the limelight by giving lengthy answers to Socrates queries, which to the outside observer seems dangerously close to a mere nit-picking on words trying to reveal spurious contradictions. There are a host of very positive features such as respect to the gods, justicemindedness, but are they the same or do they differ and can they even contradict each other, Socrates wonders. Could you do the right thing and still be disrespectful to the gods? But Socrates is not happy, he finds the lengthy replies of Protagoras to be mere obfuscation, although he is too polite (or crafty) to say so much, but instead he refers to his own feebleness, in particular his limited capacity to remember and thus easily losing the thread of an argument. Could not the discussion be conducted more on his terms, with Protagoras giving short and to the point answers to his questions? A man of such wisdom and sophistication as Protagoras could surely do that, otherwise he would be no better than a book, which can expound eloquently and at length on a subject but be unable to answer the simplest question. Protagoras refuses to budge, he has his style of doing things and sees no reason why he should compromise. Socrates complains. He would not be able to keep up with an Olympian runner (a specific name is brought up), so if he would be able to keep on a conversation with him, the latter has to walk slowly, because Socrates cannot run fast but the other can run both fast and slow. Socrates threatens to leave but the audience begs him to stay and at the end a compromise of sorts is made, and Protagoras starts to ask a question, a lengthy one concerning a poem about the difficulties of achieving virtue and wisdom. Socrates tries to answer, while Protagoras points out that the poet, whose poem under discussion Socrates lauds, contradicts himself. Socrates is taken aback, his mind is temporarily blacked out, as if he had been hit hard in a boxing match, and only with some effort does he scramble to his feet again. The simile

with a boxing match is of course very apt. Plato himself was no stranger to such physical combats, and the surviving likenesses of him reveals a sturdy man, far from the aristocratic refinement his philosophy projects. Thus what we are witnessing is an intellectual boxing match where Socrates challenges the older and established Protagoras. For a sophist such as Protagoras winning a debate is everything, Plato seems to indicate, the discovery of truth at most incidental to it. Not that Plato totally disagrees, he can appreciate a fight as any man, and Socrates, not entirely lacking in the killer instinct, is torn between his frustration and his desire for blood, entering the fray with gusto as eager to play the game as his opponent. Anyway he tires of the lengthy discussion on the poem, after he has pointed out that there is, pace his opponent, no real contradiction at all, and likens the whole thing to the entertainment boorish people procure for their parties in order to be relieved from the onerous task of entertaining themselves. In other words one should not discuss the views of a poet not present (in fact long since dead) but ones own views. The discussion continues, Protagoras claims that virtues such as courage may even be had by evil people and thus differs from the other virtues. This is interesting. Socrates presses him on the issue, especially as to the connection between courage and enterprise. Courageous people are enterprising, Protagoras holds, but enterprising people may not be courageous. Relevant to the discussion is fear, and hence what fear has to do with deficient knowledge. More generally there is the issue of pain and pleasure. Pain is bad, pleasure is good, but can one equate them? Is pleasure always good, and pain always bad? Surely there are pains which are good for you, as when a medical treatment is painful, and pleasures which are bad, such as the effects of an overindulgence in food and drink. Any action carries with it not only immediate pains and pleasures which have to be weighed against each other, but also future pains and pleasures. How does one compare an immediate pleasure with a distant pain it may cause, and conversely? Things that are far away look smaller than what is close. How do you come to an assessment of real sizes? Only by measuring, and measurement is knowledge, and thus only with superior knowledge you may make the necessary calculations involved in comparisons over time. If your knowledge is deficient, you may choose to do the ultimately bad. No one willingly, Socrates seems to maintain, chooses the bad over the good, it is just a matter of knowledge to make the right choice. In that way Socrates slowly turns the question about virtue to turn into one to do with knowledge. Something that Protagoras instinctively objects to. But it is only with this connection that virtue can be taught, Socrates points out, hence having, like a skilled wrestler, put his opponent in an untenable position, contradicting his first claim, that virtue is indeed teachable. And if the whole point of sophism is to teach virtue and it turns out to be impossible, how come they then feel entitled to charge for their putative services? But this is not spelled out.

Plato's weapon is irony. By employing irony you make a secret pact with the reader, playing up to human vanity, assuring him or her that you and the author are smarter than the general reader, who may take what is written on face value, while you know that the real intention is hidden from the simpletons. Nevertheless many readers fall into the trap, not realizing the hand which has been stretched out to them, and thereby condemning themselves to the status of fools. The dialogues are not about what they purport to be. The criticism against Protagoras are, as already noted, never spelled out, but left for the

reader to formulate in his mind, drawing his own conclusions, the work of which has already been prepared for by the author,

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