Protagoras ... or Plato?
II. The Protagoras

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From the viewpoint of Plato’s techniques in manipulating historical figures, Protagoras is even more startling than Republic I or Theaetetus. Like them, it is organized around themes Plato wanted to discuss; and like them, it reaches the themes by deliberately perverting an ambiguous formula of its chief antagonist. But in the accompanying arguments neither of the other two quite approaches (though Rep. I 343 c comes close) the violence of the means employed in Protagoras: the passages apparently irrelevant to the main strategy; the disproportionate length of some of these; the false leads; the use of acknowledged fallacies; the awkward transitions; the internal inconsistencies.

We shall not be here concerned in detail with most of these features as they appear in the sections on the identity of the virtues (330 c-334 b, 349 a-351 b), on Simonides’ poem (338 e-349 a), and on hedonism (351 b-359 a) and its application to the problem of the unity of courage and wisdom (359 a-360 a). All these sections – and the Dialogue as a whole – constitute a kind of manipulation of Protagoras, to be sure; but an adequate analysis of them would carry us far beyond the permissible limit of space; and, in any case, they are not quite the kind of manipulation we have been chiefly examining in Republic I and Theaetetus, as Prof. Kerferd has pointed out to me. This kind of manipulation – the kind that turns on deliberate mis-interpretation of an opponent’s formula, either by Socrates (Theaetetus) or by the opponent himself (Republic I) – appears in full light only in

1 On these, cf. “Thrasy machus ... or Plato?”, Phronesis 16 (1971) 142-163; and “Protagoras ... or Plato?”, ibid. 18 (1973) 115-138. The latter will hereinafter be cited as “Protagoras I”.

2 All of these, plus the diverse origins of the material used in the Dialogue, have been demonstrated to superfluity by O. Gigon, “Studien zu Platons Protagoras”, in Phyllisbläa für Peter van der Mühll (1946), 91-152.

3 In Theaetetus 169 d it is Socrates who says, misleadingly, “Protagoras agreed with us that the wise are superior to others with respect to the better and the worse” (cf. “Protagoras I”, p. 132 f.). In Republic I 343 c it is Thrasy machus himself who misleadingly introduces “another’s good” as if synonymous with his earlier “advantage of the stronger” (cf. Phronesis 16 (1971) 145ff.).
the first third of the Dialogue (309 a-328 d), though this appearance sets the stage for all the other kinds which follow, and indeed, is the direct cause of one kind – that in the Dialogue as a whole.\(^4\)

In Protagoras, Plato wanted to discuss the teachability (in some sense) of (moral) virtue, its unity, and the ground of both in wisdom (σοφία), or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), or skill (τέχνη), (357 b); i.e., in some precise knowledge of an objective standard – in this case, of what is truly advantageous. Thus, there are two main themes interwoven in the Dialogue, one moral, the other cognitive, both being directed against Sophistic concepts and practices. The moral turns on the meaning of ἀρετή (specifically, moral excellence, especially justice and temperance, vs. excellence in administering household and state); the cognitive, on the distinctions between knowledge how and knowledge that, and between doxa and episteme – a theme prefigured at Protagoras’ first appearance in the Dialogue by his open contempt for the technai, arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music as instruments of higher education (318 d f.).\(^5\) The two themes begin to coalesce in the disguised attempts to identify the other moral virtues with sophia in 330 c-334 b, 349 a-351 b; and they remain united in Socrates’ interpretation of Simonides’ poem and in the “hedonistic calculus”. But before any of this could occur, the moral content of arete had to be established – by whatever means.

Plato begins with what may be the only authentic pronouncement of Protagoras in the entire Dialogue: his profession, he says (explaining

\(^4\) The latter manipulation is signalled in 361 a-b where Socrates remarks on the unconscious reversal in Protagoras’ position – from his original assumption that arete is teachable, to strongly opposing the thesis that it is knowledge, though the corollary of the latter is that virtue is not teachable. For urbanity’s (or irony’s) sake, Socrates confesses to a converse reversal on his own part; but, whatever its motive, that confession is not to be taken seriously. The fact is, of course, that both reversals are a direct consequence of the manipulation of Protagoras by Socrates-Plato which we shall be considering in the following pages: Protagoras’ original version of arete, as euboulia, is not teachable according to Socrates; the manipulated version, as moral virtue involving knowledge of an (unspecified, 357 b 5) objective standard, is.

\(^5\) Cf. G. M. A. Grube, “The Structural Unity of the Protagoras”, C.Q. 27 (1933), 203-207, though Grube perhaps makes too much of this by relating it directly to Plato’s own program of study in Rep. VII. The point here seems to be the same as that made by the presence of Theodorus throughout much of the discussion in Theaetetus; viz., to contrast Protagoras’ subjectivity with some admittedly objective knowledge; cf. “Protagoras I”, p. 134, 123 f. and P. Friedländer, Plato 3, 155, 157, al.