Courage in Plato’s Protagoras

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I

The Protagoras, as is well known, depicts Socrates pitted against the famous sophist in a dispute about “the unity of the virtues,” among other things. If Socrates has some difficulty proving the unity of the five virtues, commentators and readers of this dialogue have had as much trouble about the unity of the work, or the connections between the five or so topics appearing in it. Particularly it has been hard to see just why Socrates introduces the question of the unity of the virtues when he does, and what is going on in the hedonism passage where Socrates apparently secures agreement to a principle by the odd means of deriving it from a premise Protagoras says he does not accept, and which we hardly expect Socrates to believe, and which is not necessary to establish what he wants.

I believe that we can make good sense of all this and more if, remembering that the guiding question of the dialogue is whether Protagoras will really be able to deliver the goods he publicly offers, to Hippocrates or anyone else, we follow the question, What about the virtue of courage (ἀνδρεία) for Protagoras? Is it a virtue, can he teach it, do his presuppositions allow him to give it its due? The question is important because, as I shall explain, there is an inconsistency in believing that “Man is the measure of all things” as Plato interprets that maxim in the Theaetetus, and believing that there is anything worth dying for, i.e., that courage in the paradigm case is a valuable trait to the one possessing it. But to follow this thread through the dialogue, we have to see that Plato has laid it down as far back as Protagoras’ long speech.

II

From 320 C to 328 D Protagoras engages in defending the claim that virtue can be taught, against two Socratic objections: The Athenians seem to operate quite successfully on the hypothesis that there are no specialists in the “civic science,” and virtuous men have a notoriously poor average when it comes to raising virtuous sons. Protagoras answers these objections in succession in a great speech which outlines definitely, even if uninten-
tionally, his own idea of virtue. ἄνδρεία receives surprisingly scant homage.²

1. Though the civic art in which the original men were deficient includes the art of war (322 B) and would therefore be expected to bristle, as it were, with courage, Protagoras' actual sketch of civic virtue ignores it. Zeus, fearing the annihilation of the human race, sent respect and right (αἰδώ τε καὶ δίκη — 322 C) to produce order and friendship. A little farther on, we are told that when the Athenians meet to decide nontechnical questions of general import for the city, where everyone's advice is sought, on the assumption that all possess the civic art they are supposed to be characterized by justice and temperance (ἡν δεὶ διὰ δικαιοσύνης πάσαν ίέναι καὶ σωφροσύνης — 323 A). Again there is no mention of courage.

2. Just following the above passage Protagoras undertakes to uncover the universal belief that everyone partakes of justice and the rest of civic virtue (... δικαιοσύνης τε καὶ τῆς ἄλλης πολιτικῆς ἀρετῆς — 323 A).

3. Punishment according to Protagoras is applied to those who exhibit qualities opposed to civic virtue. The ones mentioned are ἀδικία and ἀσέβεια (323 E).

4. At 324 E Protagoras equates “δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ τὸ δοσον” with ἀρετῇ.

5. The only near-mention of courage in Protagoras' whole oration occurs at 326 C, where he includes the overcoming of cowardice as part of a normal education. This is what he says (326 B-C):

In other words, when their souls have been rendered good through exposure to the poets and practice in music, the boys are handed over to trainers of the body. If we were to define virtue as a habit of the soul, then courage would not really be a virtue according to Protagoras. Moreover, it is indistinguishable from bodily fitness.

6. Once more Protagoras practically identifies ἀρετῇ with δικαιοσύνη, at 347 B. Our neighbors' justice and virtue, he explains, are to our advantage, so we do not begrudge them a share of what we know about these matters. We all eagerly teach each other. Of course, it is not equally clear that our neighbor's courage is always to our advantage, and so we are not surprised, as indeed we should not be anyway at this point, that Protagoras says nothing about ἄνδρεία.