The Hedonism in Plato's Protagoras

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I

Three interpretations of the discussion of hedonism in the Protagoras may be distinguished. Some have argued that the discussion represents the real views of the historical Socrates or of Plato himself at the time he was writing the dialogue. This is the view which at present seems to be most generally accepted. Others believe that the discussion is ad hominem, that Socrates in the dialogue is simply using the premiss that the only good is pleasure to prove his main thesis that Virtue is Knowledge, while not believing himself in that premiss. There is also a third view, which is not incompatible with either of the above. Those who hold this deny that there is any real hedonism to be found in the dialogue.

1 An earlier version of this paper was read to the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy at Oxford, September 1958. I am grateful to Prof. G. Vlastos for some helpful criticism.
2 So J. Adam, Platonis Protagoras, 1893 p. xxxii ("the episode in question is intended to represent the views of the historical Socrates").
3 Cf. e.g. R. Hackforth, C.Q. 22 (1928) 39-42 ("Plato... is making a serious attempt to understand himself, and explain to his readers what the Socratic equation really meant... he soon advanced beyond this view") and J. Tenkku, Acta Philosophica Fennica 11 (1956) 23-56 ("Hedonism is probably the first conclusion at which anyone who begins to reflect on ethics naturally arrives... No wonder that Plato defends hedonism in the early period of his ethical reflection to which the Protagoras belongs." op. cit. p. 48).
5 So G.M.A. Grube, C.Q. 27 (1933) 203ff., F. M. Cornford, C.A.H. VI, pp. 313-4. Grube's view does most justice to the dialogue as a whole. He sees the dialogue as an attack on the Sophists, part of its aim being to show that the hedonism implicit in ordinary moral beliefs is ultimately the Sophistic ethic also. The confused and qualified hedonism of the masses and the Sophists is reduced to pure hedonism - all and only pleasures are good. Yet even on this premiss Socrates can prove that Virtue is One and Knowledge of some sort.
6 T. D. Goodell, A.J.P. 42 (1921) 25ff. offers this interpretation at its most extreme: 'in fact he (Plato) never held any doctrine that we nowadays call hedonism. Only a superficial reader can find it in the Protagoras.' Goodell argues that to Plato 'whatever is morally good is intrinsically pleasant to normal human nature' and concludes: 'Taking a popular principle of action, a principle that may be applied ignobly, and is often so applied, by restricting the range of ηδονή to its lower meanings, Plato by bringing for-
The second is the view I believe to be correct and in the following pages I shall try to rehabilitate it by offering some neglected arguments drawn from other dialogues, from the *Protagoras* itself and in particular from a close analysis of 351-359. This last is most important and in the course of it I shall try to settle certain minor disagreements about the interpretation. For these disagreements have led to the belief that Plato regards the hedonism there expounded with some degree of favour. In fact, even the belief in the *ad hominem* nature of the hedonist discussion has been sometimes reached by misinterpreting the drift of the argument.¹

II

*Some Features of the Earlier Discussion (309a-351a)*

Socrates' professed admiration of Protagoras (309cd) is immediately counter-balanced, its irony made clear,² by his report of his conversation with Hippocrates, who wished to buy an education from the Sophist. The keynote of hostility is now struck: Hippocrates blushes, when asked if he would not be ashamed to become a Sophist, for the education he describes seems to entail that. Socrates describes the Sophists as wholesalers or retailers of spiritual food, whose wares through the lack of any standard market tests could be extremely dangerous to the customer (313c). Some commentators underrate the hostility. Guthrie finds that 'the keynote is courtesy and forbearance,' but Vlastos is right when he comments on Socrates' clumsy, heavy-handed irony ('His handling of Protagoras is merciless, if not cruel' op. cit. pp. xxiv-v). In the patently ironic compliments of Socrates, in the unflattering portraits of Hippias and Prodicus and to a lesser extent of Protagoras, in the insistence that Protagoras commit himself to the argument (331c), in the

¹ A. E. Taylor, e.g. states: 'Neither Socrates nor Plato is represented as adopting the hedonist equation of good with pleasure... it is carefully treated as one neither to be affirmed or denied.' (*Plato, the Man and his Work*, p. 260).

² For a similar ironic compliment which is immediately nullified by devastating general criticism cf. *Symp.* 198ff.