Justice and Holiness in Protagoras 330-331
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In his introduction to a recent edition of the Protagoras, Professor G. Vlastos has given an illuminating analysis of some of the tricky arguments in that dialogue. He singles out for detailed discussion one of the later arguments, “because its logic was loudly protested by Protagoras and the rights and wrongs of this dispute have never been properly cleared up in the literature.” Much the same could, I think, be said of the earlier argument, which Vlastos does not analyse, about the relation between Justice and Holiness. This note is confined to discussion of the reasoning in that argument. It is not concerned with the truth of any thesis about Justice and Holiness, or the “Unity of Virtue”. Nor does it speculate as to Plato’s purpose in making the contestants argue as they do in this passage, or elsewhere in the dialogue.

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From 329c1 to 330b6 Socrates elicits a number of assertions from Protagoras, which his ensuing arguments are obviously intended to discredit. These assertions may be summarised as follows:

1. Justice, Holiness, Temperance, Wisdom and Courage are “parts” of Virtue (329D). Each of them is distinct from the others (“Exauston de aouton estin, ym de eiv, allo, to de allo; Nat.”. 330A3-4). This is (let us say) to deny their identity.

2. The parts of Virtue differ, like the parts of a face, both from one another and from the whole of which they are parts. None of them is “of the same class” (olov) as any of the others. (Odev den dara esti tov tis arethpis morfwn allo olov exesth mh odev olov dikaioyn etc. 330B3-6). This is (let us say) to deny their homogeneity.

3. The parts of Virtue may exist separately in different men. A man may possess one of them without possessing all. (metalambavouai oi anwropoi touton tov tis arethpis morfwn oi me vallo, oi de allon.. 329E2-6). This is (let us say) to deny their reciprocity.

2 op.cit. p. xxi.
3 A major difficulty in interpreting the whole passage lies in translating the words oluv, taouton and demoun. In order to preserve their “sortal” connotation, I have tried, in spite of the awkwardness, to render Socrates’ argument in terms of homogeneity rather than similarity.
(4) The parts of Virtue, like the parts of a face, have each their own “power” (δύναμις). Their “powers” differ in kind as do the parts of Virtue themselves. (τὰ τῆς ἀρετῆς μόρια οὐκ ἔστι τὸ ἕτερον οἶνον τὸ ἕτερον, οὕτε αὐτὸ οὕτε ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ. 330A8-B1.).

These assertions are obtained separately from Protagoras and he makes them with varying degrees of assurance. They are by no means equivalent, and their logical relationship is of importance for evaluating Socrates’ argument. For it does not follow that if he refutes any one of them he has thereby refuted them all. The only one of which this would be true would be (1). Clearly if the parts of Virtue were identical, they could not be heterogeneous, nor could they differ in “power” or in any other respect. Nor would it be possible to possess one of them without possessing all. So the falsity of (1) would entail the falsity of (2), (3) and (4). On the other hand the falsity of (2) (3) or (4) would not entail the falsity of any of the others. For example, similarity in “power” would neither entail nor be entailed by homogeneity.1 Nor would reciprocity among the parts of Virtue prove them identical or homogeneous, any more than the relationship between triangularity and three-sidedness proves these concepts identical or homogeneous.2

The only way, therefore, in which Socrates could refute all of Protagoras’ assertions at one blow would be to disprove (1), i.e. to show that the virtues are identical. Does he do so in this argument? He barely claims as much himself. At 331B4-6 he says ἥτω τοῦ ὑπὸ τό έστι δικαιότης ὁσιότητι ἢ ὃ ποτέ ὅμοιωτον, καὶ μάλιστα πάντων ἢ τε δικαιοσύνη οἶνον ὀσιότης καὶ ἡ ὀσιότης οἶνον δικαιοσύνη. He does not here insist that he has proven (a) the identity of Justice and Holiness,3 but is willing to

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1 At least no such entailments would hold in default of a clearer account of what is meant by ascribing δύναμεις to the parts of Virtue. The closest parallels for this usage of δύναμις would seem to be those in Republic 351E6-52A, 358B5, 366E5, 367A7. The well-known account of δύναμις in Republic 477C-D is, I think, less apposite to the virtues than to the sensory and cognitive faculties there discussed. Sight and hearing, knowledge and belief are there treated as themselves being δύναμεις rather than as having them.

2 Nor, conversely, would homogeneity between the virtues prove their reciprocity. Even in the case of two such qualities as Modesty and Humility, which look much closer than Justice and Holiness, it is still arguable that a man may possess one without possessing the other.

3 cf. 333B5-6. τὸ δὲ πρῶτον αὖ ἐφάνη ἡμῖν ἡ δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἡ ὁσιότης σχέδιον τι ταύτων ὑπ. As. P. Friedländer says, (Platon, II, Berlin, 1937, p. 14), "Da scheint doch nicht, als ob alles in Ordnung wäre." Further, at 349D2-4 Protagoras concedes not that the four virtues other than courage are identical, but only that they are ἐπισκόποις παραπλήσια ἀλλήλως.