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Protagoras on Human Nature, Wisdom, and the Good: The Great Speech and the Hedonism of Plato's *Protagoras*

Marina Berzins McCoy

The *Protagoras*' discussion of hedonism has long been a source of disagreement among commentators. Some propose that Plato advocated a hedonistic doctrine (cf. Grote 1865; Hackforth 1928, 38-42; Irwin 1995, 85-92),¹ but Socrates adopts this view nowhere else, and indeed argues against it in other dialogues such as the *Gorgias*. Socrates also never explicitly adopts the hedonistic doctrine which he presents here. It therefore seems difficult to maintain that Socrates espouses the doctrine offered. Some commentators, developing this idea, believe it to be an *ad hominem* argument designed to unveil Protagoras' beliefs (cf. Weiss 1990, 17-39; Dyson 1976, 32-45; Hemmenway 1996).² Although Socrates seemingly tries to persuade a *reluctant* Protagoras to adopt the doctrine (*Protagoras* 351c8-d7; cf. Cronquist 1975, 63), there is nonetheless good reason to think that Socrates' arguments are *ad hominem*. I shall argue that although Protagoras is not explicitly, or even self-consciously, a hedonist, Socrates presents the hedonism view in an attempt to formulate more sharply Protagoras' understanding of the good and human nature and to display the limits of these two ideas.

The central problem is as follows. Protagoras presents human nature as having several 'layers' to it. The prepolitical human being has no purpose other than to pursue his own individual physical well-being. With the later introduction of justice and shame, humans gain the ability to live in cities. However, Protagoras cannot provide a philosophical *account* of the good and of human nature which justifies unselfish action, although he believes such action to be

¹ Crombie 1962, 20-41, writes, "It is only because hedonism is such a naughty view that there are any reservations about saying that Socrates maintains it in the *Protagoras*." Other commentators suggest that only some of the beliefs here are Socrates' own. For example, Nussbaum 1986, 110, claims that while Socrates is arguing for the need for a *tevnh* of practical reasoning, pleasure is not the good but only "an attractive candidate" for a unit of measure, a sort of placeholder for such a science. Similarly, Vlastos 1969, 71-88, suggests that Socrates does not believe that pleasure is the good but wants to persuade his audience that *ajkrasiva* is impossible. See also Cronquist 1975, 63-81.

² In contrast to these commentators, I find Socrates' concerns to be specifically with Protagoras' naturalism. Sullivan 1961, 10-28; Guthrie 1975, 232-33; and Taylor 1960, 260-61 concede that the argument is *ad hominem*, but think it is designed to persuade the sophist of some Socratic thesis (e.g., "virtue is knowledge") rather than to show the insufficiencies of the Protagorean view.

central to courage. On the contrary, his descriptions of human nature and the good suggest that prudent action is more natural than just action. The section on hedonism is an exposition of problems with Protagorean naturalism, not a new Socratic thesis.³ In section one I analyze the Great Speech's account of human nature, and in section two show how Socrates reformulates Protagoras' account in order to expose some of its difficulties.

I. Protagoras' Great Speech

“Once upon a time (Ἦν γάρ ποτε χρόνος) there were just gods; mortal beings did not yet exist” (320c8).⁴ So Protagoras starts his Great Speech in Plato's *Protagoras*. While the speech is in part myth and in part argument, the focus of the myth is human beginnings. Protagoras says that a myth is the most appropriate response to Socrates' queries, both because the sophist is an older man speaking to a younger audience, and because myth is more pleasant (320c2-7), but myth is also an appropriate mode of discourse here because its topic is prehistoric. The myth offers insights into Protagoras' understanding of ἀρετή because it provides a picture of the origin of human beings and their place in the cosmos and city. Protagoras' explicit aim here is to respond to Socrates' objections about the teachability of ἀρετή. I shall first focus upon Protagoras' views of human nature and the good—since afterwards Socrates himself shifts the discussion to the nature of ἀρετή—and then explore some of the tensions within Protagoras' understanding of ἀρετή.

According to Protagoras' story, the gods molded mortals within the earth. They then appointed Prometheus and Epimetheus to equip each mortal being with its respective powers, but Epimetheus persuaded Prometheus to allow him alone to distribute these qualities. Epimetheus

³ My concern here is only with the character of Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, and not with the historical Protagoras or presentations of him in other Platonic dialogues.

⁴ Plato, *Protagoras*, revised edition, trans. with notes by C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 64-65. All translations are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

assigned each animal its own powers, balancing physical weakness in each animal with complementary strengths that would allow for its survival as a species. When Epimetheus came to human beings, however, he realized that he had used up all the powers on the other animals and was at a loss as to what to do. Prometheus inspected Epimetheus' work and found that the human being alone had no physical defenses. Nevertheless, the appointed time had come for human beings to emerge into the world. Therefore, Prometheus stole from the Hephaestus and Athena the τέχναι and fire, in order to help human beings to survive. Men did not yet have the πολιτικὴ τέχνη, since it was inside the rather formidable citadel of Zeus (320c8-321e3).

Human beings began to erect altars and images of gods, to speak, build houses, make clothing, and till the soil; but because they were scattered, at first wild beasts destroyed them. Humans tried to come together in cities for protection but treated one another unjustly because they lacked the political art (πολιτικὴ τέχνη), and so abandoned cities and began to be destroyed again. Zeus feared the obliteration of human beings and arranged for Hermes to send shame (αἰδώς) and justice (δίκη) to all people.⁵ Unlike the τέχναι, which were distributed to different persons, Zeus had Hermes bestow these qualities upon all people. The universal possession of justice and shame explains why anyone can be consulted on matters pertaining to the welfare of the city, for everyone shares in the political art (322a3-323a4).⁶

Two other major accounts of the Prometheus myth predate Protagoras' version, Hesiod's in his *Works and Days* and *Theogony* and Aeschylus' in *Prometheus Bound*. There are two major innovations in Protagoras' account. First, Zeus and Prometheus are collaborators working

⁵ I choose "shame" as the most natural translation of the term αἰδώς. Another good translation might be "respect for public opinion," as in Dodds 1971, 18. Hemmenway translates it as "fear before the opinions of others." What is significant is that the motivation for self-restraint is concern for the opinions of others. Although one might argue that one can feel ashamed of oneself, Protagoras' *own* emphasis is upon the importance of others' opinions, e.g., in his discussion of the soundminded man who pretends outwardly to be just when caught in an unjust act at 323a5-c1, as I discuss further below.

⁶ Adkins 1973, 3-12, argues that Protagoras deliberately equivocates in suggesting that the universal

for human survival from the beginning (cf. Miller 1978, 23). In Hesiod, Prometheus cheats Zeus out of the best parts of an animal sacrifice, and in retaliation Zeus hides away fire and man's "livelihood," the possibility of an easy existence in which a human being could have worked only one day for the sustenance needed in a year (*Works and Days* 42-49). Prometheus steals fire to compensate human beings for this deficiency, and as punishment, Zeus sends Epimetheus Pandora, by which men become afflicted with evils, notably work and illness. In Aeschylus, the enmity between Zeus and humanity is even stronger: Zeus is a tyrant newly enthroned, who resolves to destroy human beings and 'sow new seed.' Prometheus rescues humanity from obliteration (*Prometheus Bound* 247-252). In contrast, Protagoras' presentation of Zeus as *primarily* a human benefactor is a novel element. In the Great Speech, it is not Zeus' actions but *Prometheus'* absence--literally a lack of "foresight"--which leads to the weakness of humans relative to other animals (cf. Coby 1987, 52). Zeus' gifts compensate for others' mistakes; he relieves, rather than inflicts, suffering upon humans.

Second, Pandora is absent from Protagoras' account (cf. Miller 1978, 23). In Hesiod, the downfall of man is caused by women, who demand luxury and so require men to work longer (*Theogony* 590-603). While human beings in Hesiod might have had an easy existence had Zeus not sent down Pandora, a central point of Protagoras' myth is that technical wisdom is not sufficient to ensure human survival. While the τέχναι aid survival, political community is essential to human existence. Justice and shame, together with the stolen arts, substitute for the physical defenses of thick hair, speed, flight, and the like, which other animals possess but humans lack. The formation of human beings was accidentally incomplete until they received the πολιτικὴ τέχνη. The Protagorean cosmos lacks Hesiod's ideal of nature in which living is easy and suffering is a departure from the original state of nature. The threat posed in nature to

possession of divkh and aijdwv" is sufficient to imply political ajrethv.

Protagorean human beings is double: they are threatened not only by other animals, but by fellow human beings. The natural world and human nature—not woman—is the cause of human suffering.

Human nature in the Great Speech is also 'layered.' Unlike the animals, whose formation came about in two steps at most (the formation of the physical substratum and the addition of specific qualities), human beings were formed in four steps. Thus, when we ask what human nature is like for Protagoras, we must also consider what part of human nature is under discussion. The process of human formation is as follows: first, the gods make the underlying material “stuff” of all mortal beings; second, the human being is supposed to have been given unique defenses by Prometheus and Epimetheus but is left metaphorically and literally naked; third, human beings receive the arts and fire from Prometheus; and fourth, they receive justice and shame from Zeus.

Let us examine the most elemental aspect of human nature, before the reception of the τέχναι, δίκη, and αἰδώς. First, human beings are wholly material in origin (cf. Roochnik 1990, 61). The gods make humans out of earth and fire—later strongly associated with *technical* skill (*Protagoras* 321d3-4)—and their compounds (320d2-3). The next step in the formation process is also entirely focused upon making the physical body: Epimetheus determines what sorts of defenses from aggression the animals are to possess (e.g., strength, speed, claws); how they are to protect themselves from the elements; and what sorts of foods will be necessary to sustain these bodies. In his description of the formation of animals and human beings, Protagoras never mentions the idea of a soul or nonmaterial component. The physical, the bodily, composed in a purely technical fashion, is the earliest and most basic component of human nature.

Second, human beings have no purpose other than to survive (cf. Roochnik 1990, 62). Protagoras' story lacks an account as to why the animals were made. Mortals were not brought

into being to please the gods at all; rather, it is as if the genesis of mortals were some predetermined part of the world's existence to which even the gods are subject: "Once upon a time there were just the gods; mortal beings did not yet exist. And when the appointed (εἰμαρμένος) time came for them to come into being too, the gods moulded them within the earth, mixing together earth and fire and their compounds (320c8-d3)." The purpose of human and animal life from the point of view of the gods, the extra-human perspective, is merely to continue to exist. The exclusivity of survival as the human purpose is not lost with the invention of the τέχνη in the next stage of human formation. For, the existence of physical weakness motivates Prometheus to steal fire and technical skill from the gods (321c8). It is *only* because Epimetheus failed to give humans claws, speed, or other means of protection before he exhausted his resources on the other animals that we possess uniquely human abilities at all; they are a huge mistake (cf. Coby 1987, 55).

Moreover, Protagoras' judgment of Prometheus' theft is hardly too harsh. Although Prometheus gave the task of distribution over to Epimetheus, and might have appealed to Zeus for help (for Zeus shows himself to be concerned with human survival), Protagoras blames the entire episode on Epimetheus alone (322a2). Prometheus' stealth is admirable and his punishment regrettable. Protagoras' light judgment of Prometheus suggests a utilitarian evaluation: his action was good because it achieved the proper end, i.e., it aided human survival.

The contrast with Aristotle is telling. Aristotle links the specific powers of a living thing to its τέλος: human beings ought to exercise human reason because reason is essential to being human. For a human being, to reason *is* to "be" in the fullest sense. For Protagoras, the link between existence and reason is quite different: we reason for the sake of continued survival. Both the τέχνη and political virtues exist for the purpose of protecting the survival of the human species: this end motivates both Prometheus' theft and Zeus' generosity. For Protagoras, the end of survival is separable from the means which make it possible, while for Aristotle one can say

that a living thing exists as much to fulfill its unique specific function as its functions allow it to exist.

In addition, Protagoras claims that it is only after receiving the τέχναι that human beings came to articulate words and names artfully (φωνήν καὶ ὀνόματα ταχὺ διηρθρώσατο τῇ τέχνῃ, 322a6). Διαρθροῦν is to articulate, literally to divide up by joints. Protagoras seems to mean something like a technical ability to divide up, perhaps to categorize, names and sounds in a formal system. Prior to the possession of the τέχναι, humans (like the other animals) lacked λόγοι, and so presumably speech;⁷ but Protagoras draws attention to the invention of the ability to understand speech technically, not just to the ability to speak. That is, humans lacked the rhetorical skills which Protagoras reputedly possesses (312d7-8). Progress in human rationality follows the invention of an art relating to names and sounds, but progress is not measured by the increased capacity to understand the world or the human being. For Protagoras, the invention of the art of persuasion, rather than the pursuit of philosophy, marks the advancement of human nature. This primacy of persuasion exhibits itself in Protagoras' description of the very origins of human beings, for Epimetheus *persuades* Prometheus to give him full control over the distribution of faculties, and yet both figures lack foresight. Persuasion, not knowledge, is a powerful force in the world into which humans are brought.

Significantly, in the first stages of creation, the human being's desire for survival is entirely centered on self. Like the capacities of other animals, our prepolitical rationality does not compel us to consider others' interests just because the gods have species survival in mind. Although the speed of deer exists to promote the survival of the species, the individual deer desires only to preserve its own welfare when running away; similarly, prepolitical human beings also sought their individual interest even as the gods looked to species survival. When humans possessed only the τέχναι but not αἰδώς and δίκη, Protagoras says that they lived "scattered"

⁷ One might argue that human beings differ from animals even before being given technical and social capacities, for Protagoras calls the other animals τα; ἀλογα before Epimetheus' distribution of the powers. But humans at this stage cannot invent or make anything in a technical way, run cities, make war, consider political matters, or worship the gods (322a2-b7). Protagoras likely means only to distinguish between those who would *later* acquire λογοί and τα; ἀλογα.

(σκεδαννύμενοι) and came together into larger groups only in order to avoid destruction by beasts. Because they were unable to live together peaceably and treated one another unjustly, they scattered again (322b7-c1). At this stage of human existence, social and political interaction were required by circumstance, and short-lived because of the selfishness of human nature. For Protagoras, humans are not naturally social beings, but rather forced to rely upon one another because of physical weakness.

Do Zeus' gifts of δίκη and αἰδώς fundamentally alter human nature or merely serve to further the same end of survival that characterized prior stages of human existence? Nussbaum has argued for the former position: Protagoras presents the introduction of the gift of justice as a new capacity which makes human nature "political" (cf. Nussbaum 1986, 102). Her evidence is threefold. First, she argues that human survival is no longer separate from the survival of the πόλις. The gifts of Zeus are clearly presented as central to the survival of the πόλις. Second, Nussbaum says that Protagoras wants to teach others to be "good citizens," indicating Protagoras' own belief that being a good citizen is fundamental to the good life. Third, Protagoras' language indicates that the human being has a natural tendency towards justice, as in his comparison of moral education as that which makes a person "better" (325a), like the straightening of bent wood (325d; cf. Nussbaum 1986, 102-103).

Nussbaum recognizes Protagoras' desire to harmonize the communal good—the city's survival—with the τέλος of survival prior to the reception of the gifts of δίκη and αἰδώς. Indeed, Protagoras does present the political τέχνη as fundamental to the human condition—we are not solitary animals, now that political life is a real possibility. However, Nussbaum's claim that for Protagoras human nature is fundamentally political is too strong. First, Zeus gives human beings δίκη and αἰδώς to ensure species survival, making political virtue a means rather than an end in itself. Similarly, individuals might wish for and promote the survival of others, but only as a means to their own survival. There is no clear indication that the ends or purposes of human existence have been altered. Second, it is important to note that it is Socrates, and not Protagoras, who introduces the idea of making others "good citizens" (319a4-6), as a recapitulation of

Protagoras' description of his teaching as εὐβουλία (prudence) and as teaching others to be δυνατότατος (the most capable or powerful) in the city. *Socrates* shifts the terms of the discussion from political management to moral education. Third, Protagoras in no way implies that there is a natural tendency to be just which requires gentle training, for the 'straightening of the wood' image suggests correction through beating and violence. On the contrary, the image suggests that human beings naturally are a little 'warped' with respect to virtue. Protagoras even explicitly states that "this sort of excellence" does not "come by nature or luck" (323c4-6). While Protagoras clearly wishes to present the interests of the individual and of society as complementary goods, the crucial question is whether his understandings of human nature, the individual good, and the political good are sufficient to maintain such a harmony.⁸ Although the section on hedonism will more clearly expose the deficiencies of Protagoras' views, even in the Great Speech itself there are preliminary indications that when the claims of self-interest and communal interest *do* conflict, we should expect that self-interest will triumph.⁹

There are at least three places in the Great Speech that suggest δίκη and αἰδώς are naturally weaker than self-centered human tendencies and that the city's survival remains a means of survival rather than an end in itself. First, even the average citizen who possesses justice and shame is aware of his ultimate *interest* in possessing them, as a means of self-preservation. Since even in trivial matters citizens educate their sons as well as they can, Protagoras asks,

[I]s it possible that they have their sons taught everything in which there is no death penalty or exile if they fail to learn virtue and be nurtured in it—and not only death but

⁸ Some commentators emphasize the social function of *divkh* and *aijdwn* without noting their conflict with other aspects of human nature. See, for example, Levi 1940, 284-302, who writes, "Prudential and utilitarian ends are thus connected with ethical and social purposes, but it is clear that the latter are particularly stressed and that the others are to be subordinate to them" (288). See also Moser and Kustas 1966, 111-115.

⁹ I think that it is this tension between the individual and the communal good in Protagoras' thought that *Socrates* seeks to uncover in his questions about the unity of the virtues later in the *Protagoras*. In a related vein, Hemmenway 1996 argues that there is a disunity between Protagoras' conception of demotic virtue, which requires *divkh* and *aijdwn*, and the virtue he teaches to the elite, which requires wisdom and courage. Coby 1987, 73, makes a similar claim. However, if one accepts the distinction between demotic and elite "virtue," a member of the elite must be understood as anyone who can get away with pursuing self-interest, narrowly understood: one's status as a member of the elite cannot be based on class or political position alone. Even the many are hedonists and pursue their own pleasure in so far as is possible.

confiscation of property and, practically speaking, complete familial catastrophe—do you think they do not have them taught this or give them all the attention possible? We must think that they do, Socrates (325b8-c5).

The motivation for teaching one's children to be virtuous is not that virtue is intrinsically pleasurable or a good in itself, but rather that one might lose other goods if one lacks virtue.

Second, the idea of punishment dominates Protagoras' view of conventional education (cf. Coby 1987, 64). Although it need not be the case that Protagoras punishes others as part of his educational program, his recognition that people feel compelled to correct bad behavior through punishment ought to make us wonder just how deeply ingrained in our nature he thinks justice and shame are:

For as soon as a child can understand what is said to him, his nurse and his mother and his teacher and his father himself strive to make him as good as possible, teaching and showing him by every word and deed that this is right, and that wrong, this praiseworthy and that shameful, this holy and that unholy, “do this” and “don't do that.” If he obeys voluntarily, so much the better; if not, they treat him like a piece of wood which is getting warped and crooked, and straighten him out with threats and beatings (325c7-d9).

While self-interest is natural, the capacity to consider others' well-being must be taught through violence.

Third, Protagoras' references in the Great Speech to the other virtues about which Socrates will later ask—piety, σωφροσύνη, courage, and wisdom—suggest the relatively limited power of δίκη and αἰδώς even in the virtuous life. In the Great Speech, Protagoras does not explicitly discuss piety, but does make a passing reference to why human beings worship the gods: “It is because humans had a share of the divine dispensation that they alone among animals worshipped the gods, with whom they had a kind of kinship (συγγένειαν) and erected altars and sacred images” (322a3-5; Lombardo and Bell, trans.). The “divine dispensation” to which Protagoras refers can only be technical wisdom (and not Zeus' gifts), since the creation of religion occurs after the gift of the τέχναι but before the gifts of justice and shame. Initially it is unclear just why the shared trait of possessing technical abilities should make humans want to worship the gods, for it is not that the gods ask to be worshipped, or that human beings are

thanking them for the τέχνη (which were, after all, provided by Prometheus, not by the gods). Nor does Protagoras suggest that the gods respond to human beings' prayers and sacrifices.¹⁰ However, Protagoras' use of συγγένεια with the gods suggests that it is because of our own ability to make things that we appreciate the gods for their similar abilities. We admire the gods for the divine arts which allow us to control our world and to survive. Piety reflects the human divinization of technical ability.¹¹ Piety arises from human adoration of the capacity to control but is not linked to social virtues.¹²

In the myth, Protagoras makes no direct mention of σωφροσύνη, a term which has both the sense of "modesty" or self-restraint and of being "sensible." However, Protagoras uses the term in his prose arguments in the Great Speech.¹³ There, Protagoras describes the societal expectation that every individual at least publicly proclaims his own justice (whether he is in fact just or not), as evidence that everyone possesses at least a minimal amount of justice. He says:

In the case of the other skills (ἄρεταις), as you say, if anyone says he's a good flute-player or good at any other art when he isn't, they either laugh at him or get angry at him, and his family come and treat him like a madman. But in the case of justice and the rest of the excellence of a citizen, even if they know someone to be unjust, if he himself admits it before everyone, they regard that sort of truthfulness as madness, though they called it sound sense (σωφροσύνη) before, and they say that everybody must say that he is just whether he is or not, and anyone who doesn't pretend to be just must be mad. For they think that everyone must possess it to some extent or other, or else not be among men at all (323a7-c1).

What does Protagoras mean in calling even the unjust man "just"? Protagoras suggests

¹⁰ Although one might argue that Zeus gives human beings *divkh* and *aijdwn* as a result of worship, the gods want humans to survive as a species well before the existence of worship, when the gods appoint Prometheus and Epimetheus to give defenses to the animals, and there is no textual indication that human piety influences Zeus' decision.

¹¹ Coby 1987, 56, thinks that this suggests that according to Protagoras, humans invented the gods altogether to account for the human possession of wisdom. However, I see nothing here to indicate such a belief on Protagoras' part, and even fragments of the historical Protagoras' thought suggest at the most agnosticism or skepticism, not atheism.

¹² Although one might argue that the Greek gods are not known for their moral goodness and so we ought not expect a connection between piety and other virtues, even Homeric accounts of the gods make some connections between virtuous behavior and divine reward. Consider, e.g., the importance of hospitality to strangers in the *Odyssey*, a social virtue which Zeus is said to reward (see, e.g., *Odyssey* XIV.65-73).

¹³ In the myth, Protagoras speaks of *divkh* and *aijdwn*, but in the *lovgo* which follows, he replaces these terms with *dikaiousuvnh* and *swfrosuvnh*.

that even the unjust have a *capacity* for justice, but one not fully brought to fruition by teaching. Even the person whom we consider unjust enough to punish with a fine is more just than a person who had been raised in the wild; at minimum, for example, he must know what justice is well enough to dissemble. Nonetheless, the sensible person hides his injustice, raising the question as to whether and how Protagoras unifies the virtues. Although this section is ostensibly about why justice is universal, it shows that an expectation of *good sense* (σωφροσύνη) is universal: any person foolish enough to admit his own unjust behavior is deemed mad, presumably because an admission of wrongdoing is tantamount to seeking out punishment. There is a natural tension between justice, which regulates the well-being of the city, and σωφροσύνη (understood as self-interested prudence), which regulates the well-being of one's self. This tension between these virtues reflects the conflict in Protagoras' understanding of human nature itself, between the ability to belong to the πόλις and to please others in it, and a more fundamental desire to pursue one's own interests, in so far as is possible, in the πόλις. The story suggests that prudence is a stronger motivating psychological force than justice.¹⁴ In cases where the two virtues conflict, we might expect that human nature would lead a person to pursue his own interest rather than that of the city.

Protagoras does not mention courage in the Great Speech. This silence is significant, since Protagoras later shows himself to have strong beliefs about courage, e.g., courage must involve genuine risk (349e1-351a10). Perhaps courage is absent because Protagoras' understanding of it does not fit easily with the remainder of his ideas about excellence. Even before the gifts of δίκη and αἰδώς and the existence of cities, humans presumably still needed to hunt and to protect themselves from beasts. Surely those humans, living scattered in small familial groups, possessed something akin to courage, perhaps an instinct for self-defense and defense of family. Although human beings did not have the means to cooperate politically or to defend *others* before Zeus' gifts, there was no necessity of a gift to insure that each human

¹⁴ I believe that it is this admission to which Socrates wishes to bring Protagoras at 333d2-334a3, in the argument about the relationship of justice and σωφροσύνη.

defend himself individually. Such an attitude is not adequate to be called courage in the fullest sense, however, for courage often does involve substantial risk to oneself for the sake of another (and not just for one's own gain). Protagoras' intuition that courage includes risk-taking (349e1-351a10), and his discomfort with Socrates' conclusion that the courageous and cowardly pursue the same ends—the only difference being the ignorance of cowards (359e2-360e5)—suggest that Protagoras shares this common-sense notion of courage. But in the Great Speech, Protagoras takes pains to show that individual and social goods are complementary and need not be in conflict. His avoidance of what one ought to do when they do conflict, and so of an explicit discussion of courage, reflects the tensions within his understandings of the good.

Wisdom is, of course, present in the myth, since it is “technical wisdom” (ἐντεχνον σοφίαν; Taylor trans.) which Prometheus steals from the gods to give to human beings. By its very nature, technical wisdom is restricted to a few people: everyone possesses justice and shame, but not the ability to make shoes or weave. Protagoras will later characterize wisdom as the most important of the virtues (330a2), but surely does not intend to teach his students a τέχνη akin to shoemaking or sculpting. Accordingly, some commentators claim that there is no place for wisdom in the myth. For example, Goldberg suggests that since wisdom is not mentioned in the Great Speech but is so important for Protagoras as a teacher, his speech must not reflect his true beliefs; instead, Protagoras merely wants to please the Athenian democrats and to shift attention away from the elite (cf. Goldberg 1983, 39-40).

I propose an alternative: wisdom is the ability to persuade others of that which “benefits” them, in a manner which is also benefits the one doing the persuading. I shall delay a fuller discussion of this definition until later in this paper, for first it requires a more thorough explanation of what Protagoras means by the good. Still, it should be clear by now that the desire to pursue one's own interest is more deeply ingrained in Protagoras' view of human nature than the capacity to look to the interests of the city as a whole. This priority of self-interest is reflected in its temporal priority in the mythic genesis of the human being; in its being innate while justice and shame require teaching--and even violence--for fruition; and in the priority that

the many give to the cultivation of the appearance of justice as a means only.

Still, even if the pursuit of individual self-interest is a more fundamental part of human nature, it need not be the case that Protagoras advocates its pursuit at the expense of the city's well-being. It might be *better* to act justly even if Protagoras thinks it less natural or more difficult to be just than prudently to pursue self-interest. The question now becomes whether Protagoras distinguishes between the desirable and the desired. If the primary ends of human existence are merely to persevere and to pursue physical goods, and if the city is merely useful to individuals insofar as it contributes to the fulfillment of such desires, then we must see whether Protagoras can conceive of a higher good which would allow him to claim that the human being *ought* to act justly.

Fortunately, later in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras elaborates upon his understanding of the good. In the course of an argument which seems to be leading Protagoras to equate acting unjustly with acting sensibly (or that to act well is only to act to one's own advantage; see 333d1-e2), Socrates asks whether good things are those things which are advantageous to people. Protagoras replies, yes, but that there are also things good which are not advantageous to people. Socrates asks whether he means that some good things are not beneficial at *all*, or not beneficial to *man*? Protagoras responds:

I know of many things which are harmful to men, food and drink and drugs and a thousand other things, and of some which are beneficial. Some things have neither effect on men, but have an effect on horses; some have no effect except on cattle, or on dogs. Some have no effect on any animal, but do affect trees. And some things are good for the roots of a tree, but bad for the growing parts, for instance manure is good if applied to the roots of all plants, but if you put it on the shoots and young twigs it destroys everything. Oil, too, is very bad for all plants and most destructive of the hair of animals other than man, but in the case of man it is beneficial to the hair and to the rest of the body. So varied and many-sided a thing is goodness, that even here the very same thing is good for the outside of the human body, and very bad for the inside. That is the reason why doctors all forbid sick people to use oil in their food except in the smallest quantities, just enough to cover up any unpleasant smell from the dishes and garnishes (334a4-c5).

Protagoras' examples of goodness all concern physical benefit. Plato renders the description

humorously, in making Protagoras speak of goodness not with reference to bravery in battle or other noble acts, but with reference to food, drink, drugs, and manure. The point Protagoras is making is nonetheless a serious one. The good, while relative to kind (e.g., according to what species we are talking about) or purpose, is not relative to individual perception.¹⁵ A lot of oil really is good for the hair but bad for the stomach, regardless of what people suppose; certain drugs really work well for some diseases but not others. Protagoras construes the good naturalistically: the good is connected to the fulfillment of human nature, but he conceives of that nature in narrow corporeal terms. If Protagoras believes in other, nonphysical goods, such as honor—and we might suspect that he does, given his own pride in his reputation as a teacher—he has not provided any explanation of what *makes* such goods good.

As a result, Protagoras' answer to the question, "why be just?" can only be answered with reference either to what is in fact naturally desired or naturally desirable because physically "beneficial." We might have to restrain a desire to pursue our individual self-interest because only in doing so can we have a better city. But the only *reason* that a better city is desirable, from the individual's point of view, is because it promotes his own survival. In contrast to a naturalist who asserts that the good is desired because it is "essentially" desirable,¹⁶ Protagoras derives the desirable from the desired. There is a potential split between what is in the interest of the individual (to pursue his own desires, in so far as they really are healthy for him) and what is in the interest of the πόλις as a whole. Protagoras provides no compelling reason as to why the enlightened individual ought not pursue his own selfish interest, even at the overall expense of the city's interest, so long as the protection that the city affords him *personally* is sufficient.

¹⁵ Contrast this view with that of A. E. Taylor 1960, 244, who assumes that even in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras is a relativist who simply argues for the beliefs of whatever city he is in. Too far on the other end of the spectrum is Levi, who thinks that Protagoras' claim that the povli "brings out moral capacities in human beings implies that Protagoras believes in "universal ethical values that necessarily and in the same manner force themselves on all human beings" (295). Levi seemingly mistakes things "not useful for any human being" to mean good in a nonutilitarian sense (see 300-302); however, it is clear from Protagoras' examples that what is good is always good *for* some physical end, if not always specifically a human being.

¹⁶ For example, Socrates' conception of the form of the good in the *Republic* suggests a picture of the good as attractive to the soul because of the good's inherent qualities, and the 'natural fit' between the soul and the good; the good is "what every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything" (505d10-e1). Without an account of some nonphysical element of either human nature or the good, Protagoras cannot explain the goodness of goods such as honor or altruistic courageous action in cases where they do not contribute to the actor's own survival.

Protagoras' layered account of human nature appears to make complementary the well-being of the individual and city, but at a deeper level his account implies an irreconcilable tension between the selfish and social parts of human nature. Because our selfishness is a more elemental part of our nature as Protagoras describes it, an intellectual justification as to why one ought to restrain one's own desires is needed. But Protagoras' presentation fails because it does not provide an account of the unity of individual and social virtues.¹⁷

We can now return to Protagoras' view of the nature of wisdom. I suggest that Protagorean wisdom comes to the ability to persuade others of that which is the most beneficial to pursue, in a way that benefits both the one persuaded and the one persuading.¹⁸ This definition of wisdom harmonizes well with his description of the good as the beneficial, while also entailing what Protagoras teaches: rhetoric. Persuading others of what is truly beneficial is not always easy: for example, the ill person may find it difficult to believe that a painful procedure will heal him, or citizens may find it difficult to discern the benefits of a new tax. The able rhetorician, however, can lead his audience to see a beneficial action as beneficial, even if that benefit is not apparent at first sight. Understanding the good as the beneficial can also apply to the category of beliefs themselves: good *beliefs* may be those which benefit the believer. The wise person can persuade others by changing their *perceptions* of a situation; but this could potentially require a one-sided presentation by the persuader (for example, underplaying the burdens accompanying a new tax). What matters is the actor's perception of a good *as* good (sufficient for right action), but not necessarily his understanding of why, how, or to what extent an action *is* good. Thus, Protagoras says that he teaches his students "good planning" or "prudence" (εὐβουλία; 318e6).¹⁹ For Protagoras, moral wisdom is technical (cf. Coby 1987, 67), a matter of *knowing how* to achieve certain ends, rather than knowing what is *true*. Rhetoric thus

¹⁷ This helps to explain the otherwise puzzling question of why Socrates explores the problem of the unity of virtues in questions following the Great Speech.

¹⁸ This definition of wisdom is also similar to Protagoras' at *Theaetetus* 167c2-4. Thus, I agree with A. E. Taylor that the two dialogues are interrelated, but not because both advocate relativism. Rather, in both dialogues, the notion of effecting a beneficial perception is central.

¹⁹ Lombardo and Bell translate *eujbouliwa* as "good planning"; "prudence" is used by Levi 1940, 287.

supplants philosophy insofar as “beneficial perception” takes priority over knowledge.

While Protagoras calls wisdom the greatest of all virtues (330a2), he does not describe it explicitly in the Great Speech. Perhaps wisdom is absent from Protagoras' initial discussion because he wants to reserve it for himself, as a mark of his superior rhetorical skill, but cannot do so without offending the Athenian democracy. It is not advantageous for him to suggest either that others are wise or that they lack wisdom.. There is a tension in the ideas of Protagoras between the universality of ἀρετή (because of the universality of the capacities for justice and shame) and his own elite possession of wisdom. This is true despite his claims that some individuals have a little greater natural ability than others, for the more that certain individuals are set apart from others with respect to excellence, the more credence he can give to his own teaching. Yet that comes at the expense of a defense of democracy. The more that he defends the democracy on the basis of the universal availability of wisdom, the less Protagoras can claim to have special knowledge of the πολιτικὴ τέχνη. It is undeniably problematic that Protagoras calls wisdom the most important virtue, for according to the Great Speech, wisdom is not explicitly among the virtues universal to everyone. For this reason, Protagoras exhibits his rhetorical skill in his silence about all wisdom but technical wisdom.

With this picture of Protagorean ethics in mind, I shall now turn to an examination of the hedonism section of the dialogue, in order to show the way in which its arguments are intended to draw out the implications of many Protagorean ideas within the Great Speech.

II. The Argument for Hedonism

Near the start of the hedonism section, Socrates asks whether Protagoras agrees that suffering is not living well, while living a pleasant life is good. While Protagoras is willing to affirm this statement, when Socrates asks whether the pleasant life is the *same* as the good life, Protagoras gives a qualified yes: so long as one takes pleasure in praiseworthy things. Protagoras wishes to maintain a distinction between noble and base pleasures; the question is whether his concept of the good and related ideas can support such a distinction. Socrates presses him on the

point: isn't something also good insofar as it is pleasant? Protagoras suggests that they investigate: if Socrates' questions lead to the conclusion that pleasure and the good are equivalent, then Protagoras will agree; but if not, he will disagree. Although Socrates gives Protagoras the opportunity to ask the questions, Protagoras insists that Socrates lead the discussion. He reminds his potential critics that "it is fitting for you [Socrates] to lead, for it is you who brought up the idea" (351e10-11), suggesting that Protagoras is uncomfortable being associated with a hedonistic position but *not* necessarily that he is not implicitly committed to it.

Socrates next asks Protagoras about his view of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη; 352b2). Does Protagoras believe that knowledge is weak, as the many do, who think that knowledge is a slave to other forces in a man, such as passion, pleasure, pain, lust, and fear? Or is knowledge sufficiently strong such that if a person possesses it, he will never do anything except what knowledge bids him to do? Protagoras states that wisdom and knowledge are the mightiest of all things; he thus implies that ἀκρασία is impossible. This implication accords well with the previous view of wisdom we attributed to Protagoras. If wisdom includes knowing what is in my self-interest, then it seems reasonable to suggest that we will always act well if we act knowledgeably; this is nothing other than saying that we always act to pursue our self-interest. Although Protagoras wishes to distinguish between the base and the noble, his earlier definition of the good as the beneficial is entirely consistent with psychological hedonism (cf. Dyson 1976), for on his view all creatures naturally pursue that which benefits them physically. To the objection that we sometimes act in ways that are self-defeating, that cause us pain, Socrates will show that the hedonist can make sense of apparent ἀκρασία through the notion of miscalculation.

Socrates gives three examples of apparent ἀκρασία: being conquered by the desires for food, drink, and sex (353c7). His choice of these examples in particular is telling, for they are all pleasures of the body, pleasures most closely associated with the maintenance of the individual's

overall physical well-being. Nowhere does Socrates mention any pleasures of the soul (for example, of intellectual pursuits). Protagoras never objects that these examples are too focused on the physical, but this should come as no surprise to us, given that his earlier descriptions of the good as the useful, that which is of physical benefit (334a4-c6). Socrates, we suspect, raises these examples precisely because they are typical of Protagorean goods.

Socrates asks Protagoras, who acts as a the representative of the many, whether we call certain pleasures “wrong” because they are pleasurable, or because they later lead to other physical problems such as disease and poverty.²⁰ Protagoras answers that most people would say the latter. Additionally, it is because disease and poverty cause pain or deprive one of pleasures that these are evils. Conversely, when the many say that painful things are good, what they really mean is that a short-term pain leads to other good conditions, such as when an uncomfortable medical treatment produces health. Again, the absence of the goods of the soul is underlined by Socrates’ choice of examples: he mentions health, good bodily condition, the safety of the city, rule over others, and wealth (354a3-b5), *precisely* those goods which Protagoras favors. He values wealth, for he takes payment as a sophist; he believes rule over others to be a good, for in teaching εὐβουλία he claims to teach others to do precisely that; and in the Great Speech he explicitly mentions the safety of a city as its primary good. All indications are that Socrates’ argument is *ad hominem*, and not his own (for Socrates is neither wealthy, a teacher, nor a ruler).

Socrates himself clearly leaves open the possibility of some other understanding of the good, asking whether

[t]hese things are good because of the fact that they result in pleasure and in the relief of and avoidance of pain? ‘Or do you have some other criterion in view, other than pleasure

²⁰ Socrates addresses his argument to the level of the many in part to deflect attention from Protagoras, but also to demonstrate that the sophists advocate exactly what the many do, but in a more sophisticated manner.

and pain, on the basis of which you would call these things good?’ They [the many] would say no, I think (354b8-c2).

Protagoras answers, “And I would agree with them” (354c3). Socrates a second time asks whether enjoyments could be called bad for any other reason than that they are painful, and claims that the many could not give any other criterion of the bad. Protagoras once again agrees: “I don’t think they’ll be able to either” (354d1-4). Socrates reiterates a third time, “But even now it is still possible to withdraw, if you are able to say that the good is anything other than pleasure or that the bad is anything other than pain” (354e8-355a4). Socrates pushes home the point that none of his interlocutors—neither the many with whom he is in imagined dialogue, nor Protagoras—can provide any alternative account of the good. Socrates implicitly suggests that there is another way of understanding the good, but Protagoras’ inability to suggest an alternative indicates that *he* has no other criterion for what makes something good than that it is pleasurable. Perhaps Socrates is suggesting that Protagoras’ understanding of the good as the beneficial can be reduced to a form of hedonism, for Protagoras has no philosophical way of distinguishing “beneficial” acts from other acts except on the basis of the quantity of pleasure produced.

Socrates argues against the possibility of ἀκρασία from the point of view of a hedonist (cf. Santas 1966, 5 and Weiss 1990, 24). No one willingly does what harms himself, for it would be absurd to claim that a man does what is bad because he is overwhelmed by pleasure, if “bad” is substituted for “pain” and “good” for “pleasure.” For we would then be saying that someone does bad things because he is overcome by good. Although commentators have tried to give more elaborate explanations of what the absurdity consists in, the idea seems to be that it is simply absurd to suggest that something good could have the power to lead someone to do anything bad (cf. Dyson 1976; Weiss 1990).²¹ In a *mixed* situation where an action will lead to

²¹ For different points of view, see Santas 1966 and Vlastos 1969, who think the absurdity depends upon

some goods and some evils, it cannot be anything “but that one is greater and one is smaller, or some are more and some are fewer” that leads us to call one good or evil stronger than another (355e1-2). But then doing what is bad because overcome by good leads to a paradox: either the good outweighs the bad, in which case the entire chosen action *is* good; or if the good is not stronger than the bad, then no akratic behavior has taken place. In short, the hedonist cannot give an account of apparent ἀκράσια since it reduces all of the motivation for action to one single dimension of pleasure (good) or pain (bad). No claims about the relative *qualities* of different pleasures are made here: quantity alone measures the difference between pleasures. Socrates’ emphasis on the quantitative measurement of pleasure seems to be a dialectical move. For while Protagoras had claimed that certain pleasures were nobler than others, there is no sign of protest from him now. Protagoras has no justification for asserting that some goods are better than others, for his explanation of the good as the naturally beneficial gives no philosophical grounds for establishing a unifying criterion of the good aside from pleasure or another physical criterion.

Socrates does not explicitly adopt hedonism as his own position. Nowhere does he say that he believes that pleasure is the good, although he affirms, for example, that wisdom is sufficient for virtue. In contrast, the evidence for construing hedonism as one way of further defining the concept of the “beneficial” in Protagoras’ thought is strong.²² First, in Protagoras’ description of the good as the beneficial (334a4-c6), his examples of food, drink, and drugs suggest that paradigmatic for him are those benefits which are physically pleasurable in the long run. While other pleasures, such as political power or wealth, may also be considered in a

the later introduction of psychological hedonism, or Gallop 1964, 117-29, who thinks the absurdity is not to be found until 357d-e. Gallop thinks the absurdity consists in claiming that a man may know x to be evil and yet be ignorant of it. The problem with any interpretation which does not see the absurdity of the revised statement as immediate is that the representative of the many immediately laughs aloud at the substituted phrase. Socrates does not think that he needs to go on to argue for the absurdity.

²² Although Sesonke 1963 also argues that hedonism is the logical consequence of Protagoras’ views, he believes that this follows from Protagoras’ affirmation of the beliefs of the many. In contrast, I think that Socrates’

hedonistic calculus, the paradigm here, too, is physical pleasure.

Second, this view of pleasure as the good sits well with Protagoras' naturalistic ethics. In his view, the purpose of human beings, like all species, is simply to continue to exist. This is precisely what Socrates seems to take as the purpose of the hedonistic calculus. At six different places in the text, Socrates refers to the advantage of the calculus as promoting our survival: he says it will "save our lives" (356e2; 357b2); "save us" (356e4); or "preserve our lives" (356e6; 357a1; 357a7). Although Socrates says that pleasure is the *τέλος* (354b7) for the individual, pleasure is perfectly compatible with survival in at least two ways: understood as pleasure in the long run, pleasure promotes survival, and furthermore, survival is necessary for us to enjoy more pleasures. For example, eating food is necessary to survival, and survival necessary for the experience of further pleasures, including eating. An intense pleasure which would harm one's chances for survival would not be desirable, since in death one would lose other pleasures associated in living. Similarly, in some cases, painful actions that promoted survival might be desirable, as in the case of a medicinal treatment which produced discomfort but promoted health. One might even argue that existence itself is pleasurable. In many cases, then, the ends of pleasure (i.e., a package of pleasures and pains considered as a whole) and individual survival are compatible.

Third, the hedonistic calculus sits well with Protagoras' valuation of *σωφροσύνη* over the other parts of virtue even justice itself. However, while Protagoras sees wisdom as giving others beneficial *perceptions*, Socrates here firmly links the beneficial to knowledge. In the hedonistic scheme, the incontinent individual does not merely lack the right perceptions; he lacks the *τέχνη* which allows him to weigh the conflicting good and bad effects of an action and to see the package of goods and evils as a whole; i.e., the *τέχνη* gives him knowledge of the whole.

questions are designed to show that hedonism follows from Protagoras' views as stated in the Great Speech.

Education in this model would be correcting others' misperceptions of what a "beneficial" action is by giving them the technical ability to make the correct calculation *for themselves*. Thus one "positive" Socratic element of the hedonism argument is that it moves from good perception to knowledge as necessary for virtue.

The hedonism section of the dialogue, then, is not an argument for Socrates' own views, nor one designed to expose Protagoras' explicit belief in hedonism, but rather to sharpen the focus upon what is implicit and lacking in Protagoras' understanding of the good as the physically beneficial. While Protagoras wishes to maintain a distinction between noble and base pleasures, his conception of the good is insufficient for doing so. More generally, Socrates will go on to show in the argument for the equation of courage and wisdom, Protagoras' particular understanding of human nature makes an argument for just action in the face of personal danger difficult, if not impossible. For courage is defined as "wisdom about what is to be feared and what isn't," and the criterion by which one judges the fearful is the relative quantity of pleasure and pain that the actor will experience as a result.²³

At first glance, Protagoras' naturalism seems intended to make natural selfish desires consonant with the political virtues, by showing the interdependence of individual and societal goods. However, his naturalism confines the human good to the physical world and sensible desires, and treats the natural desire for self-interest as stronger than the capacity to be social. As a result, his conception of nature does not fully harmonize the political with the individual good. Because Protagoras cannot provide a unifying account of the good, his naturalism falls prey to a hedonism which reduces knowledge of the good to technical calculation, a view which in turn fails to preserve ordinary moral intuitions which Protagoras shares. As Socrates shows Protagoras, so too Plato shows the reader of the *Protagoras* the shortcomings internal to the

²³ See Weiss 1985, 11-24, for an exposition of the way in which Socrates reduces courage to technical knowledge.

sophist's conception of human nature and the good..²⁴

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