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Socrates on Simonides:
The Use of Poetry in Socratic and Platonic Rhetoric

At *Protagoras* 339a-d, Protagoras brings up a problem concerning the interpretation of a poem by Simonides. Socrates gives three amusing interpretations of the poem as possible solutions to the problem, all of which ring false on the face of it. As a result, many commentators devalue the Simonides section. Some regard this section as a playful interlude on Plato's part.¹ Others argue that it is a Platonic statement of the inferiority of poetry or rhetoric to philosophy.² I, in contrast, will argue that it is essential to Socrates' rhetorical strategy in the dialogue. Although this position may seem counterintuitive, since Socrates does also argue for the superiority of philosophy over poetry, I hope to show through the course of this paper that nonetheless poetic interpretation is central to Socratic rhetoric in this dialogue. In particular, the presence of two well-known Socratic theses, "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess" as part of his interpretation (343b2-3), suggests that Socrates uses the poem in order to make his own claims about the nature of goodness and moral knowledge.³

In this paper, I first offer a brief sketch of the meaning of the original poem, insofar as it is available to us.⁴ Second, I examine Socrates' three interpretations of the poem and see how they are manipulations of the poem which present a Socratic alternative to the Protagorean understanding of knowledge. Third, I shall give some indication of the significance of these Socratic ideas for understanding Socratic and Platonic rhetoric in the *Protagoras*, especially insofar as it might be intended to contextualize Socrates' other arguments in the dialogue. The Simonides section of the dialogue is not only philosophically interesting but even crucial to the *Protagoras* as a presentation of moral knowledge as knowing *what* is good in itself rather than knowing *how* to achieve other, concrete ends.

I.

The full poem is unavailable, since only those fragments quoted in the *Protagoras* survive. The presence of lacunae makes poetic interpretation particularly difficult.⁵ However,

we can reconstruct the order of the fragments with some certainty. Below is a likely reconstruction of the original poem:

It is hard to become a man truly noble (ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν),
in hands and feet and mind,
fashioned foursquare without blemish.
[lacuna]

Nor do I think that the word of Pittacus
was said harmoniously, although said by a wise man.
He said that it is hard to be noble (χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι).
God alone can have this privilege, but man
cannot be but base (δ' οὐκ ἔστι μὴ οὐ κακὸν ἔμμεναι),
whomever irresistible misfortune (ἀμήχανος συμφορὰ) has overtaken.
For in good fortune every man is noble (ἀγαθός)
and in bad fortune base (κακός),
and for the most part they are noble (ἀριστοί)
whom the gods love.

Therefore shall I never,
in a search for what cannot exist,
waste my span of life in an empty, impracticable hope--
the all-blameless man, among all of us
who win the fruit of the broad-based earth.
If I find him, I shall tell you the news.
But I praise and love all,
whosoever does nothing base (αἰσχρόν)
of his own free will (ἐκὼν). But against necessity,
not even the gods fight.

[lacuna]
I am no lover of carping. Sufficient for me
is the man who is not base (μὴ κακός), nor too witless, if
he has in his heart the justice which helps the city,
a sound man; nor shall I blame him
for the generation of fools is past counting.
All things are fair (καλά) in which
base things (αἰσχρὰ) are not mingled.⁶

Most commentators see the Simonides poem as presenting the following point of view:
excellence as traditionally understood--e.g., possessing the traits of wealth, physical
attractiveness, and power⁷--is difficult to attain, and impossible to keep for long.⁸ Because

human beings universally act badly in the face of misfortune, and the gods control the circumstances surrounding the possession of external goods such as wealth, Simonides is willing to praise some lesser, more attainable standard. Commentators vary significantly in the importance that they attach to this new standard. Some suggest that Simonides proposes a revision of the traditional morality in favor of a new, internal standard, while others claim that Simonides is making a more limited, personal statement about whom he finds praiseworthy without abandoning the old ideal of the ἀγαθός.⁹

The poem presents three major themes in the following order: the difficulty of becoming ἀγαθός; the impossibility of remaining noble in the face of misfortune; and the praise of the relatively good man who avoids being base. The first stanza emphasizes the difficulty of becoming ἀγαθός in both body and mind and sets a high standard for what it means to be ἀγαθός. In the second stanza, Simonides criticizes Pittacus for saying what at first sounds quite similar to what he himself has said in the first stanza, that it is hard to be noble. (It is this apparent contradiction that Protagoras presents to Socrates as a puzzle to be solved.) However, the second stanza only further emphasizes the difficulty of attaining the standard set out in the first: only the gods can remain noble apart from the vicissitudes of fortune, whereas all humans act badly in cases of misfortunes beyond their control. It is difficult to become good both because the standard is high and because the gods and fortune are in control while we are not. Being a traditional ἀγαθός is not a matter of exertion or choice.¹⁰ Wealth, power, and physical attractiveness can all be lost at a moment's notice.

Simonides then suggests that he is willing to praise those who do not deliberately (ἐκὼν) choose to do what is base (αἰσχρόν). The reasonably good man is not completely witless or base, cares for the justice of the city, and is sound, but he is a far cry from the man “fashioned foursquare without blemish” of the first stanza. His standard is much more modest, for it requires not external attributes, but only some minimal internal traits. What is praiseworthy need not be that which is elite and divine, but only what is average and human.

II.

Protagoras' objection to the poem concerns its consistency. He asks,

But how could anyone be thought to be consistent in saying both these things?
First of all he himself asserts that it is hard to become a truly good man, and then a little further on he forgets that and attacks Pittacus for saying just what he has said, that it is hard to be noble, and refuses to accept it, though it's just the same as his own view. (339d1-6).¹¹

Socrates attempts to make the passages consistent in three ways, none of which are particularly sensitive interpretations. The first focuses on a distinction between being and becoming excellent, which Protagoras rejects as antithetical to common sense. The second proposed solution is a humorous application of Prodicus' fine philological distinctions. The third and lengthiest interpretation reconsiders the distinction between being and becoming excellent, but this time with an emphasis on the impossibility of perfect virtue.

Socrates' first answer is to suggest that Simonides meant something different by ἔμμεναι and γενέσθαι, i.e., between being and becoming, in the poem. Socrates picks Prodicus as his partner in the defense of the poem, and his choice is entirely appropriate, as Prodicus is a lover of philological distinctions and is from Ceos, Simonides' place of origin (340a1). When Socrates asks Prodicus whether being and becoming are the same, he replies that they are different. Socrates then claims that Simonides means that *becoming* noble is difficult, while criticizing Pittacus for saying that it is hard to *be* noble. Perhaps like Hesiod he believes that it is hard to become good, "[f]or the gods have placed sweat on the path to excellence," but once one is excellent, "[t]hereafter it is easy to keep, hard though it was to achieve" (340d3-5).¹²

Of course, this is not what Simonides meant to say, for the poem's next lines controvert such an interpretation: it is not easy but *impossible* to remain good in the face of misfortune. Protagoras objects not by citing any inconsistency with other parts of the poem, but rather with an appeal to common sense. He says, "It would show great stupidity on the poet's part if he says that it is so easy to keep excellence once you have it, when that's the most difficult thing of all, as everyone agrees" (340e6-8). While Socrates could have pointed out his citation of Hesiod as

one who disagreed with the many, or made a general point about common opinion and its limitations, he quickly abandons this line of interpretation.

I suggest that Socrates temporarily abandons his first interpretation because its significance can only be seen in light of his third and fullest interpretation, where he will take it up again (343b6-347a6). There he will claim that virtue is knowledge, but that human excellence is a middle state between divine virtue and the complete lack of goodness. For human beings, becoming virtuous is not easy, because knowledge is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Still, this first interpretation suggests that *if* perfect knowledge could be achieved, then indeed being virtuous would be easy. Socrates presents the view that being good is an easy state to maintain if one is perfectly knowledgeable, but quickly abandons it in the face of criticism because such a claim is counterfactual. It is nonetheless an ideal against which to read Socrates' ideas in his third interpretation. The Hesiodic interpretation presents us with one side of the coin, what would happen if our state of becoming good were ever to become an unchanging, "divine" state of being, while the third interpretation examines the other, what it means to be in a state of becoming.

In his second interpretation of the poem, Socrates mercilessly teases both Protagoras and Prodicus, and thereby distances himself from the methods of the latter. This time Socrates gets Prodicus to say that by *χαλεπός* Simonides meant not "hard to bear" but "bad" (*κακός*). Simonides was "censuring Pittacus, for not distinguishing the sense of words correctly, coming from Lesbos as he did and having been brought up to speak a foreign language" (341c7-9). Just as Prodicus has reprimanded Socrates for calling Protagoras *σοφός και δεινός* (terribly wise), saying that Socrates ought not call something good "terrible" (341b1), *χαλεπός* properly used means "bad." Therefore, Socrates dryly suggests, Simonides is chiding Pittacus for saying that it is "bad to be good." (Socrates also implies that he meant the *double entendre* all along in calling Protagoras *δεινός*.) Protagoras objects, insisting that *χαλεπός* means what everyone ordinarily would understand it to mean, that which is difficult to attain. Socrates kindly rescues Prodicus and claims that the latter was only joking, since otherwise the poem would not continue with the

claim that only the gods have the gift of being good.

Although Socrates' primary intent here seems to be to poke fun at Prodicus' sophistical method, which affixes fixed, precise meanings to words without attention to their context, it also raises the question as to what makes the noble valuable in the first place. That is, what makes it so comical even to suggest that Pittacus meant to say that it is “κακὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι” (341c5-6)? Protagoras' implicit answer is rather unphilosophical: everyone understands χαλεπός to mean “difficult to attain” here, presumably because it is absurd to think that anyone could claim that the noble is bad. Socrates, however, claims that he knows Prodicus to be joking *because* the poem continues with the claim that the gods are the only ones who are ἐσθλός. Socrates thus implies that to be continually noble is to be like the divine and *therefore* is valuable. In Socrates' third interpretation, he will distinguish the human state from the divine one and ascribe a different standard of praise to the human, though in a way quite different than the one in which the original poem distinguishes the two standards. Socrates' first two interpretations, viewed in light of his third, suggest that the process of becoming good is difficult, while being good is, if possible, easy and divine, and worthy precisely because divine. His third interpretation will set against this divine model of goodness a distinctly human goodness, which nonetheless takes its bearings from the higher standard of divine goodness.¹³

In Socrates' third interpretation, he describes the Spartans as the wisest of all Greeks, those who conceal their wisdom and feign preoccupation with sports and combat in order to protect their wisdom from foreigners. That the Spartans are the best- educated and most skilled in words can be seen in the “pithy, memorable” sayings they unexpectedly throw out in conversation (342e4). Many well-known wise men are students of such a Spartan education, and these wise men at Delphi inscribed the maxims “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess” as a sort of offering. Pittacus is one of the wise men, and his bit of wisdom was the saying “It is hard to be good”; Simonides criticizes him in order to discredit Pittacus and gain renown for himself (342a7-343c6).

The presentation of Simonides as engaging in a verbal battle with Pittacus in order to

increase his own reputation parallels the situation between Protagoras and Socrates, for public defeat of his opponent is precisely the point of Protagoras' exercise. Protagoras wishes to persuade Hippocrates to become his student, even as Socrates wishes to win the debate to keep Hippocrates from the sophist. Furthermore, Socrates is similar to the wise students of the Spartans in his choice here to use βραχυλογία, short speeches, rather than the long ones Protagoras prefers;¹⁴ it was the incommensurability of Protagoras' and Socrates' approaches that led to the discussion of this poem (334c9-338e6). Although Socrates is clearly poking fun at the Spartans, and perhaps also at an overreliance upon aphorisms, the two aphorisms which sum up the wisdom of the sages are well-known and associated with Socrates in other dialogues, and they point to the centrality of self-knowledge and σωφροσύνη in Socrates' conception of wisdom.

Socrates begins the exposition of his third interpretation by suggesting a transposition of the word ἀλαθέως (truly) in the poem. While one would ordinarily assume that ἀλαθέως modifies ἀγαθός, Socrates suggests that it instead modifies γενέσθαι. Socrates' justification for the unusual reading is that it would be "naive" to suggest that one can be good but not *truly* good; therefore Simonides must be replying to Pittacus' aphorism and mean that it is not hard to *be* but rather to *become* good (343d5). In Simonides' poem itself, the use of ἀλαθέως emphasizes a high standard of goodness, achieving the pinnacle of excellence rather than some merely adequate approximation. Socrates' misreading puts the emphasis here not on the perfect state of goodness, but on *becoming* good.

Socrates reconsiders his earlier distinction between being and becoming good. This time the contrast is not between the difficulty of becoming good and the ease of remaining so, but rather between the difficulty of becoming good and the *impossibility* of remaining so. "Helpless disaster" (ἀμήχανος συμφορὰ) overthrows the good man (344c5). Ἀμήχανος, literally, "without contrivance," can mean either lacking means or being such that no means will do.¹⁵ Simonides seems to have meant that excellence is directly dependent upon good fortune: for example, one cannot be a traditional ἀγαθός without a certain amount of wealth, but wealth can be lost as the

result of circumstances entirely beyond one's control. However, Socrates introduces a new term which mediates the relationship between fortune and goodness: knowledge (ἐπιστήμη; 345b5).

His explanation is as follows:

Now in controlling a ship, who is it whom helpless disaster (ἀμήχανος συμφορα) overthrows? Clearly not a man without knowledge of sailing (τὸν ιδιώτην); for he has been overthrown from the start. So just as you can't throw a man who is already down, but you can throw a man who is on his feet, and put him down, but not if he's down already, similarly helpless disaster can sometimes overthrow the resourceful man, but not the man who is always helpless(344c6--344d3)

Again, a distinctively Socratic thesis is introduced (and again, at the expense of honest hermeneutics): while bad fortune can take away excellence, one can only lose what one already possesses, and excellence is dependent upon knowledge. This proclamation of the importance of knowledge in excellence culminates in this section when Socrates says that the only way to do badly is to lose one's knowledge (345b5-6).¹⁶ Socrates believes that virtue is knowledge. The discussions of the unity of the virtues and for hedonism which surround this section also argue for the centrality of knowledge in virtue, although, as we shall see, with a different understanding of what knowledge is than found in this interpretation.

Socrates' examples in developing his case that only those with knowledge can be overthrown by disaster--everyone else already being down, so to speak--are those of a helmsman, farmer, and doctor. In each case, a person's skills can fail to help him sufficiently in times of disaster: "[A] helmsman can be struck and rendered helpless by a great storm, and a farmer made helpless by the onset of a bad season, and the same with a doctor" (344d3-5). Although Socrates' examples would all seem to be similar in pointing to cases where skills are insufficient for controlling overwhelming external events, he shifts to a different kind of helplessness in his explanation of the doctor overcome by bad fortune. For while the analogy to the helmsman in a storm and farmer in a bad season could have been continued by saying that there are some diseases too terrible even for a doctor to cure, instead Socrates speaks of the bad doctor as one who has lost his knowledge.

The shift is a partial move from the inability to control external events to the inability to control one's internal state. Socrates still recognizes the possibility of an event outside one's control which can prevent one's remaining good, but now only those events which negatively affect one's *knowledge* can do so: "In the same way a good man may eventually become bad with the passage of time, or through hardship, disease, or some other circumstance that involves the only real kind of faring ill, which is the loss of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)" (345b3-6).¹⁷

It is this sort of reliance upon knowledge which has led commentators such as Nussbaum to claim that Plato is insensitive to tragedy.¹⁸ If knowledge is the only condition for excellence, then it would seem that Socrates denies the possibility of losing one's friends, family, or even one's own life prematurely as significant impingements upon happiness. However, such a reading is unfair if overstated, for Socrates has shown a sensitivity to the plights of the helmsmen and farmer, for whom skill will not always be enough to avert disaster. Moreover, even knowledge can be lost because of forces out of one's control, e.g., age, toil, disease and other unnamed misfortunes. It is for this reason that Socrates agrees with Simonides in saying that "it is impossible to be a good man, good all the time, that is, but it is possible to become good and for the same man to become bad. And the best, who are good for longest, are those whom the gods love (345c1-4)." His point is that the *self* cannot be harmed except through a loss of knowledge of what is good, i.e., the loss of knowledge is *decisive* for harming the good life in a way that other losses, bad as they may be, are not.

Socrates interprets the next line of the poem, "But I praise and love who do nothing shameful freely. But against necessity not even gods fight." Again, he suggests a transposition: ἔκων (willingly) does not modify ἔρδη (do) but ἐπαίνημι (praise), and Simonides means only to say that he is praising of his own free will. For, no one intelligent believes that anyone ever freely acts shamefully or badly (345d2-e6). Socrates thus further draws out the principle that virtue is knowledge to the logical conclusion that no one does wrong willingly, by further misreading the poem for his own purposes.

Of the final line of the poem-- "Now all things are fair, which are not mingled with foul"--

-Socrates gives a similar misreading. Whereas Simonides' meaning would seem to be that what is καλός is defined by the mere absence of the κακός, Socrates claims that this is unlike the case of black and white, where one could define white as the absence of all blackness. But his reason for distinguishing the two cases is merely that it would be laughable (γελοῖον) if the goodness were the mere absence of badness: he does not articulate why the two cases must be different. Socrates' next line clarifies *what* he means in distinguishing them: Simonides must mean that he accepts the middle state as free from censure (346d3-4). The idea that a middle state characterizes the human being is familiar to readers of the *Symposium*.¹⁹ Socrates here implies that human beings are not capable of "divine" goodness, but also that we must not view goodness as the mere absence of what is κακός. Human beings can strive to become good but cannot hope to achieve continual, unchanging goodness: this trait belongs only to the gods.²⁰ However, the difficulty of becoming good and the imperfectibility of the human state do not mean that we can rest satisfied with merely avoiding what is most base, as Simonides himself seems to have meant. Socrates implies that our state is only a middle one relative to the divine, and that it is not pure ignorance. Insofar as we are becoming good, we are moving towards goodness, which is "divine." With respect to how to evaluate the middle state, one might say that the Socratic cup is half full.

When we combine this notion of a middle state with the notion that excellence is knowledge, an interesting picture emerges. Socrates thinks human beings are incapable of goodness precisely *because* they cannot know everything perfectly and completely. Implicit in Socrates' poetic interpretation is the idea that we can know the good, which is *more* than the mere privation of the bad, but that we can know it only imperfectly or ephemerally.²¹ Perhaps for this reason Socrates sees self-knowledge and moderation as appropriately human kinds of wisdom, for they remind us of human limitations and frailty, both with respect to what we can know and what we can do. Still, because human goodness takes its bearings from an idealized standard for which it strives (rather than from the mere absence of terrible wrongs), Socrates suggests that we are not limited only to knowing our own ignorance. Whenever we know the

good, perfectly or imperfectly, completely or incompletely, we know *something*. Even imperfect knowers, if they can be said to have knowledge at all, are oriented towards what is, and to *become* virtuous is to increase our knowledge of what is good.

To summarize, Socrates' deliberate misreadings of the Simonides' poem present a complex picture of the goodness towards which human beings strive. His first interpretation suggests that becoming good is difficult, but (as Hesiod thought) being good is in principle easy once achieved. In light of Socrates' later implying that knowledge is virtue, he seems to mean that knowledge of moral matters is difficult to acquire, but once possessed is sufficient for virtue. Socrates' second interpretation calls such a state of unchanging, ideal virtue divine, either in a literal or metaphorical sense. His third interpretation claims that the human state must be distinguished from the divine state, insofar as the human state is a middle one between perfection and imperfection. Human beings are always in the difficult state of *becoming* virtuous. Unlike Simonides, however, Socrates does not reject the divine standard altogether, but on the contrary thinks it that from which the good human takes his bearings, as an ideal towards which to strive. The way to become good is to know, and although perfect knowledge is perhaps divine, nevertheless human beings not only *seek* to know what is good, but can know (imperfectly). The loss of knowledge is tragic only because we are more like the doctor who can lose his knowledge than like the man who is already down on the ground because he never possessed it.

III.

In the section on the Simonides poem, Socrates does not argue for the beliefs which his interpretations imply. One might ask what the significance of their inclusion in the *Protagoras* is, if not as philosophical arguments for Socratic positions. Why would Socrates use poetry to set forth his own views in a dialogue in which he criticizes the act of poetic interpretation? Furthermore, why would Plato, the author of a work of *poesis*--the dialogue--include a criticism

of the interpretation of poetry in a written work which the reader presumably is expected to interpret?

The dialogue provides us with the beginnings of an explanation of Socrates' rhetoric. Socrates claims that the search for the 'real meaning' of any poet is not only impossible but also of little consequence if possible. We have no need of poets since "you can't question them about what they say, but in most cases when people quote them, one says that the poet means one thing and one another, and they argue over points which can't be established with certainty" (347e4-7). Instead, we ought to engage the living in conversation about our own ideas. Socrates' skepticism about the possibility of an objective hermeneutic in poetic interpretation is reminiscent of Socrates' well-known criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus*: living conversation is superior to writing, since a written work cannot defend itself against misinterpretation or orient its arguments differently to different audiences (*Phaedrus* 275e1-6). Here, too, Simonides is absent and cannot defend his poem against misunderstandings. Moreover, were we to understand the poet's intentions fully, he still would not be present to answer any doubts we might have about the *validity* of his position. Even when true, poetry falls short from the point of view of Socratic philosophy, if only because its author is absent from all but the beginning of the conversation.

However, Socrates says that he has closely studied this particular poem by Simonides and that he thinks it a fine and properly written poem (339b5-9). What, if anything, about this particular poem makes it a suitable subject for Socrates, the defender of philosophy against poetry, to study? Perhaps the answer lies precisely in the apparent contradiction in the poem which Protagoras disparages. As Socrates reads the poem, it contains an internal dialectic, between Simonides and Pittacus, similar to the Socratic mode of philosophical conversation. What makes the poem worthwhile is precisely the tension between Simonides' and Pittacus' views of excellence. On Socrates' reading, Simonides responds to Pittacus' assumption that

becoming good is hard not by rejecting Pittacus' claim altogether, but by saying that Pittacus does not go far enough. Thus, Socrates can say to Protagoras that he thinks the two passages which the sophist cites are consistent (339c8). While it might remain inferior to living conversation about a philosophical topic, Simonides' poem at least has the virtue of containing a miniature dialogue within itself between two points of view.

Socrates builds upon this internal dialectic of the poem by using interpretation to build upon and to respond to Simonides' own view. Socrates therefore does not attempt to recount what Simonides thinks, but to respond thoughtfully in his own person to the issues of the poem. His hermeneutical aim is not poetic interpretation, but dialogue with the poet. Moreover, since Protagoras will not allow Socrates the question-and-answer format which he prefers, Socrates draws Protagoras and others into the conversation, in effect, resuming at least an indirect conversation between the living about human goodness. We see therefore three imitations of dialectic, each one in turn closer to the genuine practice of dialectic: a dialectic within the poem; one between the poet and Socrates; and one between Socrates and the sophists. Socrates thus satisfies Protagoras' formal demand that he interpret a poem, without entirely abandoning his dialectical project.

Plato's aims here must be somewhat different than Socrates', since the dialogue is itself a work of *poesis* by an author now absent, which demands interpretation. However, the dialogue form contains multiple voices within it, and so allows for its reader imaginatively to engage in the process of philosophy along with the characters. The dialogue lays out for us a number of positions, at times analyzes them, and always invites us to respond further to the questions of the dialogue in subsequent conversation with the living. That is, it easily allows for many of the activities Socrates undertakes with much greater difficulty in his analysis of Simonides. Plato

draws the reader into his dialogue as an active participant rather than as a passive onlooker, and so mitigates the problems of poetic interpretation to which Socrates refers in the *Protagoras*.

In particular, I suggest that Plato includes the Simonides section in order to qualify for us, his readers, the conclusions about the nature of moral reasoning at which Protagoras and Socrates arrive, conclusions which are influenced by Protagoras' beliefs as much as by Socrates'. Ideas similar to those articulated in Socrates' interpretation are argued for elsewhere in the dialogue (e.g., the importance of knowledge in distinguishing courage from rashness at *Protagoras* 349e1-350c5). Socrates' apparent aim through most of the dialogue is to show Protagoras that the virtues are unified and that knowledge is central to virtue. He seems to accomplish his end. However, the very end of the dialogue is also aporetic: Socrates and Protagoras look as though they hold opposite beliefs about the teachability of excellence, and the relationships between excellence, knowledge, and teaching are left unclear.

While Socrates wants to show Protagoras that knowledge is central to virtue, he also indicates that such knowledge is not of the sort that Protagoras thinks it is, as indicated in other parts of the dialogue. Socrates offers explicit arguments for the centrality of wisdom to virtue, but also implicitly suggests that a full account of what it means for excellence *to be* knowledge is far more complicated than has been shown here. Although there are numerous comparisons to be made between Protagoras' and Socrates' views of knowledge, two interrelated points of contrast stand out. First, Socrates' interpretation makes self-knowledge crucial to wisdom, while Protagoras' explanations of knowledge are entirely oriented to the material world outside of the self. Second, Protagoras' view of the knowledge involved in excellence is *knowing how* to manipulate the environment, while Socrates indicates a concern with *knowing what* is the case in some normative and not merely factual sense.

There are two crucial passages which strongly indicate how Protagoras understands the knowledge involved in goodness. The first is a passage on the subject matter the sophist teaches, and the second is on the nature of goodness. With respect to the former, Protagoras says:

What I teach is the proper management (εὐβουλία) of one's own affairs, how best to run one's household, and the management of public affairs, how to make the most effective (δυνατότατος) contribution to the affairs of the city both by word (λέγειν) and action (πράττειν) (318e5-319a3).

Εὐβουλία as Protagoras uses it here suggests the importance of the down-to-earth kind of prudence required for being a good manager, whether of a self, city, or a household. The pairing of λέγειν and πράττειν here suggest that they have a similar function for such a manager: both speech and action are tools of the leader, whose aim is to become δυνατότατος, that is, he who is the most capable--or perhaps the most powerful--man of the city. Wisdom here is not *knowing what* is good and evil but rather good management or sound counsel, i.e., *knowing how* to achieve what benefits the city or home. Self-knowledge plays no role whatsoever in what Protagoras says he teaches. Nowhere in this description is there an indication that knowledge includes either knowing what is good in a moral sense or knowing anything about one's self. Socrates must restate Protagoras' description of his teaching as "the art of running a city" (τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην) and "making men to be good citizens" (ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας) (319a3-5),²² even to keep the question of goodness (rather than efficacy) at the heart of the conversation.

In contrast, when Hippocrates first approaches Socrates about Protagoras' instruction, Socrates focuses upon showing Hippocrates what he does and does not know and Hippocrates' awareness of the state of his own soul. In their conversation in the courtyard, Socrates leads Hippocrates to see his own ignorance about what Protagoras teaches. Hippocrates thinks Protagoras is a wise speaker, but he has no idea about what subject Protagoras is wise. Moreover, Hippocrates is not even clear about what his own aims are in seeking an education with Protagoras. When Socrates leads Hippocrates to the admission that it looks as though he would learn to be a sophist by studying with a sophist, Hippocrates blushes, and dawn breaks

(312a3). Hippocrates knows that his aims are *not* to be a sophist, even if he does not know exactly what they are, and Socrates' elenchus reminds Hippocrates of at least this. Hippocrates comes to see the need for questioning Protagoras about what he teaches, a question he saw as entirely unnecessary before in his rush before dawn to find Protagoras. Self-knowledge is a part of Hippocrates' education by Socrates, even if in this context it is limited to the discovery of ignorance rather than of knowledge. For Protagoras knowledge of externals is important, in the service of better manipulating events, while Socrates sees self-knowledge (including knowledge of human limits) as central to goodness.²³

Protagoras' description of goodness also indicates a concern with knowing how to control the external world. When Socrates asks whether the good is always that which is beneficial to men or not, Protagoras replies:

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' aim here is to claim that advantage is relative, so that one cannot define the good as the humanly advantageous. However, he in no way suggests that the good is a different *kind* of thing than the advantageous. If the wisdom associated with excellence is only knowing what is of benefit for the city or self in concrete ways analogous to the examples above, then even knowing *what is* good can be explained in terms of knowing what is useful. The gardener's knowledge of what is good for a tree's roots is valuable for tending trees; so too the good man's knowledge of the political art is valuable for political management.

Socrates' description of knowledge in the Simonides poem is entirely different in its focus

upon the value of the *state* of being or becoming knowledgeable, not the utility of our knowledge. Recall that Socrates' bad doctor is not bad because he cannot control disease, but because he has lost his knowledge of medicine. By analogy, the bad human being is not one who cannot control his world, but one who no longer knows what is good.

Protagoras' belief in knowledge as useful information has consequences for his own understanding of excellence as knowledge in the arguments for the unity of the virtues. While I take Socrates to be arguing seriously for the unity of virtues, the precise way in which this unity is articulated better reflects Protagoras' picture of knowledge than Socrates'.²⁴ In the argument for the equivalence of courage and wisdom at the conclusion of the dialogue (359c2-360e6), the model of knowledge used is one of calculation. The coward is in error about what is and is not fearful, while the courageous man is wise about the same things (360c7; 360d2-3). Socrates appears to incorporate Protagoras' understanding of knowledge as useful information into his questions with Protagoras in the argument for the unity of the virtues.²⁵ Ignorance is equated with error about the facts. At first, Socrates pairs two terms for ignorance together at 360b7, ἄγνοια and ἀμαθία, but afterwards he repeatedly attributes cowardice to ἀμαθία, not ἄγνοια:

'And didn't it turn out that they are cowards as a result of their error (ἀμαθίαν) about what is to be feared?'

'Certainly,' he said.

'So it's in consequence of that error (ἀμαθίαν) that they are cowards?'

He agreed.

'And you agree that what makes them cowards is cowardice?'

He assented.

'So cowardice proves to be error (ἀμαθία) about what is to be feared and what isn't?'

He nodded (360c3-c9).

In addition, Socrates three times (360d2- d5) calls σοφία the opposite of ἀμαθία about what is to be feared. Socrates might have used the term ἄγνοια to imply that the coward does not see what is good (e.g., in battle he does not see that fighting is morally worthy in this case). However, his choice of ἀμαθία implies that it is a lack of learning, ignorance in the sense of being "untaught," from which the coward suffers. That is, the coward lacks information or facts, as a layman lacks

knowledge that the general possesses (e.g., in battle he cannot accurately calculate the risk).

Plato demonstrates the shortcomings of such an understanding of the knowledge involved in courage in the *Laches*, where Socrates and his interlocutors explore a similar definition of courage. Nicias defines courage as "knowledge of terrible and confidence inspiring things" (*Laches* 195a1-2).²⁶ However, Socrates shows that, on the one hand, the man who has knowledge in battle in a way seems less courageous than he who lacks skill; for example, the man fighting in battle against fewer and inferior men seems less courageous than the man putting himself at risk when victory is uncertain. On the other hand, the man acting in complete ignorance seems foolish, not courageous (193a3-e3). Socrates later defines courage as "knowledge about pretty much all goods and evils and in all conditions" (199d1-2). Knowledge in this context must mean something more like knowledge of what is good as such, e.g., of an idea of the good, not just having useful information.²⁷

The *Protagoras*' presentation of the knowledge involved in courage is more like Nicias' than like Socrates' in the *Laches*. But it is precisely the difference between this understanding of courage as knowing the right information and the final definition of the *Laches*, which may be responsible for Protagoras' own dissatisfaction with the equation of courage and wisdom. The definition of courage as knowing what is and is not fearful means something quite different if given an interpretation like "knowing that this action will not lead to one's own death" rather than "knowing that death in this case would not be (morally) bad." In the context of the hedonism argument, which associated being good with possessing knowledge of pains and pleasures, and in light of his own understanding of knowledge,²⁸ Protagoras takes the knowledge involved in courage to be something like prudent calculation, and so finds the equation of wisdom and courage difficult to accept. Thus, Protagoras refuses even to answer Socrates in the final moments of this argument (360d8).²⁹ However, Socrates' interpretation of the Simonides poem leaves room for a different understanding of knowledge, knowledge of what is good in itself. Courage defined as knowledge of what is and is not fearful in this revised sense might be more acceptable to ordinary intuitions about courageous action.

The conclusion of the dialogue is aporetic in order to show that Protagoras' education about excellence is incomplete. Socrates says that when he began his conversation with Protagoras he thought that excellence could not be taught, but now it would be astonishing if excellence could not be taught, if it is knowledge (361b7). But Protagoras, who had thought it teachable, now seems to think that excellence is something more than knowledge. Socrates exhorts him to return to the nature of excellence (361c6), implying that there were problems with their previous discussion.³⁰ Socrates' misreadings of the Simonides' poem point to a possible solution to these problems by offering an alternative picture of knowledge as a state of knowing what is good for its own sake and not only as a means to other, concrete ends. For Socrates to know is to know increasingly what is good, coupled with the knowledge of the difficulty of gaining such knowledge and the knowledge of our relative ignorance. Socrates makes progress with Protagoras in showing him both that excellence is knowledge and hinting at the limitations of how Protagoras conceives of this doctrine. The *Protagoras* thereby exhibits the value of dialectic as a philosophical method appropriate to the human state, in showing us both what we do and do not know.³¹

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¹ A. E. Taylor 1960, for example, writes, "The argument for the Socratic paradoxes makes a severe demand on the reader's power of hard thinking, and the most difficult part of it is still to come. The strain of attention therefore requires to be relaxed, if we are to follow Socrates to his conclusion with full understanding (251)." See also Shorey 1933, 128 and Guthrie 1975, 227 for similar claims.

² See, e.g., Friedländer 1977, 23-25 and Goldberg 1983, 160. Certainly part of the aim is to show the superiority of poetry. For, Protagoras' desire to ask questions as he sees fit prompts the discussion of poetry, and it is Socrates' ability to defeat Protagoras on the sophist's own terms that allows the conversation to proceed once again on a Socratic model. At the conclusion of his interpretation, Socrates suggests a return to a short question-and-answer format as the superior, philosophical mode. However, I am claiming this interpretation on its own is partial and insufficient, as Socrates himself uses poetry to make his own claims, even if he might prefer other methods.

³ Most of the literature which exists on the Simonides poem concerns the poem itself without attention to the significance of Socrates' interpretation. One notable exception is Frede 1986, which is particularly helpful for its attention to thematic links between the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium* and the importance of the idea of the impossibility of perfection here. Frede limits herself to Socrates' third interpretation, however, and views the section on poetic interpretation as a later insertion by Plato into the *Protagoras*. In contrast, I argue that this section is better explained as showing the limits of other arguments in the dialogue--limits which are based upon Protagoras' conception of knowledge--rather than revealing a development in Plato's thought.

⁴ By "original poem," I mean the version which most scholars take to be the original from reconstructing the fragments found here. See Adam and Adam 1971's appendix on the poem. I take the poem to be genuinely Simonidean, but doing so in no way affects my conclusions, which

would stand even if Socrates were interpreting Plato's own invention.

⁵ The very fact that Protagoras thinks this a challenge suggests that the problem of interpretation was a real one even without the lacunae. Therefore, my exposition of the poem remains general and for the sole purpose of making clear where Socrates' departures from the poem's original meaning clearly manipulate the poem and so reflect his own views.

⁶ Translation and reconstruction by Bowra 1961, 326-336.

⁷ See Adkins 1960 regarding the traditional meaning and development of *ajrethv*, *ajgaqv*", and related concepts in the ancient Greek world.

⁸ See, for example, Bowra 1934, 230-39 and Woodbury 1953, 135-63.

⁹ Cf. Donlon 1969, 71-95, who sees Simonides as proposing a new standard of excellence which looks to "inner motivation" while Parry 1965, 297-320, sees the poem as taking a more traditional approach to excellence.

¹⁰ I am in agreement with Woodbury 1953 with respect to much of his interpretation. In brief, he argues that for Simonides being *ejsqlo*;" is determined by the gods, but becoming *ajgaqv*" is possible through human exertion (155). It therefore makes no sense to speak of the ease *or* difficulty of being good, only becoming good.

¹¹ Translations are C. C. W. Taylor's unless otherwise noted.

¹² Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 289 and 291-92.

¹³ By "divine" goodness, Socrates might mean either a state of goodness actually possessed by gods or the "divine" in a metaphorical sense (e.g., as an ideal). For the purposes of my interpretation here, it is sufficient to attribute the latter sort of claim to Socrates, though it need not exclude the former. The point is that human goodness, for all of its imperfections, takes its bearings from the ideal state, rather than rejecting the ideal altogether as inappropriate to the human being because of its unattainability.

¹⁴ The dialogue as a whole is narrated and so is itself a long speech, so the reliance upon short speeches is not universally true of even Socrates. Still, within the context of the debate

itself, Socrates claims (no doubt disingenuously) that he can only follow short speeches (335e1-336b2) and notes the greater difficulty of defending one's views to questions rather than giving long speeches (329a1-b5). Goldberg 1983, 170 extensively discusses the connection between Socrates and the Spartans as a criticism of Protagorean rhetoric.

¹⁵ See Taylor 1991, 146.

¹⁶ As if to emphasize this statement, 345b5-6 contains the first appearance of the word *ejpisthvmh* in this lengthy description. Prior to it, Socrates refers only to the absence of knowledge (using the term *ijdiwvthn*), contrasting laymen with professionals.

¹⁷Lombardo and Bell's translation.

¹⁸ Nussbaum 1986, 89-121. There, she argues that the *Protagoras* calls for the need for a science of measurement to control *tuvch*. In doing so, I believe that she overlooks parts of the dialogue by which Plato cautions us against the possibility of such a science (e.g., the resistance Plato makes Protagoras feel to the reduction of the knowledge involved in courage to the measurement of pleasures and pains, and Plato's cautions against the quantification of value in the debate on the proper length of speeches).

¹⁹ As Frede 1986 notes, the description at 347c3-e1 of men who drink together and converse without the presence of flute girls is a perfect description of the *Symposium*. Moreover, all the characters from the *Symposium* are also present in the *Protagoras* (with the exception of Aristophanes), and the *Protagoras* opens with a reference to Alcibiades and Socrates' claim that wisdom is more beautiful than any physical love, including his love of Alcibiades.

²⁰ Socrates' descriptions of the divine state here depart from traditional, anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine insofar as Socrates reads Simonides as saying that god *alone* is good at 341e4; i.e., he interprets Simonides as saying that god is not just a more powerful version of the human being but possesses goodness in a way human beings cannot.

²¹ Socrates' brief comments do not clarify for us whether he means to say that knowledge

of what is good is incompletable in a quantitative sense, is qualitatively imperfect, can be known but also easily lost because of the ephemeral quality of human knowledge, or some combination of these elements.

²²Lombardo and Bell's translation.

²³ While the dialogue does not specify what is meant by self-knowledge, everything from knowledge of one's own ignorance and limitations to a sort of recollection akin to that in the *Meno* and positions in between are possible interpretations of the philosophical significance of self-knowledge. The point here is that Protagoras is concerned exclusively with knowing how to manipulate things in the ordinary world, rather than knowing about one's self or about other things through self-knowledge.

²⁴ See Hemmenway 1996, 1-23, who makes the case for the influence of Protagoras' views on the direction of the unity of virtues argument.

²⁵ Although it is well beyond the scope of this paper, I also take the hedonism argument to be a fleshing out of Protagoras' rather than Socrates' views, although Socrates' aim is, again, to establish the importance of knowledge in virtue even for Protagoras' understanding of the good.

²⁶ Translations are by James H. Nichols, Jr., from Pangle 1987.

²⁷ Griswold 1986, 177-93 argues that Socrates means to show that the knowledge involved in courage is identical with knowing what the good life is in general. While Griswold does not argue for the presence of forms in the *Laches*, he notes that the descriptions there come pretty close to those of the ideas (see p. 188).

²⁸ While arguing for this position is well beyond the scope of this paper (and therefore not the basis for my argument here), I take the hedonism argument to be in part *ad hominem*.

²⁹ As Weiss 1990, 30, suggests, Protagoras does not give the logical answer here because he does not believe it.

³⁰As Frede 1986, 735, also notes.

³¹ Thanks to David Roochnik and John Tomarchio for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.