

Phi 260: History of Philosophy I
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Plato's *Protagoras* (317e-334c, 348c-362a)

The Unity of the Virtues and Weakness of Will

The first question of the *Protagoras* is whether virtue can be taught. Protagoras says that it can be taught and that he can do it; Socrates claims that it can't be taught. But this gives way to the more interesting question, whether the virtues are, in fact, identical. That is, the dialogue concerns fundamental Socratic/Platonic doctrines: the unity of the virtues and the identity of virtue and knowledge. Along the way, Plato also raises another issue: the possibility of weakness of will.

What are the virtues? What qualities does a virtuous person have?

For the Greeks, the general term 'virtue' (*aretē*) includes at least the following: justice (*dikē* or *dikaiosunē*), courage (*andreia*), moderation (*sophrosunē*), wisdom (*sophia*), and piety (*hosia*).

Socrates' question: "Is virtue a single thing, with justice and temperance and piety its parts, or are the things I have just listed all names for a single entity?" (163/329d)

The argument: Part One

A. Justice and piety (163-65/330a-32a)

- (1) Suppose the justice, piety, and so on are different parts of virtue.
- (2) Each has its own unique power or function. Each is unlike the others in terms of its power and function. (330a)
- (3) Justice is something real. (330c)
- (4) Justice is just; that is, justice brings about what is just. (330c)
- (5) Piety is something real. (330d)
- (6) Piety is pious; that is, piety brings about what is pious. (330e)
- (7) But piety is just (brings about what is just), and justice is pious (brings about what is pious). (331b)
- (8) If so, then justice and piety in fact *resemble* each other in terms of their powers and functions. (331b)
- (9) Stronger conclusion: If each thing has one and only one function, and justice and piety have the same function, then justice and piety are identical.

Note: Protagoras does not concede the identity of justice and piety, only their similarity.

B. Moderation/Temperance and Wisdom (332a-33b)

- (1) Wisdom and temperance are distinct things. (329d)
- (2) Folly (*aphrosunē*) is said to be diametrically opposed to wisdom. (332a)
- (3) When people act correctly, they do so temperately. (332b)
- (4) The opposite of acting foolishly is acting temperately. (332b)
- (5) Whatever is done in a certain way is done through the agency of a certain quality, and whatever is done in the opposite way is done through the agency of its opposite. (332c)
- (6) For each thing that can have an opposite, there is only one opposite. (332d)
- (7) Folly is the opposite of temperance. (332e) [from (4) and (5)]
- (8) Folly is the opposite of wisdom. (332e) [(2) again]
- (9) But, according to (6), folly cannot have *two* opposites. (333a)
- (10) Therefore, wisdom and temperance are identical. (333b)

After (A) and (B), we seem to have two identical pairs: justice-piety and wisdom-moderation. The rest of this section is an attempt to tie those two pairs together, hence Socrates' questions: Does someone who acts unjustly seem temperate to you? (333b) And, do you think some people are being sensible (*sophronein*) when they act unjustly?" (333d) The answers are supposed to be "No," of course, and this establishes the desired connection.

The Argument: Part Two

Beginning at 348c.

Protagoras: OK, most of the virtues are identical and related to wisdom – but not courage. For some men are brave even though they lack the other virtues. (349d)

Socrates has a short argument designed to rebut Protagoras' claim (349d-350c): All brave men are fearless, but not all fearless men are brave. After all, some fearless men are just plain crazy. The point is that the courageous man acts out of knowledge of the situation, that is, knowing that his action is for the best.

Can the courageous person lack moderation, justice, piety, and wisdom? Note: Socrates has already tied wisdom to moderation, justice and piety; so if someone is wise then he or she is just, temperate and pious; if someone is just, temperate, and pious, then he or she is wise. Therefore, the question becomes, Can someone be courageous and lack wisdom or knowledge?

This question leads to a fascinating discussion of **weakness of will** (*akrasia*).

According to Socrates, the majority of people will hold that "most people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is are able to do it." Such people act that way "because they are overcome by pleasure." (352d) On

Socrates' view, this doesn't really happen. Rather, it is an error in judgment about what is good for you.

In his argument, Socrates appeals to the thesis of *hedonism*: "things are good because of the fact that they result in pleasure and in the relief and avoidance of pain" (354b); "you pursue pleasure as being good; avoid pain as being bad." (354c)

The majority of people talk of 'being overcome by pleasure'. But, Socrates argues, if hedonism is true, then the position of the majority leads to absurdity. (355) By substituting equivalent terms, we get statements like this: "someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, it not being necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good." (355d)

But perhaps the problem is that an immediate pleasure differs from a later pleasure. (356b) We can say that one pleasure *outweighs* another. But if this is so, then judging which pleasure to choose is merely an instance of measuring them, which is, in turn, an art or a kind of knowledge. Therefore, "those who make mistakes with regard to the choice of pleasure and pain, in other words, with regard to good and bad, do so because of a lack of knowledge, and ... it was not merely a lack of knowledge but a lack of that knowledge [that is] measurement. And the mistaken act done without knowledge...is one done from ignorance." (357d-e)

This ought to establish that weakness of the will is impossible and that any time one consciously chooses an option that is worse he or she does so out of ignorance.

Finally, return to the main point – the relation between courage and wisdom. Socrates claims that wisdom about what is and is not to be feared is courage and the opposite of this is ignorance. (360d) So, we have the desired result: courage is wisdom; and if courage is wisdom, then it is united with all the other virtues. Note, too, that, according to Socrates, the courageous can experience fear – it is simply *justified* by the conditions. And this is in contrast with the position suggested earlier by Protagoras that being courageous is being fearless.