

PHIL 321

Lecture 6: Plato's *Protagoras* (348c-end)

9/17/2013

317e-334c

Protagoras (a well-known sophist) claims to teach his students “sound deliberation” (*euboulia*), which Socrates equates with the “art of citizenship” (*politikê technê*) and “virtue” (*aretê*)

S wonders whether virtue can be taught (P's claim presupposes that it can)

S asks P, “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” (329d) Two options for “parts”:

- [A] In the sense in which the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears are parts of the face (heterogenous parts)
- [B] In the sense in which there are “parts” of a block of gold (homogenous parts)

S asks further whether someone can have some parts of virtue *without* having all of them

- P says yes, and points to (allegedly) courageous but unjust people, just but unwise people, ...

S argues that the virtues do form a unity, each of them being some kind of knowledge/understanding (*epistêmê*)

- P (begrudgingly) agrees that all the virtues *except* courage may be kinds of knowledge

Hedonism

[A] Pleasant things are good insofar as they are pleasant (pleasure is *a* good)

[B] Pleasant things alone are good (pleasure is *the* good)

- [B1]: One's present pleasure is the good
- [B2]: Maximized pleasure is the good (S attributes this view to the many, 354a-c)

S also assumes that all pleasures and pains are “commensurable”—all pleasures and pains can be weighed against each other; thus, in principle, all pleasures and pains can be ranked

The experience of “*akrasia*,” (“being overcome,” “lack of self-control,” “weakness of will”), as reported by “the many” (*hoi polloi*)

One's knowledge (*epistêmê*) that an action is bad can be overcome by desire, pleasure, pain, love, fear, etc. (352b, d, 353c)

Two explicit versions:

- [1] X does B, i) knowing B is bad, ii) when able not to do B, and iii) overwhelmed by pleasure
- [2] X does not do G, i) knowing G is good, ii) when able to do G, and iii) overwhelmed by pleasure

Socrates' aim

The probandum (“thing to be proved”): Knowledge “rules” in a person—if X knows that A is good, X will do A, if X can; if X knows that A is bad, X will *not* do X, if X can

- If S proves this, he will have shown that the akratic situation is impossible or misdescribed
- Given that S suspects virtue is some kind of knowledge, it is clear why he wants to argue for this

Socrates' argument

[P1] Pleasure is the good

[P2] All pleasures and pains are commensurable

[P3] The akratic situation, when re-described in accordance with [P1], amounts to:

- [1*]: X did B, knowing B to be bad and able not to do it, because X was overcome by good =
- X did something painful, knowing it to be painful and able not to do it, because X was overcome by pleasure

[P4] In 1*, the good/pleasure is less than the overall bad/pain X chose to get

[P5] So in both cases, X chose to do what X knew was worse/more painful instead of what was less bad or less painful

[P6] It is impossible to choose the worse of two alternatives when you know (or believe?) it to be the worst

[C] Therefore, it is only ignorance of the relative weights of the alternatives that can explain X's selection of the worse

S re-describes the akratic situation as being a manifestation of “ignorance” (*amathia*)—the “power of appearance” leads a person to miscalculate the relative weight of an immediate pleasure (e.g. just as seeing something in a distance can lead us to judge (mistakenly) that it is smaller than something that is up close)

S uses this conclusion to argue that even courage is a kind of knowledge/understanding, namely knowledge of “what is and is not to be feared” (360d8-9)

Problems

Is hedonism plausible in its own right?

[P6] is only plausible if all desire is for the maximized good or that there is only one kind of desire/faculty of desire. Are there desires that are not aimed at the good?

Does S legitimately move between Hedonism B1 and B2 in his argument?

Even if S's argument succeeds, is there an epistemic problem? If virtue is to guarantee correct action, and virtue is a kind of knowledge/understanding, will this require unrealistic demands of knowing *all* the future consequences of our actions?