

PHIL 321
Lecture 6: Plato's *Protagoras* (348c-end)

9/17/2013

317e-334c

The dialogue actually starts with Socrates and a friend, Hippocrates, in conversation. Hippocrates very clearly wants to succeed in life and he has heard that Protagoras is a teacher of the skills and qualities necessary for such success. So he asks Socrates to entreat Protagoras on his behalf. Socrates, however, asks Hippocrates whether he knows what it is that Protagoras is supposed to teach people, that is supposed to make them better. Hippocrates is shown to be unclear on the matter. So, when they finally achieve admittance, Socrates sets about trying to figure out what exactly it is that Protagoras teaches

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)

- **This was a much discussed issue: could teaching bring about those characteristics that ensure good living and happiness?**
- **It's connected to the idea Socrates goes on to explore, whether virtue is knowledge/understanding? This is a view strongly associated with the historical Socrates—that knowledge/understanding is virtue. A consequence of this is that people only act wrongly through ignorance. No one knowingly does wrong. And it's at the end of this dialogue that we see an argument of sorts of these various claims**

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
 - **B2 is the view Socrates ascribes to the many 354a-c—An action is good just to the degree that it partakes in or produces pleasure; it is good or bad overall just to the degree that it produces maximized pleasure or pain—i.e. taking the subsequent effects of the action into account**

S also claims 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

- **Go into the conception of soul at work here**
- **358d: claims that it is not in human nature to go to the bad. Or, perhaps because everyone wants to be happy.**
- **There can only be desires for the good. And every action, to be an intentional action, must be preceded (and caused by) the judgment that the action is good**
- **only 1 kind of desire—rational or “maximizing” desire**
- **‘irrational desires’ can be redescribed as (mistaken) beliefs about value 358d5**
- **important to distinguish between intentional action and compelled action**

[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)

- **If the hedonistic thesis is true, and if Socrates' argument is successful, it is fairly clear that virtue will be knowledge: knowledge of the relative weights of pleasures/pains will be sufficient to produce happiness**

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 illegitimately move between Hedonism B1 and B2 in his argument?

Even if S 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?