

## **The Problem of Political Virtue in Plato's *Protagoras***

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We seek to recover the context within which Aristotle worked, both politically and philosophically, with regard to political virtue. Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* will help us define political virtue, and recognize the problems Aristotle faced in defending and amending a notion of public virtue. Our overall intention is to assess the degree to which Aristotle's account of moral or practical virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics* attempts to transform a prior or more primordial experience of virtue as self-sacrificing political virtue. In this essay we are interested in the pre-Aristotelian account of political virtue available in Plato.

One can distinguish between skills and talents useful for conducting public business on the one hand, and the moral quality of dedication to the common good on the other. It is political virtue in the latter sense, as a virtue of intention, which I wish to investigate. Its classic expression could be said to be the sacrifice of the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae which hindered the Persian invasion of Greece . As the story is told by Herodotus, a contingent of Spartiates blocked the narrow pass at Thermopylae which opened up Greece to an invasion by land forces from the north. They knowingly sacrificed their lives in order to delay the Persian advance and thereby helped to save their political community.<sup>1 [1]</sup> The citizen virtue displayed by these famous Spartans was characterized by dedication to the good of the noble city of their birth; the

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<sup>1 [1]</sup> See Herodotus, *History*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), Book VII, 176, 198-200, 210-225.

Spartan was virtuous insofar as he acted for the city's benefit rather than for his own, narrowly defined.<sup>2 [2]</sup>

Plato in the *Protagoras* has his title character explain in a long speech how virtue is teachable.<sup>3 [3]</sup> In so doing, Protagoras describes political virtue and recounts its origins. Protagoras uses the term "political virtue" more often than any other character in Plato's writings. His is also one of the first uses of the phrase recorded in Greek literature. After defining political virtue, we will consider Socrates' attack on ordinary virtue in order to give a context for Aristotle's own account of moral virtue.

### Protagoras' Great Speech

Plato's *Protagoras* records a dialogue between Socrates and the celebrated sophist Protagoras which is supposed to have taken place at the home of the rich Athenian Callias perhaps sometime just before the start of the Peloponnesian War. Roughly speaking, the discussion covers two topics. Socrates provokes Protagoras into explaining how he believes that virtue can be taught; that is the subject of Protagoras' Great Speech (320d-328d). Thereafter, Socrates conducts a cross-examination of Protagoras on the question of whether virtue is one thing or many things. Socrates declares at the conversation's conclusion that his purpose has been nothing other than to discern what virtue is (360e).

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<sup>2 [2]</sup> By "political virtue" I mean what Montesquieu meant by that same term: "love of the homeland, the desire for true glory, the renunciation of oneself, the sacrifice of one's dearest interests" for the good of the political community. See The Spirit of the Laws, Book III, ch. 5.

<sup>3 [3]</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I consulted the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Protagoras*: Lamb, W.R.M., trans. *Plato: Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*, (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press; 1967). All unattributed references to Stephanus page numbers in parentheses in the text are to this edition. The translations are my own.

By Protagoras' own account, his great speech is divided into two parts: the myth (320d-324d) and the argument (324d-328d). He maintains throughout both parts that virtue can be taught to most men and that the Athenians believe this to be true. What kind of virtue does he speak of? It is here that Protagoras uses the term "political virtue," which is equivalent to republican virtue, an excellence required of all citizens, punishable by its absence, but sufficiently demanding so as to justify participation by all in a deliberative body.

Political virtue is the virtue that is taught. But does it need to be taught? One might expect that we are born into civic dedication. Let us address the question to Protagoras. Is man a creature made for communal life, possessed at least of a dormant capacity for communal satisfaction? Is man a creature whose good as an individual is satisfied fundamentally by dedication to the larger community and the awareness that the community's good is furthered by his membership in it?

On the contrary, according to Protagoras, man was designed on the model of the beasts, and his preservation is guaranteed while living apart from other human beings (322a). But the gods who were assigned the task of distributing the various powers to the animals botched the job, no special capacities were left for man, and the human race was dying out in competition with the well-endowed beasts. It was man himself who conceived of joining together in communities, albeit because his life depended upon it. But, due to a lack of the civic art--a knowledge Prometheus was unable to steal from Zeus' well-guarded citadel--the newly gathered individuals unwittingly harmed one another and scattered again, to their eventual doom (322b).

Man was created for a life outside of the community. His inclinations were so private, one could say, that even under the threat of death by beasts and while possessed of the wisdom of an artisan, he could not keep himself from injustice. In Protagoras' fable, Zeus solves the problem by introducing into the human race what will be the roots of political virtue. But one should see that political virtue--in the fable at least--is hit upon as a means of preserving a being

whose weakness requires that he live in a community but whose solitary nature, prone as it is to injustice, makes communal life impossible. Political virtue appears to be merely instrumental to the preservation of the political community, and so of the human species.

How then is virtue acquired? Zeus does not give to man that by which Zeus rules the other gods--political wisdom. Instead he distributes *aidos* and *dike*, respect and right. Political virtue is composed of these two main elements. *Aidos* means, as Hegel glosses it, "reverence, natural obedience, honor, docility, respect of children for parents, and of men for higher and better natures."<sup>4</sup> [4] It is therefore that which allows us to look up with genuine admiration and to look down with disdain. It also makes possible self-restraint that is motivated by a positive desire to be better than one already is. The second element is *dike*, which ordinarily indicates the legitimacy of a particular order, with an eye to the judgment of punishment that might be made in its support. *Dike* often designates the sentence of a court, or the court itself, and sometimes refers to the penalty which returns affairs to an ordered state. Thus *dike* marks that outlook which holds that those who fall short of the order of the political community are worthy of punishment. Therefore, respect and right provide the foundation for the common standards and laws which constitute the community. Respect and right must be presupposed if a regime is to be viewed as legitimate and authoritative.

According to Protagoras' fable, then, does political virtue (as introduced by Zeus) strongly attach human beings to the political community? Are respect and right meant to transform self-regarding creatures, prone to harming one another, into communal beings capable of living together in friendship? Political virtue must be some sort of regard for the political community in which the common things and the order which characterize them are looked up to with reverence. But it is a question whether, even in Protagoras' myth, men--all of whom have a

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<sup>4</sup> [4] Hegel, G.W.F., Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. I, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, (New York: The Humanities Press, 1974), p. 362.

share in right and respect--become communal beings. Simultaneously with the distribution of the elements of political virtue, a law from Zeus is put to men, declaring it a capital crime to be unable to partake of right and respect (322d). Something in all men, or in some particularly troublesome individuals, requires the most extreme punishment in order to ensure that the community's good coincides with their own.

For our purposes, we need not probe Protagoras' speech for further clarification on this issue. We can leave the matter at a problem: just how are human beings capable of political virtue? That men are not by design communal beings is perhaps no surprise. For we associate with the notion of virtue a sense of striving and of rising above ourselves. How would that be true for creatures who were completely communal in nature? Indeed, in the ensuing argument given by Protagoras, the education of young citizens is described in such a way as to make two things clear: 1) young men are capable of being admonished and therefore of holding themselves up to the noble examples of justice; thus they must have as a possibility of their nature the capacity to look up to the common good; and 2) there seems no end to the need for threats of punishment and guidance by the law, even for adults, to ensure that the noble and just examples are imitated; something else in their nature keeps them from complete absorption in the community.

Besides the dual nature of the citizen (as one who is torn between merely selfish satisfactions and those associated with the public), political virtue requires participation in rule. The citizen wants to rule, and he presents his dedication to the common as a claim to participation in rule. That such a desire is elemental to the longing for political virtue is clear from the context of Protagoras' great speech. Protagoras is charged with the task of convincing the "wise" Athenians that his teaching of citizen virtue does not undermine their belief that everyone already possesses the virtue requisite to participation.

The phrase "political virtue" is first used in a peculiar circumstance in Protagoras' great speech. He says that, in Athens at least, the citizens "come together for consultation on political virtue" itself (323a). Whatever else this may mean, the virtues of moderation and justice not only make possible participation, but participation seems to have as its end deliberation about political virtue. Political virtue then stands for, one might say, the very formulation of the common order insofar as it is legitimate and worthy of respect. The assembly makes the laws. Protagoras seems to express the citizen's understanding that political participation is not something other than virtue which virtue makes possible. It is deliberation about itself. Participation both presupposes and aims at political virtue--it is virtue in action. For our present purposes, the point to emphasize is that virtue and participation in rule--understood as legislating--are integral to the longing for political virtue. Political virtue is essentially republican virtue or participation.

Plato's *Protagoras* is not only useful for bringing to light the elementary meaning of political virtue, of the longing for virtue that is publicly practiced and displayed. Protagoras' notion of political virtue is subject to sustained questioning by Socrates. Protagoras fails to defend citizen virtue from a hedonistic account of human motivation offered by Socrates. Our consideration of Socrates' analysis will further illuminate the character of virtue and mark the course for Aristotle's own defense of political virtue in the form of moral virtue.

### Socrates' Discussion of the Citizen's Good

I will omit a lengthy portion of the dialogue not immediately bearing on our inquiry. Near the point at which we enter the discussion again, Socrates assures an uncertain Protagoras that by understanding what the people mean by "being overcome with pleasure" they will find out how courage is related to the other parts of virtue (353b). They will learn whether virtue is essentially

one thing, and therefore whether virtue is knowledge, able to be taught like the arts. So runs the thread of the discussion.

But we need to set the context of the discussion. Socrates resumes an inquiry into the five kinds of virtue--wisdom, moderation, courage, justice and piety--"whether they are related to a single thing, or whether some distinct existence or thing with its own power underlies each name." Socrates first attempts to show that courage is knowledge, since those who know what they are doing are more bold than those who are ignorant (and the courageous are bold) (349e-351b). Socrates however concludes too much from this premise, as Protagoras is quick to point out.

Nonetheless two very interesting observations are made in a branch of the discussion which is otherwise quickly abandoned. First, Protagoras distinctly separates the virtue of courage from whatever might be akin to the arts (and thus akin to knowledge). Knowledge, madness, and spiritedness can give rise to capacity (*dunamis*). But strength comes from "nature and the good nurture of the body" (351a). Similarly, boldness can arise from art, spiritedness, and madness, but courage comes from the nature and good nurture of the soul. Courage, according to Protagoras, is strength of soul. It is a natural potential brought to activity by good nurture, and is analogous to the strength of body of a wrestler.

The second observation concerns Protagoras' ready agreement with Socrates that virtue is something noble<sup>5 [5]</sup> (349e). The significance of this agreement is the subject of the next and much more lengthy discussion of the role of pleasure in the moral life (351b-358d). Socrates will purport to prove that, virtue being good for the virtuous person, and the good meaning the same as the pleasant, all virtue is the right calculation of pleasure. Virtue therefore presupposes

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<sup>5 [5]</sup> The Greek word is *kalon*. It is a concept of vital importance to the whole of Greek moral thought. It combines notions of beauty, fittingness, and grandeur.

knowledge of the pleasant and painful consequences of an action, and so is reduced to knowledge or wisdom. Virtue is a single thing, namely, teachable wisdom concerning pleasure and pain (or good and bad). Unfortunately, such a conclusion robs political virtue of its distinctive character: the feeling of dignity that comes from dutiful adherence to what is best.

Socrates wishes to explain how the virtuous man--the citizen--lives with respect to pleasure. Protagoras agrees with him that the good life must be marked by pleasure rather than pain and distress. But Protagoras distinguishes between good and bad pleasures, holding them up to the standard of nobility. "And, of course, to live pleasantly is good, and to live without pleasure is bad?" asks Socrates. "If one lives in the enjoyment of noble [pleasures]," replies Protagoras. Socrates, starting at this point, undermines the distinction between the good or pleasant and the noble.

Socrates appears to undertake the main task of showing that a thesis one might associate with the great sophist Protagoras--the good is the pleasant--does not allow Protagoras to find anything but wisdom to be virtue. Socrates carries out a destructive analysis of our ordinary experience of virtue as duty. It raises problems with the ordinary conception of virtue with which Aristotle will be much concerned, and points to what a defender of political virtue would have to maintain in order for that experience to be genuine.

Socrates' destructive analysis of political virtue denies the distinction between noble and base pleasures, for he makes virtuous action a calculation of quantities of one's own pleasure. He explores two consequences of the elimination of nobility as a distinctive standard. In the first, comprising the discussion at 352a-357e, virtuous action--like all conscious human action--is shown to be a calculation aimed at maximizing pleasure. This argument culminates in the idea of a science of perfect measurement for the guidance of life. In the second, occurring at 358a-360e, nobility is considered again, but now as one among a variety of pleasures we choose from. Sacrifice on the battlefield becomes the calculation of the knower of dread things who flees the



most unpleasant alternative, disgrace. The first argument makes morality impossibly easy; the second makes virtuous action impossibly difficult.

The denial of nobility as grounds for distinguishing between pleasures undermines the fundamental experience of sacrifice or self-overcoming associated with citizen virtue. This can be seen by glancing over the course of Socrates' last arguments. He refutes the claim of the people that they are regularly "overcome by pleasure" and led to act contrary to their best interest, which they know and which they are otherwise capable of doing (353a). Socrates will show that being conquered by pleasure or pain is in fact ignorance. But this undermines ordinary moral experience. Socrates will replace an account of vicious action in which the worse (*ponera*, 353c) rules the better with an account of vice as weak reasoning power. A virtue whose basis is the strength of a capacity replaces a virtue of choosing what is better over what is worse in a moral sense. The people think that a powerful pleasure overcame their judgment. Socrates tells them that they simply erred in calculating what is good for themselves. Despite what they believed, they really did not know that the pleasure was bad. More precisely stated, insofar as they believe that pleasures can be bad, they operate under a perhaps salutary misconception. They are not wicked when they choose a harmful pleasure (or act selfishly, for instance). They have made a mistake; they are ignorant.

Eliminating the distinction between noble and base pleasure makes impossible the distinction between better and worse human beings in the ordinary moral sense, that is, between human beings who have bad intentions, who habitually choose what is wicked and evil out of a wicked or evil character. All character and intention, as well as all objects of choice, are leveled. The discussants agree, all men choose what is good for them (356b); therefore all intentions are the same. One could still imagine distinguishing the morally good and bad according to that good which they choose: the good men act for the sake of the common good, whereas the bad men act for the sake of their own good. But the good in every instance is understood to be pleasure, and

so one's own good in the most immediate sense. But again, someone might try to distinguish between pleasures that were different in kind (because, for instance, they preserved the city's good as well as the individual's). But Socrates insists that there is no difference of kind of pleasure and pain, only of degree of intensity (356a). All men intend to maximize their own pleasure.

When the noble is eliminated from our consideration of these matters, virtuous action becomes impossibly easy, that is, it requires no battle against base desires. To be virtuous, we need only to consult our pleasures and avoid misperceptions caused by the distance of a future pleasure or pain and the immediacy of a present pleasure or pain (357a,b). We need not be troubled by ranking the pleasures according to what is higher and lower or nobler and baser, a rank which may be contrary to our present cultivation or actual nature and so require that a lesser pleasure or even a pain be chosen for the sake of nobility. In agreement with what was said above, the ease of moral action rests precisely on its no longer going against our nature; it causes no conflict in us. Perhaps more truly, the conflict that we do feel (and which is expressed by the phrase "being overcome by pleasure") is one of an inability to perceive the nearer from the farther, or the lesser from the greater, when the two are obscured. The conflict we feel in choosing right action is not that felt when choosing between the animal and the human, for instance, where we strive to live up to what is best in us. A pang of conscience would only be a sign of uncertainty. This uncertainty would be the mark of one whose powers of perception and calculation are weak.

The distinctive unease associated with virtue, expressed in the need for strength in order to be able to do our duty, disappears. Similarly, the admiration felt for a strength which is somehow self-created, and which is a sign of our superiority, must also disappear. For that strength was superior not so much because it was strong as because it was created by a being who preferred the best or the noble to the worst or the base. And no one any longer prefers the

noble as noble; he only chooses what he knows to be most pleasant. Virtuous deeds become impossibly easy because they are freed from any conflict between the high and the low. Virtue then is the mark of a pleasure-seeker who calculates the most efficient path to the pleasant life. Socrates' hedonist calculus robs human experience of its divided character. Every correctly calculated action redounds to our advantage. There can be no overcoming of oneself, no devotion to something beyond ourselves. There can be no virtue of intention, only one of technical excellence.

As long as the conversation aims at refuting the opinion of the people, Socrates carefully excludes any mention of noble action. When he turns to the sophists themselves to establish their opinion on the matter, noble action enters the discussion again. As a consequence, virtuous action becomes impossibly difficult: the pains of sacrifice must be their own reward.

The trick employed by Socrates is simple. Having established that one always chooses what is pleasant, Socrates invokes the gentlemanly opinion that noble action too is pleasant. It would therefore be choiceworthy as a calculation of the greatest amount of pleasure. Cowards avoid courageous acts, not because those acts are painful, but because they make a mistake in calculating the consequences. There indeed may be pains associated with military service, but these present pains bring great pleasures: security for your own city, rule over others, and wealth (354b). Unable to tolerate the discipline of the moment, and the risks and injuries of the battlefield, the cowards give up much greater pleasures which come only as a consequence of the pains.

But that is not enough to justify courageous action, for how does one compensate a soldier who dies? Socrates' reference to the pleasures associated with noble action must then also refer to their intrinsic pleasantness. They are to be chosen because, despite the pains one might find, they are also pleasant in the moment of action--extremely pleasant. They are so pleasant as to counterbalance even such pains as a soldier routinely undergoes, including the pains of death.

One is reminded of one of Socrates' answers to the plight of the just man as described by Glaucon in the *Republic*.<sup>6 [6]</sup> The just man had to be shown to be happy when he possessed nothing but his justice, regardless of the fact that he was believed to be unjust, and underwent great physical torment while witnessing the destruction of his loved ones. What pleasure could make up for the pain felt by Glaucon's suffering innocent? It would seem that the intrinsic pleasures of noble action must be great indeed, since the virtuous man is supposed to choose to act virtuously in every circumstance, however much he is threatened with pain or tempted by another pleasure, and since the basis of his choice (according to the argument of the *Protagoras*) can only be a calculation of the quantity of pleasure and pain at stake in the action. Even the virtue of courage must be its own reward. Whatever else this argument of Socrates reveals, it implies that the virtuous expect, in addition to their virtuous action, and especially to those actions which involve great sacrifices, a corresponding satisfaction (perhaps happiness itself). If virtue does not bring happiness with it as the immediate accompaniment of the virtuous action, it must somehow promise happiness in the future. (For instance, in the case of the dying soldier, in another life). It becomes difficult to understand virtue simply as its own reward.

Socrates challenges Protagoras to take a position consistent with the ordinary experience of citizens regarding virtue. He opposed Protagoras' attempt to maintain a distinction between the pleasant and the good by means of some standard of noble and base. Is there a pleasure that can be called wicked for being pleasant itself and causing pleasure (353c,d)? Is there a pain that is in itself good, and not because of consequences (354a)? Is there an end looking towards which they call a thing good besides pleasure (354c)? How can the people say both that they do what they know to be bad because they are overcome by pleasure and that pleasure is the good? Only, says the questioner, if the good is not worthy of conquering the bad (355d). To maintain the opposite, Socrates suggests, one would have to hold that pleasant and painful or good and bad

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<sup>6 [6]</sup> Plato, The Republic of Plato , trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), Book II.

can overcome one another for reasons other than their relative amounts (356a). But what of a worthiness that comes from a difference in kind? Pain could lead to a condition that is dignified, proper, noble, or beautiful. Protagoras nonetheless assures Socrates that the people would not be able to offer such an alternative, and he--with the rest of the sophists--at a later point does not attempt to describe an alternative. Indeed, the sophists who listen to discussion, or at least Prodicus, seem to be playful about letting Socrates follow out the thought that all enjoyment comes from pleasure. Prodicus laughs when Socrates asks him not to distinguish between delight, enjoyment, and pleasure. And perhaps that is because he knows that a distinction of this sort is required.

Socrates sets the task for a defense of our ordinary experience of virtue. An end must exist other than that of pleasure according to which we can call an action good. Its worth would outweigh the pain necessary to its realization. It could declare a pleasure in itself unworthy of being indulged. As for the split in a human being which allows one part to overcome another part, we are reminded of another passage from the *Republic* where a similar saying--"stronger than himself"--is discussed (431a). Socrates is looking to find moderation in the city in speech which they have constructed. Moderation, interpreted by this saying, implies that a better part of our soul is master over a worse part. Ordinary experience of virtue points to a distinction within the single human being between better and worse such that one can explain the possibility of striving, devotion, and self-sacrifice. One needs the concept of noble and base.

In sum, what is distinctive about political virtue is the experience of devotion or of duty. We ordinarily feel within us the pull of motives we are inclined to call "noble." These motives dignify us and give us reason to think of ourselves as human in an exalted sense. They give us our sense of worth. We are beings, then, in need of a sense of worth--we are capable of being moved by base motives, of falling short of humanity. 1) We are therefore marked by a dual, not a simple, nature. And the duality of our nature is characterized by a difference of kind, of rank,

encompassing the high and the low. Selfishness and hedonism are characteristics of the base side of our nature. 2) Noble action requires dignity, so that we will act in a manner that befits us, even when that action pains us by its impinging on our merely selfish desires. When we are noble we are ready to choose a pain in preference to a pleasure for the sake of a good other than pleasure without which we do not choose to live. It is true, however, that we always act with an eye to our own good. But we can admit this only when there is a clear distinction between goods that are exalted and noble and ones that are base. We also speak of a pleasure in noble action, but that pleasure would have to be distinguished from the more ordinary pleasures of our self-regarding nature. I do not mean to imply that the gentleman looks down on his ordinary self-regarding desires. But to choose his own good narrowly defined instead of the noble deed when the two come into conflict--that would be base.

3) Finally, we note that noble political action is done for the sake of the political community, which is conceived of as the noble and exalted object. When one contributes to the existence of that noble object, when one serves that object and upholds it, one partakes of its nobility and becomes noble oneself. This could lead one to imagine that nobility resides only in the action of the individual. But however true that may be, our primary political experience insists that there be a political whole outside of ourselves to which we are dedicated. Our partnership in the community does not make up the essence of the nobility of the community--the polis is greater than the individual, even than the sum of the individuals. The greatness of the polis is its nobility, conceived of as the whole of the parts. In the context of the ancient city, the nobility of the political community is embodied in the gods whose home is found in the city. By this understanding, the citizen's nobility is subordinate to and derivative of the greater nobility of the city and the city's gods.

We thus provide a setting for Aristotle's treatment of the political problem of political virtue. On the one hand, we recognize the ordinary outlook on political virtue with which

Aristotle had to deal. The political community encompasses the highest aspiration of those seeking virtue, both those who command authoritatively, and those who admire obediently.

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