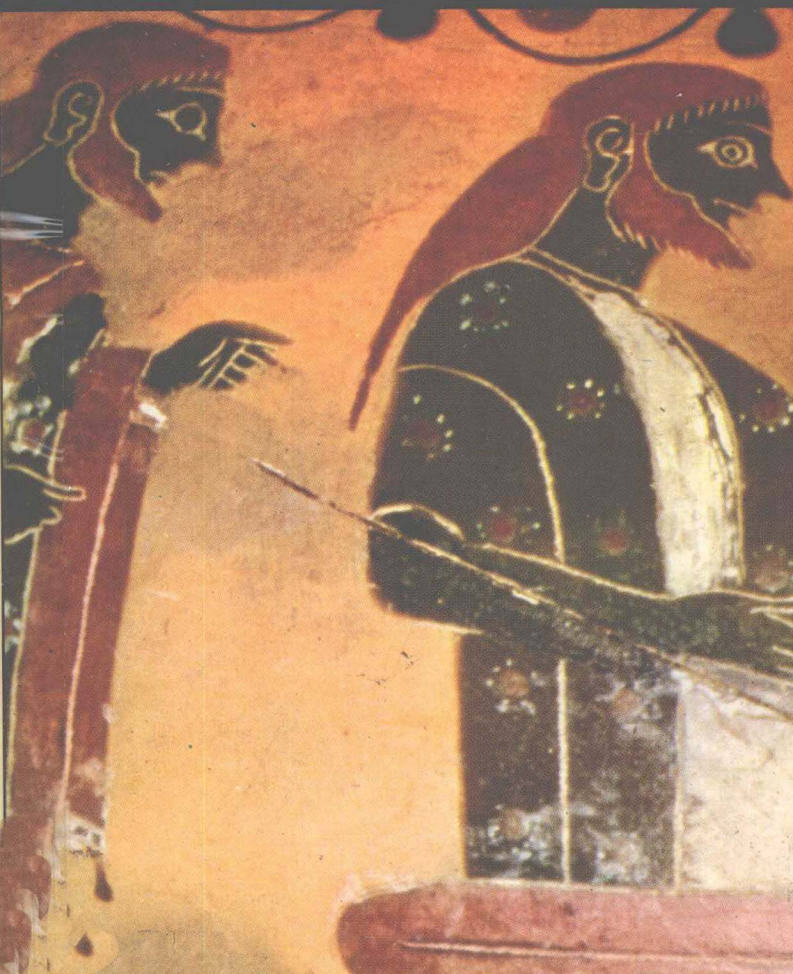


PENGUIN CLASSICS



PLATO

PROTAGORAS
AND MENO





PROTAGORAS AND MENO

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

PLATO (c. 429–347 B.C.) stands with Socrates and Aristotle as one of the shapers of the whole intellectual tradition of the West. He came from a family that had long played a prominent part in Athenian politics, and it would have been natural for him to follow the same course. He declined to do so, however; disgusted by the violence and corruption of Athenian political life, and sickened especially by the execution in 399 of his friend and teacher, Socrates. Inspired by Socrates' inquiries into the nature of ethical standards, Plato sought a cure for the ills of society not in politics but in philosophy, and arrived at his fundamental and lasting conviction that those ills would never cease until philosophers became rulers or rulers philosophers. At an uncertain date in the early fourth century B.C. he founded in Athens the Academy, the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching, and the prototype of all western universities. He travelled extensively, notably to Sicily as political adviser to Dionysius II, ruler of Syracuse.

Plato wrote over 20 philosophical dialogues like the *Protagoras* and *Meno*, and there are also extant under his name 13 letters, whose genuineness is keenly disputed. His literary activity extended over perhaps half a century; few other writers have exploited so effectively the grace and precision, the flexibility and power, of Greek prose.

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PLATO
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PROTAGORAS
and
MENO

TRANSLATED BY
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INTRODUCTION

THE *Protagoras* and *Meno* are two of the most enjoyable and readable of Plato's dialogues. Whatever one may think of the philosophical content and the methods of argument employed in the *Protagoras*, it is universally acknowledged to be a dramatic masterpiece. It introduces an unusually large number of characters, and lively, accurate portraiture obviously ranked high among its author's aims. The portraits are drawn with humour and a keen appreciation of personal foibles, but the caricature is not overdone, and one is left with no doubt at all that this is substantially what the living men were like, and that by introducing us not only to their ideas but to their mannerisms, turns of speech and little vanities Plato has done more than would have been possible by any other means to make us personally acquainted with some of the leading figures of thought and life in fifth-century Athens.

Much of the secret of this lies in the stylistic device of the reported dialogue. The dialogue form conveys the dramatic sense of actual presence, whereas the fact that the dialogue is not presented directly, but narrated by Socrates to a friend, allows also for a lively description of scene and actors. It involves, of course, acceptance of the improbability that Socrates could remember by heart the conversation of some hours, including several long and elaborate single speeches. But this is a convention of which one is hardly conscious in reading, and makes no greater demands than do many novels written in the first person. In the *Meno*, where the dramatic element plays a smaller part, this device is not used. We read the whole dialogue like the text of a play. With the *Protagoras* we seem, not simply to read the play, but to see it acted; and when one considers its characters and setting, it is a marvel of good fortune that we should possess this particular first-hand document of life and thought in the great age of Athens. We enter the

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house of a rich and cultured citizen and find him entertaining the leading Sophists of the time. We see each of these brilliant and egotistic characters behaving in his most characteristic way, and observe among their audience, besides the wealthy patron Callias, such notable figures as Alcibiades, Critias, Charmides, and the two sons of Pericles. We may certainly feel grateful to Plato for giving us the opportunity of sitting in the midst of this remarkable circle and overhearing their conversation.

But in proportion as it excites our admiration as a literary work, so the *Protagoras* perplexes those who would extract its philosophical lesson. This is not because of the depth and difficulty of the problems with which it deals. In that respect we find nothing comparable to the abstruse questions of logic, epistemology, and ontology with which Plato wrestles in later dialogues. But as the philosophy grew deeper and more serious, so the dramatic and literary interest of his works receded into the background. He retained the dialogue form, but it became more and more the vehicle for continuous exposition of one or another philosophical theme. The interest in character-drawing and in the clash of conflicting personalities, which is such a marked and attractive feature of the *Protagoras* and by no means absent from the *Meno*, practically disappears.

When a philosopher expounds his thoughts in the more usual form of a systematic treatise, it may be profound and difficult, but at least the reader's task is limited to finding out what it means on the assumption that the writer was doing his best to communicate his own views in as clear and orderly a manner as possible. But in dealing with something that so far from being a treatise, is a unique amalgam of philosophical discussion with dramatic art, humorous irony, and poetic myth, a number of prior questions must arise. What is Plato trying to do in the *Protagoras*? Is he trying to set forth philosophical ideas of his own? If so, they seem to be surprisingly well disguised. Is he trying to tell us the philosophical views of Socrates, the chief

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speaker? An endless controversy has been aroused by the fact that in this dialogue he apparently makes Socrates enunciate and defend a doctrine regarded by many as the direct antithesis of what Socrates is likely to have taught in real life. Is he trying to show that, however outrageous a thesis Socrates chose to put forward, he could beat the Sophists at their own style of argument? Or does he aim only at putting on record some of the brilliant talk of that golden age of conversation which was just over, and giving us, mainly through their own mouths, character-sketches of its leading spirits? Is the main purpose of this dialogue dramatic, and not philosophical at all?

In spite of the importance of the dramatic element, it would be difficult to maintain that the work has not a serious philosophical, and in particular an ethical, purpose. Its main subject is the same as that of the *Meno*. Both discuss the question: 'Can virtue be taught?' In other words, what is the secret of that peculiar quality which makes some men so much more proficient than others in the art of living according to the highest human capacities? Why do some make a success of life and others a failure? Is it something we are born with or can it be acquired by taking thought, or instilled by the kind of instruction that a father gives his son or a master his pupil? We cannot doubt that this question, which first came to the fore in the democratic atmosphere of fifth-century Athens, retained its serious import for Plato, as it did for Aristotle after him. But that does not settle the essential questions of how far Socrates is supposed to be speaking seriously, or what is Plato's view about the issues raised; questions inherent in the dramatic form, which in most philosophical literature do not arise. Most of the value of a Platonic dialogue, at least of the early or middle period, lies in the direct impression which it makes on a reader. It cannot be analysed and presented as a collection of neatly tied and labelled parcels of philosophical doctrine. At least, to do so would be to travesty Plato, who made it clear that he did not believe philosophy

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could be retailed in that way. It could only be a product of living contact between mind and mind, in which one strikes sparks from the other as steel from flint. To write dialogues was a second best course. Although no substitute for the direct and dynamic give-and-take between living people, they provided the only means by which he could reach a wider circle than that of his personal disciples, to say nothing of posterity down to the twentieth century A.D., and they at least avoid the defects (in his view) of continuous treatises which try to expound philosophy 'like any other subject of instruction'. We cannot in any case participate in those conversations which he regarded as the ideal method of philosophical progress, but through the dialogues we learn how they were conducted and watch them unfold. The dialogues are wholes, and must be treated as such. To try to strip off, as if they were husks or ornamental accretions, the character-drawing or the myth, and expect to be left with a hard kernel of something which we can call 'Plato's philosophy', is wasted labour. To some this may seem a pity, but more than anything else it explains the inexhaustible fascination of the dialogues, their perennial freshness, and the fact that they are under as lively discussion today as they were in any previous age.

The *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, as we have noted, differ in their dramatic technique. The *Meno* plunges straight *in medias res* with the abrupt question of Meno: 'Tell me, Socrates, is virtue teachable or not?' This is the question which the *Protagoras* also raises, but by no means at once. We have an opening dialogue, or prologue, at Socrates's house before we even approach the scene of the main conversation. When we get there the setting is described and the chief persons present are enumerated and characterized. Since, as we have seen, the form and content of a Platonic dialogue are not to be separated, these external differences (as some would call them) must be borne in mind in considering the scope and purpose of the two. It has been argued that the abrupt opening of the *Meno* indi-

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cates an early date of composition, before Plato's talent for dramatic representation had reached maturity. On the contrary, Meno's impetuous plunge, with no preliminary courtesies, into a string of questions is dramatically perfect. It gives his character in a nutshell, a character which he sustains throughout the dialogue and on which Socrates gently teases him from time to time. His good looks and charm, he tells him, would be obvious even to a blind man from his employment of the imperious and wayward tone of one accustomed to having his own way. By other touches also Plato shows his mastery of the art of dramatic conversation: the annoyance of Meno at his helplessness in Socrates's hands, expressed in the comparison of his tormentor to an electric fish (a comparison extending to physical features), or the dramatic irony of the exchanges with Anytus and Socrates's closing remark to Meno, when read in the knowledge that Anytus was to be an accuser of Socrates at the forthcoming trial which led to his death. More important, however, than these uncertain considerations of the degree of literary accomplishment displayed, if we are interested in the relative dates of our dialogues, is the fact that the *Meno* shows a distinct advance in philosophical ideas; and to their philosophical content and background we must now turn.

The question of the nature of virtue, and the need which Socrates and Plato felt to decide whether it was a possible subject of instruction, arose from the teaching of the Sophists, those free-lance professors who travelled from city to city in Greece making their living out of the new demand for education. A new social order was calling into being this need of education for citizenship, and particularly for political leadership, which was not provided for by any system of schools or colleges in the cities themselves. This was true especially of democratic Athens, and in Athens the Sophists obviously found the best market and the most congenial intellectual atmosphere. They claimed to provide instruction in a variety of subjects, but

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particularly in oratory and the kind of intellectual culture needed as a training for public life. Brilliant speakers and instructors as they were, they became the dominant educational influence in the latter half of the fifth century, especially among the more talented and wealthy families, who were naturally best able to afford their fees. Plato often refers to them collectively as 'the teachers of *arete*', *arete* being that word which we translate 'virtue', but which Protagoras, himself a professed teacher of it, is made to describe in the dialogue as 'the proper care of one's personal affairs, so as best to manage one's own household, and also of the State's affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as speaker and as man of action'.

The outlook of these men was predominantly secular and sceptical. Law, hitherto believed to have been delivered by Zeus through his son Apollo at the Delphic shrine, was to them no more than 'inventions of good lawgivers of ancient times' (*Protagoras* 326D). To most of them the attempts of previous philosophers to understand 'the nature of things' were a waste of time. Practical life was what mattered, and one could learn how to live without bothering one's head to find out whether the world was the product of divine mind or the fortuitous result of collisions between innumerable atoms blindly jostling one another in infinite space – questions which, in any case, it was probably beyond the wit of man to answer.

This was all very well so far as it went. Socrates too regarded cosmic speculation as an unpractical waste of time. And yet Professor Sinclair was right to describe the difference between Socrates and the greatest of the Sophists, Protagoras, as being 'that Socrates did not regard education and philosophy as a training how to do things, but as a process of acquiring a knowledge of the nature of things'.^{*}

The 'things' in which Socrates was interested were not physical objects but moral qualities. Hitherto, moral terms

* *A History of Greek Political Thought* (Routledge 1951) p. 94, second ed. 1967.

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like virtue, justice, courage had been used as freely as they are today, but with no philosophical reflection on the implications of using them. Most people, then as now, if asked a question like 'Is there such a thing as justice?' or 'Do you believe in such a thing as courage?' would answer in the affirmative. Protagoras himself, who denied any universal or absolute validity to moral values, assents to the question of Socrates: 'Is there such a thing as holiness?' even when it is repeated in the form 'Meaning that holiness is an actual thing?' This is a quotation from Plato's dialogue (330D), but it is unlikely to misrepresent Protagoras. To answer 'No' when asked 'Is there such a thing as courage?' would seem absurd to any sensible man.

Well and good, said Socrates, but we must look at the consequences. Here are our orators, and other people, talking about loyalty, freedom, equality, and other fine things as if they meant the same for everybody everywhere, yet men like Protagoras deny that such conceptions have any universal validity. We are each entitled to our private notion of them, which remains true for us so long as we hold it. If that is so, people ought to be stopped from using them as if they were absolutes. The situation is intolerable both intellectually – for it obviously leads to confusion of thought – and morally, since in such a situation there is no means of knowing what constitutes right action. An inquiry is urgently necessary into the nature of moral entities.

Socrates was convinced that the relativist's explanation was wrong, but how was he to prove it? The first step was to get representative people from different walks of life, who all made use of these common general terms, to say simply and clearly what they meant by them. This would at least provide a basis on which some conclusion might be built. And so he set out on the career of interrogation which largely contributed to his unpopularity. Politicians, poets, generals, and craftsmen all came under his scrutiny, and to his dismay, so he said, he discovered that none of

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them knew the meaning of the words they used, except the craftsmen. These could explain the technical terms incidental to their craft, but spoilt the effect by claiming to know the meaning of wider terms as well, of which his examination proved them to be ignorant.

The political implications of this seemingly innocent procedure were not lost on the Athenians. The craftsmen, said Socrates, had their own expertise, but were at a loss when it came to an understanding of the large and important conceptions of ethics or politics. Athenian democracy, on the other hand, was based on just the opposite assumption, namely that all citizens alike, whatever their daily occupation, were equally well qualified to deal with questions of public policy, which was not a matter of any special skill. As Socrates expresses it in the *Protagoras* (319D), in professional matters the Athenian assembly demands expert advice, but in business connected with the policy of the State it is ready to listen to anyone – smith, shoemaker, merchant, sea-captain, rich or poor, of good family or none. To Socrates the successful pursuit of any occupation demanded the mastery of a particular knowledge, skill, or technique; and this was above all true of the direction of the city's affairs, on which questions of peace and war, and the whole happiness of the citizens, necessarily depended. By his criterion Athenian democracy stood condemned.

Socrates then, who started out, as he claimed, in all humility to learn from others, decided in the end that, whereas he and they alike knew nothing, he was to this extent superior, that he was aware of his own ignorance. And since no one will try to find out what constitutes right action, or what is the real meaning of freedom or justice, if he thinks he knows it already, the first task was to convince others too of their ignorance. Then together they could start the inquiry with some hope of success.

This endeavour to show people that they knew nothing goes far to explain why Socrates shared the odium with

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which conservative Athenian opinion regarded the Sophists, but we can see the essential difference between them. They believed the kind of knowledge he sought to be impossible, because absolute and universal moral qualities did not exist to be known. When they claimed to teach virtue they had nothing of that sort in mind, but only a purely practical and empirical training. His procedure on the other hand was based on a passionate conviction that the knowledge could be attained, and moreover that the only way to reform conduct was to lead men to an understanding of certain permanent and unvarying principles on which to base it; but his conversations had shown him that most men suffered from an illusion of knowledge which must be dispelled before the positive side of the inquiry could begin. The two sides of the process are clearly demonstrated in the *Meno*, where at the end of the first stage Meno complains bitterly of the sense of frustration and mental incapacity to which Socrates's questions have reduced him.

His method then was to put the dilemma: Is there such a thing as (e.g.) justice, or not? If not, why keep talking about it? If so, what is it? What is there in common between all actions called just, that makes men give them that name? He rejects the faulty definitions that are first offered, and by going deeper and considering a wider range of examples, tries to lead on to one which will adequately describe the concept under consideration. 'Justice, you say, is giving to every man what belongs to him: Suppose I have a dagger belonging to a homicidal maniac: is it justice to return it to him?' And so on. Recent history and his own extraordinary character made it so natural for Socrates to link together the ideas of intellectual ignorance or scepticism and moral imperfection that he sincerely, if somewhat naïvely, believed that this clearing of the mind alone was required to bring about moral reformation: if men understood the true nature of what was good (no small demand, for it meant no less than a knowledge of the true end and aim of human life) they would inevitably seek it. Hence his

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famous paradoxes: 'Virtue is knowledge' and 'No one does wrong willingly.'

That is the contribution of Socrates. He did not think he had himself attained this knowledge, but he was convinced that right and wrong and similar notions were not just a matter of the expediency of the moment, changing with the changing needs of individual or state, but permanent and universal principles with a nature of their own. In method also he differed from the Sophists, for in his view the kind of knowledge needed was not to be imparted in public lectures, but could only be attained by two or three people, all convinced of their own ignorance, trying to hammer out the truth together in informal conversation ('dialectic' in the Socratic sense) and in a spirit of mutual helpfulness.

Socrates was no metaphysician, and went no further than his practical and ethical aims required.* But when, after his execution, Plato wished to carry on the battle for the same ideals, he found that Socrates had bequeathed to him a whole complex of problems concerned both with the possibility of knowledge and with the nature of reality. Implicit in the demand for definitions was the assumption that justice, courage, virtue or whatever it was, is a *thing* which *exists*; for what would be the point of trying to define something which has no existence? But is there in fact such a thing as absolute justice or virtue, apart from the individual actions which we call just or good? No one would claim that any of these is 'justice itself'; they are all thought of as only imperfect instances of, or approximations to, it. What then, and where, is this justice or

* The question where the thought of Socrates ends and that of Plato begins (the 'Socratic question') is a famous subject of academic controversy. It could scarcely be otherwise, seeing that Socrates wrote nothing himself and the words that he is made to utter in Plato's dialogues are our most important (though not our sole) source for his ideas. A writer can only give his own view, which in this case agrees with the testimony of Aristotle and would probably command a wide measure of assent today.