



P L A T O ' S



PROTAGORAS



A Socratic Commentary

B. A. F. Hubbard
E. S. Karnofsky

With a Foreword by
M. F. Burnyeat

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PLATO'S PROTAGORAS

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When two go in company, one sees before the other.

Homer, *Iliad* 10.224–5

Foreword

M. F. Burnyeat

This book is that rare thing, a real contribution to education. Tony Hubbard and Ellen Karnofsky have conceived an entirely new way of presenting a masterpiece of philosophy and literature. Their excellent translation of Plato's *Protagoras* is backed up by a commentary which has the special feature that it is written from beginning to end as a series of questions. The questions are so arranged as to lead the reader on from one problem to the next, not haphazardly but building at each stage on the answers given to previous questions. The reader is made to think, and to think for himself, and then to think what his previous thoughts imply for the next issue. This approach is not merely valuable in itself. There is good reason to believe that it is in perfect sympathy with the spirit of the original.

Of all Plato's dialogues the *Protagoras* is the most vigorous presentation of Socrates at work in philosophical discussion. The action of the dialogue is a confrontation between Socrates and some of the most famous intellectual figures of his day. He argues with them; he reduces them to perplexity by his knotty, abstract reasoning; he parodies their own very different methods; he exposes their pretensions to have important knowledge to teach – all this in his most pugnacious style and with the savage irony which Plato, no doubt rightly, always made a prominent feature of his portrait of Socrates. Socrates' chief adversary in the discussion is the eldest and most distinguished of the gathering of intellectuals, Protagoras, and the issue between them, to state it in its broadest terms, is the nature of virtue: what it is and how it is to be acquired.

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Anyone who thinks he knows the answer to these questions will find that Plato has anticipated his presence among his readers. He has made Protagoras the spokesman for a number of views typical of 'common sense' or 'ordinary morality' in fifth-century Athens, and it is not difficult to find twentieth-century equivalents for the beliefs which Protagoras defends and Socrates attacks. We still tend to think, for example, that a person may have the wisdom to know what to do in a difficult situation and yet lack the courage to carry it out. Wisdom is one virtue, one quality to admire in a person, courage is another, and we do not expect them necessarily to go together or to be possessed by everyone to the same degree. If we belong to this class of reader, the *Protagoras* unrolls as a drama which challenges us to radical reflection on our values and assumptions.

If, on the other hand, we are uncertain where we stand on such questions, perhaps uncertain even how to begin thinking about them, Plato is prepared for that also. He will take us, as Socrates takes the young Hippocrates for whose benefit the discussion is held, and invite us to arbitrate between opposing views and opposing arguments. He will make us appreciate the inevitability with which a simple seeming question ramifies into others and has to be reconsidered, time and again, as further, connected problems come into sight. Above all, in Socrates and Protagoras he gives us two deeply opposed styles of thinking and discoursing about fundamental issues. About all these things Plato expects his readers to make a considered choice, each on his own behalf.

But of course it is one thing to see that Plato wants his reader to be an active participant in the discussion, another to stir oneself to a genuinely active reading. It is so easy, and certainly pleasurable, just to read the dialogue through without really stopping to think. What the authors have so splendidly done with their 'commentary by questions' is to compel, encourage, and most importantly to help the reader to be an active participant at every stage of the proceedings.

The questions are both systematic and wide-ranging. Literary and philosophical considerations are shown to be intertwined, as one would expect with a dialogue which is

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at one and the same time a masterpiece of philosophy and a great work of literary and dramatic art. Readers who feel themselves inexperienced in literary and philosophical skills will find that they can do much more than they had realized. The questions, if tackled seriously, will show the way, awakening ideas and sensitivities which may previously have lain latent and unused. That awakening is of course the great educative purpose of the Socratic method of questioning portrayed in the dialogue and now extended by the authors to the commentary on it. But even the most seasoned scholar, who has read and reflected on the *Protagoras* many times, will find that the questions open up fresh and stimulating lines of inquiry. In sum, it does not matter whether we are old or young, experienced or inexperienced: this is a book that should be welcomed into schools, university classes, private studies – wherever genuine education is sought and valued.

Robinson College, Cambridge

M.F.B.

For our parents

Preface

It might be supposed that the authors of a book know what the book is about and for whom it is intended. But we have in fact found the purpose of this book no less difficult to define than Plato's own intention or intended audience. Looked at in one way, the *Protagoras* is a literary and dramatic masterpiece, and an entertaining satire on the sophistic movement. Alternatively it can be seen as a punishing attack on rhetoric as a means of education: for in this dialogue we see the great master Protagoras make an impressive and plausible speech, only to have his ignorance of those very excellences which he professes to teach exposed by Socrates' mercilessly exact cross-questioning. By contrast we are shown two faces of Socrates himself. The Socrates we find at the beginning is a man of conventional morality, who shows an almost avuncular concern for the moral well-being of the impetuous Hippocrates; but in argument we see a man who is so devious, willing to make such apparently outrageous claims, that we can understand why Aristophanes took him for a sophist. It is as though Plato wanted to show both how different from the sophists Socrates really was, and yet how similar to them he appeared. From yet another point of view this is a serious philosophical work in which are propounded the unity of virtue and the Socratic Paradox that virtue is knowledge so that no man does wrong willingly. Moreover the sheer variety of argumentation and subject-matter make it possible to think of this work as itself constituting a course of instruction, but of a different kind from the type of course which Protagoras has for sale.

Perhaps, therefore, one of the most important features of this commentary is that it brings these disparate literary, polemical, philosophical and didactic elements together and helps the reader to relate them to one another. Hence

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although it resembles the traditional commentary to the extent that it consists of text together with a section-by-section analysis, it takes a much broader view of the text than most commentaries on Plato. Nor have we aimed at that Platonic ideal for commentators, an exhaustive and definitive interpretation. This commentary is designed not to persuade learned scholars, though we hope that it has some interest to them, but to enable the text to operate on the reader as Plato operated on his students. It is thus primarily a teaching document, cast almost entirely in the form of questions. Were the reader to write down his answers to each question, he would have a commentary, though not the only possible one. The reader, then, should produce his answers, in whatever form they take, ideally from discussion with others, or simply by thinking them through by himself. We hope that the student will learn from this book a good deal about the *Protagoras*, about Socratic method and Platonic thought, and about the intellectual life of Classical Greece. But more important, we hope that he will develop his skills at exegesis and criticism, whether the object of his studies be a philosophical treatise, a historical document or a work of fiction. This general purpose has dictated the exclusive use of questions, in preference to a discursive commentary with 'questions for discussion', as is usual in student editions. Only by reading the dialogue actively, by constantly responding to the problems raised by the text, will the student learn the basis of all serious reading, that no text, fiction or non-fiction, should be allowed to pass through the mind without hindrance.

There are three recent translations of the *Protagoras* available: W. K. C. Guthrie in the Penguin Classics series (1956), Martin Ostwald's revision of Jowett (Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1956) and C. C. W. Taylor in the Clarendon Plato series (Oxford University Press, 1976) with extensive commentary. This translation cannot hope to improve on these in accuracy or in general intelligibility. If there is a criticism it is that these elegant novelistic renderings tend to obscure the true character of Plato's literary art, which is not that of a novelist but that of a dramatic raconteur with an astonishingly varied literary palette. We have

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therefore tried to emphasise this sense of a man brilliantly telling his story to a friend, and at the same time to reflect the many subtle variations of style which Plato uses. Nevertheless the main justification of this translation lies in the way in which we hope the book will be used. For this reason we have chosen, in the more closely argued passages, to confront the reader with the full difficulty of Plato's literal text, rather than offer a more placid idiomatic rendering.

The problem facing the translator of Greek – what to do with untranslatable words like *sōphrosunē* or *hēdus* – has been solved by including the transliterated Greek word in the text. We have given the English word in *italic* followed by the Greek word in parenthesis. This use of Greek in the English text introduces the reader to a Greek word or reminds him of it after an interval. This system, too, allows us to vary the translation of some Greek words in accordance with the context. Once a Greek word has been introduced, its English translation is occasionally italicised without the Greek, to encourage the reader to recall the Greek. Finally, we cite, or re-cite, the Greek word where it is being specifically considered in the commentary.

This raises a problem. Greek is an inflected language in which the ending of a word varies with its case, gender and number. To reproduce exactly what is in the Greek text would confuse the reader who does not know Greek. But to ignore these differences will rightly offend the Hellenist. As a compromise, we have retained the nominative case throughout, but observed variations of gender and number whenever reasonably possible. Thus *dikaïos* is the Masculine form of the Greek adjective which means *just* (a just man). Just *men* (the masculine plural form) is *dikaioi*. A just *thing* (the neuter singular form) is *dikaion*. Just *things* (the neuter plural form) is *dikaia*. Its adverb, justly, is *dikaïōs*. Feminine words tend to have the ending *-ē* (singular) and *-ai* (plural). Thus *aretē* means excellence, while *aretai* means excellences. There are only two main exceptions to this in the text. The plural of *polis* (a city) is *poleis* (cities); *hēdus* (pleasant) has as its neuter singular *hēdu* (a pleasant thing), and as its neuter plural *hēdea* (pleasant things).

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We have followed the Oxford Classical Text. Marginal numbering in the translation refers as closely as possible to that text. We have omitted line numbers to avoid confusion between the translation and the Greek text. Section headings in the translation refer to the sections of the Commentary and are not part of the original text.

As this book is intended principally as an exercise in philosophical thinking and textual exegesis, we have not attempted to provide extensive background information. Where we thought it essential to the reader's understanding, we have incorporated biographical or historical material into the questions in the commentary. Brief details of people referred to in the dialogue have been given in the Biographical index at the end of the commentary. The Index lists mainly Greek words and principal themes, and is intended as a guide to the development of important issues in the dialogue rather than as an *index locorum*. Hence the cited word does not necessarily appear in the listed Commentary question, and the student may need to think through the question as a whole in order to understand the connection.

We suggest that the reader first read a section of the translation, preferably aloud, and then consider the questions for that section by discussing them or by giving written answers. The questions are organised as follows: the Arabic numerals denote major points; successive questions depend on the previous answers. By the end of a section several ideas should have emerged which link the whole section to previous sections, and which anticipate what is to come. Under most Arabic numerals there are sub-questions, indicated by Roman numerals. These either elucidate the main question (which may be difficult to answer on its own), suggest objections to answers which have probably been posed for the main question, or push the reader to consider implications of the direction which the questioning is taking. In short, for the commentary to work, the reader must answer the questions systematically. The natural tendency to cheat, to read right through a section to find out 'what it is getting at' won't work; the final questions of a section will make sense only in the light of earlier an-

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swers. There will certainly be a temptation to rush through questions which seem to have obvious answers. This too is a bad practice. We have found that when readers let a seemingly obvious problem flit by, they cannot, when pressed, put into words either what the text is about or what they think about it. We hope to break students of the habit of uncritical reading by encouraging them to exercise self-discipline by studying the commentary systematically.

That this commentary-in-questions has affinity with Socrates' own dialectical method is no accident. Nor is the choice of the *Protagoras*. A central theme of the dialogue, perhaps the most important, is the conflict between the passive ingestion and active analysis of what people say. Protagoras is presented as the masterful purveyor of pat but elegantly-packaged conventional wisdoms. Socrates is, as always, the gadfly. But the gadfly is here somewhat waspish, temperamental, not always on solid ground, in short, not the totally admirable character of, say, the *Apology* or the *Crito*, two dialogues often read by students new to Plato. This duality in the portrait of Socrates, and Protagoras' interesting and persuasive, if flawed, arguments make this dialogue the most well-rounded display of the dialectical method in action that Plato wrote. This is a conversation among real people, not a near-monologue for Socrates and a yes-man. It is the archetype of the serious discussions we find ourselves in from time to time, whether it be in a formal academic context or in argument with friends about some current political issue. The near-collapse of the dialogue a third of the way through, the rapid and sometimes obscure changes of direction in the debate, the introduction of seeming irrelevancies, the lengthy excursus into literary exegesis in the middle – all these make the *Protagoras* closer to a piece of theatre, or to a recording of a real conversation, than to a philosophical set-piece.

But amid these devices of the fiction-writer is a core of formal logic and philosophy. And yet when we try to ask what the *Protagoras* is about, no one answer is satisfactory. The relation to each other of the moral excellences? The relation of the will to moral judgment (the Socratic Paradox)? Can ethics be taught? Is an ethical system a response

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to environmental dictates or to something innate in human beings? Can we learn, can we be taught, to govern our society wisely? How can we judge the competence of a teacher, if the criteria by which we judge him are those which we have come to him to learn? Is this dialogue really a series of experiments in language and logic? Of all Plato's shorter works the *Protagoras* covers most widely the range of moral philosophy which, dealing as it does with issues which are of immediate interest, is perhaps the best introduction to philosophy in general. In addition the logical set-pieces present not only the problems and methods of formal argument, but explore the ways in which fallacious arguments can appear plausible because of ambiguities and equivocations in the terms used to express them.

This book, then, attempts to present to the student this range of topics, always, however, in the belief that in this dialogue, more than in any other, Plato used the figure of Socrates to embody the most important fruit of the real Socrates' life – the realisation that there are rarely clear answers to questions, and that what seems like an answer is only a door to another question.

Among all those who have helped us we want to express our most especial gratitude to I. M. Crombie and David Harvey, whose detailed and painstaking criticism of our manuscript has had a profound influence on the final book. We can only hope that we have done justice to their efforts.

We are grateful for the interest of Profs. W. G. Forrest, M. F. Burnyeat and J. Gould, all of whom saw parts of this book in its early stages and whose comments encouraged us to persevere. In addition others have read the book in its final stages; to all of these we wish to express our appreciation for comments and suggestions: Prof. C. Collard, D. J. Collinson, C. Emlyn-Jones, G. Fallows, Martyn Goff, J. P. Griffin, Prof. Matthew Lipman, Christopher Rowe, and Prof. P. Wiseman. Our thanks goes, as well, to Downside School, to its headmaster Dom Philip Jebb OSB, and to Dom Raphael Appleby OSB, for the help and support they have given to our work.

Downside School
1982

B.A.F.H.
E.S.K.

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The Protagoras

Section I*

- Friend:* Socrates, where have you appeared from? As if it weren't obvious: you've been on a hunt, haven't you; chasing the youthful Alcibiades? And I certainly did think him a *beautiful* (*kalos*) young man when I saw him the other day; but a man for all that, Socrates, and, strictly between ourselves, already beginning to sprout a beard. 309a
- Socrates:* Well, and what of that? Don't you agree with Homer when he says that the most charming age is that of early manhood – the age Alcibiades is now? b
- Friend:* And today? Have you, in fact, been with him? How is the young man disposed towards you?
- Socrates:* Oh, pretty well, I think, and especially today. He spoke up in my defence several times, and indeed I have only just now left him. But actually, I have something rather odd to tell you: though he was there, I paid him no attention and several times I quite forgot about him.
- Friend:* How could such a thing possibly happen between you two? You didn't, I take it, encounter a greater *beauty* in the *city* (*polis*)? c
- Socrates:* Very much so, yes.
- Friend:* What? A citizen or a foreigner?
- Socrates:* A foreigner.
- Friend:* Where from?
- Socrates:* Abdera.
- Friend:* And this foreigner, whoever he is; you found

* Section headings refer to the Commentary and are not part of the original text.

The Protagoras

him so *beautiful* that he actually seemed *fairer* (*kalliōn*) to you than Cleinias' son?

Socrates: But my dear fellow, is not the *greatest wisdom* (*to sophōtaton*) likely to be the greater *beauty*?

Friend: Then you have come from some *wise man* (*sophos*), Socrates?

d *Socrates:* Yes indeed. The wisest of any living, if, that is, you think Protagoras is the wisest.

Friend: What's that you say? Protagoras has come to town?

Socrates: Two days ago, yes.

Friend: And you have just been conversing with him?

310a *Socrates:* Indeed so, having said and heard many things.

Friend: Well then, why don't you give us the whole story of your conversation? Make this slave give up his seat, and sit down – if you have no other business, that is.

Socrates: Certainly: in fact you will be doing me a kindness by listening.

Friend: And you us, by giving us the story.

Socrates: Then the kindness will be mutual. Well now, listen.

Section II

b Early this morning, when it was still pitch dark, Hippocrates, Apollodorus' boy, the brother of Phason, started hammering at my door with his staff; and when someone opened up, he came rushing straight in and said at the top of his voice: 'Socrates, are you awake or asleep?' And recognising his voice I said: 'Oh, it's Hippocrates. Nothing up, is there?'

'Nothing but good,' he said.

'That,' I said, 'really would be good news. But what is it, and why have you come round at this hour?'

'Protagoras has come,' he said, standing beside me.

'Yes,' I said, 'the day before yesterday. Have you only just found that out?'

c 'Of course,' he said; 'well, yesterday evening, that is.' And