

The Fragility of Nihilism: Virtue, *Techné*, and the Nature of Self-Knowledge in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*

Dylan van der Schyff

Abstract

Through interpretive readings of Plato's *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* I demonstrate how the character of Socrates manages to reveal a deep concern for virtue in even his most apparently nihilistic interlocutors. I suggest that these dialogues ask us to consider the possibility of a universal human concern for goodness that transcends or collapses the *nomos/phusis* distinction—one that must be diligently, even courageously attended to if our lives are to be effectively applied towards a virtuous ideal of self and society. To conclude I contrast my readings with those that see Plato as the stern rationalist—the unwavering proponent of *techné*—and I open the question of what knowledge of virtue and goodness might entail: Are justice and goodness knowable to us purely by rational means? Might ethics be subject to some manner of measurement or counting, like the technical arts, in order to ensure its epistemic stability? Is a science of ethics possible? Or do virtue and self-knowledge entail a different kind of understanding in which reason and technical thinking play limited roles?

Introduction

It seems to be generally agreed that the principal concern of Presocratic philosophy lies in the pursuit of true knowledge of creation, the nature of the Cosmos, and Being as such, and not with regard to how one might best live one's life once one is in possession of such knowledge. It is, however, all too easy to adopt the view that sees the Presocratics as inherently amoral. Many of the early philosophers, like Heraclitus and Xenophanes, claim that their investigations and discoveries are to benefit humankind—the ethical aspects of Presocratic philosophy cannot be completely dismissed. This said, the ethical or value statements we have from the Presocratics are rather vague in terms of their content. For example, Democritus tells us that it is “best for a person to live his life with as much contentment and as little distress as possible” (B189).¹ However, we have no comprehensive way of knowing how a person might go about achieving this state, only

the vague promise that it “will come about if he does not take his pleasures in mortal things.” (B189) Democritus also highlights an important philosophical distinction when he writes, “by convention (*nomos*) sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour, but in reality atoms and void.” (B125) Here Democritus appears to be positing the idea that the qualitative aspects of human experience are not themselves based in any fundamental reality, but rather that they are psychological creations of custom, habit, and convention (*nomos*). This perspective resonates with Parmenides separation of *doxa* and *alêtheia*; but with Democritus, the qualitative aspects of human experience come very close to being understood as epiphenomenal over the eternal and quantitative ‘true reality’ of atoms and void. As with Parmenides, this perspective sacrifices or diminishes *doxa*; it does not attempt to, nor can it, explain the way we experience the world or what the meaning of those experiences might be. Furthermore, this perspective strongly implies that there is no real truth to human experience and values; they are nothing more than mere convention and habit. By this light, and Democritus’ advice about not “taking pleasures in mortal things” notwithstanding, it seems that a life lived “as cheerfully and with as little distress as possible” could mean a great many things to many different people—for the tyrant, the criminal, the hedonist, the philosopher, or the average citizen, the good life would appear to be a relative proposition.

A similar devaluing of human experience is central to our conception of modern science and knowledge; and for many modern thinkers it is one of the key ethical problems of our times—a kind of dehumanising of knowledge and Truth that leads to moral relativism, nihilism, and a kind of reckless hedonism. Indeed, we need only make a very small step before we see the compelling but largely non-ethical kind of ontology and physics put forward by the Presocratics clash in a rather confusing way with the political world of human values—the realms of nature (*phusis*) and that of human reason, laws and

conventions (*nomos*) become estranged from each other. And it is just this kind of uncertainty about the relationship between human experience and the true nature of reality that created such fertile ground for the relativistic ethical views that began to emerge in 5th century Athens.

Protagoras of Abdera (approx.485–415) responded to this environment by focusing completely on the human perspective. He twists the *phusiologoi* view of the world into a perspective that asserts the primacy of human belief, desire and will. He pushes aside concerns about the *kosmos*, atoms or the *archê* and claims that the true nature of the universe and the gods—if they exist at all—is not knowable and therefore not worth investigating. For Protagoras, human beings are the center and the “measure” of all reality: “The human being is the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not” (B1).

Protagoras and the sophists he is associated with appear to have embraced a purely humanist and relativistic view of the world. For them, whether something is true or false, good or bad, depends on the person or group who holds that truth or value—virtue and ethics are plural and mutable rather than singular and true concepts. And indeed, if one holds the position that nothing is absolutely good or true in and of itself—or, as Democritus suggests, that the meaning of even the most basic human sensory experiences of the world are contingent—then the value judgments that guide human conduct do seem to be founded on nothing more than human convention and agreement (*nomos*) which do change from culture to culture and from time to time. By this light, human values and beliefs have absolutely no basis in nature, nor can they derive their authority from the gods or from some universal conception of Truth. Rather, they are, as Parmenides would no doubt agree, the products of habit, persuasion, and power.

Like many sophists, Gorgias taught the craft of rhetoric that goes hand in glove with this perspective. And this art of persuasion became central to political and legal life in the 5th century Athenian democracy where the ability to speak well and persuasively in front of the Assembly was the key to political success.ⁱⁱ However, the art of rhetoric, as Plato would have us understand it, is a potentially dangerous practice by which the master rhetorician may convince anyone of anything. For Plato, the kind of rhetoric practiced by the sophists is unconcerned with knowledge or truth; it is an activity that leads to philosophical apathy, nihilism and a kind of reckless hedonism. Indeed, if one adopts a purely relative and humanistic view of the world then it seems only natural to turn towards the satisfaction of base desires and pleasure, or the pursuit of power as the only things towards which reason may be properly directed.ⁱⁱⁱ By this view the only universal moral logic would be one based on some notion of natural right where justice is simply the domination of the weak by the strong.

Through interpretive readings of the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* I will attempt to demonstrate how Plato manages to draw this view into question. In both of these dialogues concerning the great sophists, Plato's Socrates manages to reveal a deep—albeit confused and unexamined—concern with virtue in his interlocutors.^{iv} Plato seems to be suggesting here that regardless of the relativistic conception of knowledge and virtue these men hold, and despite the confidence they have in the ability of the sophistic arts to fulfill selfish desires for political influence and material riches, an attachment to goodness or justice as an end in itself permeates their very beings; and that this attachment, once recognized, cannot be easily ignored. Indeed, I suggest that these dialogues ask us to consider the possibility of a universal human concern for goodness that transcends or collapses the *nomos/phusis* distinction—one that must be diligently, even courageously, attended to if our lives are to be effectively applied towards a virtuous ideal of self and society. To conclude I open the question of what knowledge of

virtue might entail: Are justice and goodness knowable to us purely by rational means? Might ethics be subject to some manner of measurement or counting, like the technical arts, in order to ensure its epistemic stability? Is a science of ethics possible? Or do virtue and self-knowledge entail a different kind of understanding in which reason and technical thinking play limited roles?

The Revelation of Justice in the *Gorgias*

In the *Gorgias*, Plato contrasts Socrates' conception of justice with that of the great rhetorician and his students. Here Gorgias claims to teach the ability to consistently win one's position in any political or judicial context without appeal to any true knowledge of justice, goodness or anything else for that matter. Rhetoric is initially presented as an art or *techné* that permits the practitioner to persuade but not necessarily to teach the truth. Indeed, for Gorgias, good and bad, justice and injustice appear to be relative concepts that are to be used instrumentally within a given context; there is no truth, only the winning argument. As an example of this, Gorgias himself relates how he is easily able to persuade medical patients to undergo painful and frightening treatments—a task that even a great doctor may struggle with unsuccessfully—without possessing any real medical knowledge himself (456a-c). However, in the course of things Socrates undermines the idea that Gorgias' rhetoric is any sort of *techné*. And in doing so he reveals some recognition of innate goodness in each of his interlocutors.

After some preliminary discussion, Socrates begins his questioning by pressing Gorgias to clarify the ultimate value of rhetoric. Gorgias finally proclaims, “the greatest good that rhetoric brings about is freedom for yourself and rule over others in your own city” (452d-e). Furthermore, he promises the student of rhetoric the following: “[the] capacity to persuade by speech, judges in the law court, councilors in the council, assemblymen in the assembly, and in every other gathering whatsoever when there is a political gathering;

and indeed with this power you will have the doctor as your slave, and the trainer as your slave, for you can speak and persuade multitudes” (452e). And of course, in a direct democracy such as that of 5th century Athens public speaking is a very important skill—the ability to convince the *demos* of the goodness or justness of a given proposition is to have that position accepted as right by the people and thereby become law. So there is indeed a very real sense in which learning the art of persuasive speech could result in just what Gorgias promises.

Socrates now demands that Gorgias clarify the subject matter of rhetorical speech. After all, if rhetoric is an art, as Gorgias claims, it must have a clearly defined subject. After discussion, Gorgias claims that the subject of rhetorical speech “is persuasion concerning the just and the unjust” (454b7). And when asked whether rhetorical speech teaches the truth about justice and injustice, or merely persuades without teaching, Gorgias admits that rhetoric can only persuade—rhetoric, in the context of this dialogue at least, is the art of persuasive non-didactic speech (455a). Socrates himself offers a reason for this, “for the rhetorician would not be able to teach so large a mob such large matters in such a short time” (455a-b). Gorgias further claims that the art of rhetoric must be value neutral like other *technai* such as medicine and shipbuilding. He asserts that one cannot blame the teacher of rhetoric for the uses it is put to any more than one can blame the shipbuilder for the ways his ships are used or the doctor who heals a man that goes on to commit evil acts (457c). But this claim creates a serious practical problem for Gorgias: because there will always be the possibility that some students of rhetoric will put its powers to unjust uses, it is very likely that Gorgias and his teachings will be seen as a potential threat to the city. Gorgias responds to this problem by asserting that no student of his could ever be unjust—this suggests that he is a teacher of justice after all—and that if any of them were found to be using rhetoric for injustice they should be dealt with most severely (459d-461b).

A moment's reflection should reveal the incoherence in Gorgias' position. On one hand Gorgias promises the student of rhetoric the ability to persuade anyone of anything (that it is just or unjust)—a compelling proposition for the politically ambitious. On the other hand, Gorgias asserts that the rhetorician who uses rhetoric unjustly should be punished to the full extent of the law. To further confuse things, he then agrees to Socrates' statement that, "... the rhetorician, is manifestly one who would never do injustice, isn't he?" with an ambiguous, "Apparently" (460c). But if rhetoric is as powerful as Gorgias claims then the master rhetorician should be able to persuade his way out of any kind of litigation brought against him. Thus, while Gorgias claims that rhetorical speech is about justice, his position also admits the possibility that the highly skilled rhetorician might use rhetoric unjustly and be able to get away with it. He is forced to disclose the tyrannical potential of rhetoric by revealing its power to manipulate the hopes and passions of an audience in ways that benefit only the rhetorician himself. So it seems that for professional and perhaps even personal reasons (although this is not entirely clear at this point) Gorgias cannot give up on some notion of justice as some kind of guiding principle. Indeed, he asserts that justice should limit rhetoric in some way or another, but he cannot effectively show how this may occur without allowing his claims about the power of rhetoric to fall into contradiction. Thus Gorgias shows himself to be confused (or at least corrupted) with regards to the true nature of justice, and his conception of rhetoric can only be understood as unjust. And how, then, could he effectively teach justice to his students? Gorgias is reduced to silence.^v

Polus and Callicles, the students of Gorgias, now take up the discussion. Polus complains that Socrates' refutation of Gorgias is false because Gorgias was 'shamed' into silence by practical concerns for his own wellbeing in Athens. Polus asserts that Gorgias was driven by convention (*nomos*) to speak of justice in order to conceal his true thoughts—"for who do you think would utterly deny both that he knows the just things and that he would

teach [them] to others” (461c). Polus rather recklessly argues that by nature the power of rhetoric transcends conventional notions of just and unjust because it permits the fulfillment of desire and the natural superiority of the stronger and the better.

Socrates begins to reveal Polus’ confusion, and to convince him that justice is better than injustice by discussing things like proper punishment, exercise, and medicine—things that may be painful, or unpleasant in the short term but that clearly have long term benefits. And in doing so he demonstrates why rhetoric cannot live up to any sort of proper epistemic or ethical claims. In contrast to the genuine *technai* which, in principle at least, work towards the excellence of their respective subjects, sophistic rhetoric deals with the short term satisfaction of desires, the gratification of pleasures, the appeasement of fears, and so on—it only *pretends* to offer knowledge and goodness and is therefore, as Socrates claims, shameful. Socrates argues that while rhetoric may be able to satisfy superficial desires and provide pleasure for the practitioner in the short term, it guarantees nothing in the long term. He finally convinces Polus that rhetoric is not a proper art at all but rather that it is a kind of patronizing speech, a knack, or as he also calls it, a form of flattery: “[Flattery] perceives, I do not say it knows but that it guesses, there are four branches of [techné], which always exercise their objects, namely, the body and the soul toward what is best, and then [flattery] divides the parts pretending it is that which it has insinuated itself into. It does not care at all for what is best, but it always hunts out foolishness by saying what is most pleasant, and it deceives those who are foolish by making it seem as if it is the most valuable thing of all” (464c-d).^{vi}

Here Socrates demonstrates how various forms of flattery pretend to be, or to take part in, real *technai*. And he does this in a manner that can be thought of ‘geometrically’^{vii} or in terms of analogous equivalents that refer to the state of the body and soul respectively. In terms of the body, cooking and cosmetics merely flatter one into thinking that it is in a

good condition; but gymnastics and medicine are therapeutic *technai* that actually do work towards the good of the body. And where the soul is concerned, rhetoric and sophistry may flatter it into an apparently good condition, while the real political *techné*, justice and legislation, if exercised properly, work towards the real good and excellence of the soul—thus rhetoric is to justice what cooking is to medicine; cosmetics is to gymnastics what sophistry is to legislation (465c).

Socrates then goes on to claim that those who charge blindly and tyrannically after power and wealth will never be happy. For Socrates, this is because once such riches and power have been attained they may cause the individual great harm if that individual has no true understanding of how to use them well or in a truly good or advantageous way. And here we also begin to see the great difference in the way Socrates and Polus define what is good or advantageous. For Polus it is better to inflict injustice than to suffer it, whereas for Socrates, acting unjustly is symptomatic of the worst disease of the soul (474b-474c).

In response to Socrates' questioning, Polus alters his position by claiming that justice may be noble but that it is not advantageous, whereas injustice may be shameful but that it is clearly beneficial—e.g. Archelaus' murder of the young prince in order to attain the throne was beneficial to him but it was certainly not noble. This reveals that, in Polus' soul, what is good (for him this is what is immediately advantageous) and what is noble are estranged from each other; but he also clearly recognizes that the noble must be in some way or another better than the ignoble. He thus uncovers, in his own confused way, his conviction that noble things or acts must be good or admirable in some way; and that justice (related now to the noble) may be better than injustice (the ignoble) in the long term. Indeed, Polus finally reveals that he does and does not think that justice is good and therefore shows himself to be confused (477d-479e).

While Polus now seems convinced of the goodness of justice—he is turned around, or as Nichols^{viii} puts it, “bewitched”—Callicles will have none of this. He revises Polus’ position and amplifies the distinction between nature and convention or law (*nomos/phusis*). He posits that whatever is good for us by nature is for that very reason noble by nature, regardless of what law or convention may dictate—what goes by the name of injustice, because it is more advantageous by nature than justice, is by nature more noble and admirable than justice (488b). For Callicles, injustice is shameful only by convention; notions of injustice and justice are merely creations of *nomos*. And so, in effect, Callicles claims that Polus’ admission that “injustice is shameful” should have been accompanied by the words, “only by convention.” Callicles goes further, however, and offers a genealogy of justice and injustice by drawing a distinction between the strong and the weak. Here he claims that the convention that praises justice and condemns injustice was created by the weak to protect themselves from the strong—a kind of social contract. According to Callicles, these conventions were created simply to serve the interests of the weak: injustice is simply the interest of the strong seen from the point of view of the weak; natural right favors the strong and is the only true justice. Here he draws support for his argument from the animal world, the realm of human politics, and the poetry of Pindar—lions get the better of the sheep; the great Persian kings, Darius and Xerxes, expand their empire; and Heracles steals Geryon’s cattle and gets away with it because of his superior strength. For Callicles, all these things occur with the blessing of nature because it is just by nature for the better and the stronger to have more than the lesser and the weaker (482e-484c).

Socrates now engages Callicles on what the meaning of “better” might entail and questions if it is synonymous with “stronger” (489d-491a). Socrates points out that if the weaker individuals are able to band together and through their conventions and laws dominate the stronger—such as may be the case in a democracy—it is *they* who are by

nature, and by Callicles' own definition, the better.^{ix} After a petulant display, Callicles changes his position. He states that it is not those with brute strength that should dominate but rather those with intelligence and courage—those with virtue (491c). Now, however, Callicles' image of natural justice becomes much more fragile: Where his earlier position of survival of the fittest seemed to preserve some notion of justice, or at least natural right, in the world, his revised position secures very little. Indeed, there is no guarantee that the virtuous (the pious, wise and courageous) will necessarily dominate in any political organization—any democracy, including that of 5th century Athens, will easily attest to this.

Now just as Gorgias could not disassociate himself completely from justice, and just as Polus could not completely turn his back on justice and noble acts once their true long term value is revealed to him, so too in the case of Callicles we find a deep concern with justice and goodness in a character that initially seems to hold a purely nihilistic position. Callicles' attachment to justice becomes clear when we contrast his initial position with his revised position: According to his first argument, the result of every power struggle would seem to be just—the winner is the stronger and therefore right by nature. In Callicles' revised position, however, the more intelligent and courageous (the better) *ought* to win even when they do not. Democratic Athens is ruled by the inferior many and, according to Callicles, this is unjust by nature—this is not the way things *ought* to be. And here it begins to seem as though Callicles' initial position of 'might makes right' was not arrived at through reflection into the nature of justice, but rather as a kind of desperate and pained response to the realization that the virtues he really admires (courage, wisdom, piety) do not win out in the politics of the real world. Callicles cannot, finally, hold onto his first position because at his core he truly does admire virtues other than brute strength. And his nihilism is perhaps nothing more than a spiteful psychological shell created in response to seeing true excellence go down again and

again. Still, he cannot find the courage to face up to his situation—or indeed, himself—and so he launches into a denial of justice and moderation that seems to be fuelled by nothing more than rage and frustration.^x But Callicles is unable to maintain his claims to a total nihilistic hedonism; and when Socrates takes this position to its logical extreme Callicles becomes disgusted.

In what remains of the dialogue, which is a great deal, Callicles reveals himself to be, in his own confused way, a deeply moral man—Callicles’ growing anger with Socrates signals his frustration at having this repressed respect for justice shown to him. And furthermore, he seems to see in Socrates yet another noble soul that will be eventually trampled down by the mob. Callicles’ anger is, perhaps, a kind of moral frustration at what he sees as the fragile nature, or even the impossibility, of the values and virtues he holds most high—his apparent nihilism may well be a bitter symptom of his rejection of what knows in his heart to be most true. He is a deeply unhappy soul. And he is a weak one too, because for all his talk of power he feels himself to be helpless against the overwhelming force of the *demos*. Despite all that has happened in the dialogue, this weakness of character seems to render the possibility of Callicles turning to a virtuous or philosophical life unlikely, just it as it carries an ominous subtext for the political future of Athens.

The Recognition of Courage in Plato’s Protagoras

Turning now to the *Protagoras* we find another instance where the sophistic contempt for justice and noble or self-sacrificing acts is at odds with an unexamined admiration of virtue and goodness.^{xi} Here the great sophist, Protagoras, proclaims himself to be a teacher of political virtue—that is, of “good counsel” concerning the student’s own affairs and how to become “most powerful” in politics (318e-319a). But we may ask, does this mean that Protagoras teaches his students to become good civil servants

interested in furthering the common good? Or is he training them to be effective politicians who are only interested in furthering their own desires? When Socrates asks if Protagoras is a teacher of good citizenship, Protagoras responds deftly and obscurely with, “that is the very thing I publicly profess.” (319a) But given Protagoras’ rather slippery remarks earlier in the dialogue about the dangers inherent in his profession, as well his clear concern for the type of audience he addresses (316b) the answer to our question about exactly what he teaches is still not clear—although we may have our suspicions.

Socrates now questions whether or not political virtue can be taught. (319a4-5, 8-9) He suggests that when it comes to technical things, like shipbuilding or the training of soldiers, the people consult the relevant experts for their knowledge on the subject at hand. But when it comes to the question of how to best use the ships and soldiers we then enter the realm of politics and all citizens in the democracy may influence the decision as to how these things may be used. Socrates suggests that the kind of good citizenship that Protagoras claims to teach cannot be taught because otherwise we would ask to hear only from those who are experts—in the democracy, however, all citizens have a say. The question of exactly what Protagoras claims to teach remains obscure. And if it is some kind of political virtue, then the teachability of such a thing, whatever it may be, has also been brought into question. In response to this Protagoras relates his version of the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus.

Protagoras tells us how, when it came time for the gods to create the mortals out of earth and fire, the two titan brothers, Epimetheus (afterthought) and Prometheus (forethought), were charged with giving the various creatures the various powers they would need to survive in the world. But Epimetheus neglected to save any powers for human beings; they were left naked, weak, and with no natural weapons like claws to protect themselves (320d-4-8). In response to his brother’s oversight, Prometheus stole the technical arts and

fire from Hephaestus and Athena and gave them to human beings so that they might survive—they could now make weapons and shelter themselves. Despite all this, humanity fell on each other violently because they lacked the political wisdom that only Zeus possessed. So in order to prevent humanity from destroying itself, Zeus gave justice and a sense of shame to all humans; and he decreed that anyone not sharing these qualities must be killed or cast out (322d1-5).

In response to Socrates' claim that political virtue cannot be taught, Protagoras, with his rendition of the Prometheus myth and the sub-text he imbues it with, asserts that everyone that lives in a political community can and does give political advice, not because there is no political expertise, but because all are supposed to possess that kind of knowledge already. According to the myth, Zeus gives all human beings a sense of what justice entails; and this, according to Protagoras, is why democracy makes such good sense.^{xii} But we must also keep in mind that Protagoras is speaking in front of fellow sophists as well as many young and wealthy Athenians, all of whom are potential students. And so we might ask here, if Zeus has already instilled in us what we need to participate in politics, what good is Protagoras' teaching? Protagoras now begins to show that in reality it is the family and the political community, not Zeus, which teaches us how to behave in accordance with custom. He points out that people don't get angry with those who are small, weak or ugly because it is not their fault that they possess these characteristics by nature. However, people do get angry with those who are unjust, impious or immoderate because we generally understand that their being that way *is* their fault—they could and should know better. He gently reveals that political virtue is not knowledge we are born with or possess by nature or through some divine dispensation after all. Rather it is knowledge we are responsible for possessing and propagating; and this is achieved with the threat of spankings, beatings or imprisonment. The myth, it seems, merely gives the useful illusion of a greater authority in order that the customs and

laws may be accepted unquestioningly by the polis. Thus, for Protagoras, political virtue is teachable and *is* taught in some manner or other by almost everyone that lives in a political community. And here Protagoras subtly suggests that if there are those, like himself, who can advance the teaching of things political beyond what parents and the political community can achieve then so much the better for those who can afford to have access to this knowledge (328b-c). Indeed, it is here that Protagoras begins to subtly reveal to his potential students the delicate and dangerous nature of what he really teaches.

Protagoras may disguise himself with piety by employing the myth, but he also demonstrates that although Zeus, if he does exist, may care for the human race as a whole, he is completely indifferent to the fate of individuals. Protagoras uses the myth to make the compelling argument that the world was not created with the wellbeing of humanity in mind. Echoing Callicles, he implies that our political communities and notions of justice and injustice are artificial (the creations of *nomos*) and are thus full of problems. For Protagoras, the moral education that we get from the city and family is simply a kind of coercion—or brainwashing—that goes against our true nature. And here we begin to gain a clearer image of Protagoras as a teacher of injustice and deception who offers his students a kind of liberation from what he sees as the unnatural bonds of *nomos*.

For Protagoras, then, the world is fundamentally epimethean—thought follows rather than precedes creation. By this view, humanity attained fire and *techné* in spite of the gods and nature, and the only protection or comforts we have are invented by us through our arts. Beneath the rhetorical veneer and the *muthos*, the true human condition that Protagoras offers is one of complete abandonment: there is only the natural order that coldly ensures the perpetuation of the species; and even in this regard the animals are

better off than we are as they can form harmonious social groups easily and are naturally fitted out for survival. Here Protagoras subtly introduces the idea that in order to restrain ourselves from killing each other it is not necessary that Zeus the law giver actually exists, but simply that the majority of humankind believes this to be the case. In order to form relatively stable political communities the majority of humans need to believe in something greater than themselves that will, through punishment and reward, define what is unjust and what is just. Protagoras adds, however, that some humans are unjust and that it would be madness for such people to admit to their injustice or to fail to pretend to appear to be just (323a-323c)—nowhere does he say that it would be madness *to be* unjust. And so, for Protagoras, political societies do not require the universal agreement that the unjust will always be punished and that justice is good, they only require that most people think this to be so: even if there are a few wise people who understand the truth about justice and the gods, political society will persist as long as they have the ability to conceal their thoughts through clever devices like myth and rhetoric.^{xiii} It would seem that, for Protagoras, it is just these enlightened people that have the advantage over the ignorant masses whose true natures are held in check by their belief in the conventional notions of justice, piety and moderation.

Socrates responds to this by posing what seems like an innocuous technical question, “Are justice, piety and moderation three separate virtues or are they all part of the same thing?” Protagoras responds that virtue is one thing and that justice piety and moderation are its parts. Socrates then asks, “Are these parts of virtue like parts of a face or parts like parts of gold?” Protagoras responds that they are like parts of a face with differing qualities from each other (329d-330c). Socrates then asks, “do human beings also partake of these parts of virtue, some of one part, others of another; or is it necessarily the case that if in fact someone lays hold of one, he has them all?”(329e) Protagoras responds that because there are many who are courageous but unjust and because there are those who

are just but not wise (those who faithfully follow the laws and customs of the family and city) the virtues may exist independently of each other (329e5-6). This should raise further questions in the mind of the reader: Are some virtues mutually exclusive? Can the wise ever be just? Or is justice the domain of the blind followers of myth and *nomos*? And what about wisdom? Is it a virtue like justice, piety and moderation, or is it something else altogether?

Until this point in the dialogue Protagoras has spoken of only three elements in association with what he calls political virtue—justice, moderation and piety. But he has also referred to wisdom and its associate, courage, calling them the greatest of all virtues (330a). Furthermore, as I have just mentioned, Protagoras has claimed that some are courageous but not just, and that others are just but not wise. All of this strongly implies that, for Protagoras, there are in fact two kinds of virtue. On one hand there is (1) political virtue, which is made up of justice, moderation and piety; these qualities are needed to get along with others in a given political community (good citizenship, or at least the appearance of it). On the other hand, there is (2) wisdom, the greatest virtue, which allows the wise person to know the world as it truly is (and of course, the wise person needs courage to face up to the real world and to venture into foreign towns and teach as Protagoras does). According to Protagoras, then, there is a divide between political virtue and the true virtue of wisdom and its associate, courage. As a result of this, a person may be wise, courageous and unjust, *or* just but unwise. And so it seems that Protagoras presents a conception of wisdom as knowledge of the truth about the political world: the account of Zeus as the giver of justice is but a useful myth; justice, piety and moderation are mere conventions; and our attachment to all of them is merely a symptom of political life that we must learn to transcend if we wish to achieve true excellence and the fulfillment of our desires.

Socrates now begins to press Protagoras. He asks again about the unity of the virtues; and he suggests that justice and piety seem to be closely related, and wonders if wisdom and moderation might also be related to each other in some way or another. After a discussion of opposites, in which Protagoras is shown to contradict himself, he gives unwilling assent to both of these propositions (332a-333c). It is Socrates' view that all virtue is a kind of unified knowledge (of what is still unclear) and as a result he wants to show that the virtues are not separable. And indeed, if Socrates wishes to demonstrate the unity of the virtues then it would seem that the task at hand is clear: somehow Socrates has to get Protagoras to agree that it is a mark of wisdom and moderation to be just and pious, and thus collapse the major distinction between 1 and 2 above. The question at hand now seems to be whether or not the wise and courageous will ever be truly just, or if justice, piety and moderation are virtues of the fools.

Socrates' rather dubious game of opposites proves nothing. However, it does put Protagoras on the defensive; it allows Socrates to amplify the discourse, and to clarify Protagoras' distinction between virtues 1 and virtues 2 by asking if a person may be considered moderate or wise *because* he commits injustice. Protagoras responds cagily, "for my part, Socrates, I would be ashamed to agree to this, but many people do assert it." (333c) In this way Protagoras does not agree with this assertion directly, but nevertheless carefully allows it to be introduced and maintained in the discussion without having to take responsibility for it. And this also shows that despite the fact that Protagoras is becoming very rattled at this point in the dialogue, his skill at rhetoric makes it very difficult for Socrates to get straight answers out of him. Indeed, a clear capitulation by Protagoras seems increasingly unlikely; Socrates will have to take more drastic measures—a more boldly ironical and psychological approach—and attempt to reveal Protagoras' own unexamined attachment to the noble and the good.

Now follows an almost comical interlude where the audience restrains Socrates from leaving the discussion; and in which a rather long analysis of a poem by Simonides shows Socrates playing the literary critic and, perhaps, ironically demonstrating the futility of appeals to authority in situations such as this.^{xiv} Once the discussion gets back on track, Socrates points out that Protagoras has claimed that there are five virtues—justice, piety, moderation, wisdom and courage—; and he tries to narrow the terms by again asking about unity: are these actually five names for one thing, virtue, or are they different or separate things with different qualities? Protagoras, now rattled, modifies his position and claims that four of these are all interrelated or “reasonably comparable to one another” (349d2-4), but that courage remains separate. He argues here that one can easily find great courage mixed with impiety, injustice, or ignorance. By Protagoras’ new position, courage is not necessarily associated with justice, wisdom or knowledge because it is amoral—as Bartlett puts it, “[courage] would seem to be rather a certain steadfastness or toughness of soul, whether for the sake of combat or illegal thievery” (Bartlett 2004, p.80). Socrates will now try to prove that courage is linked in some way with the moral virtues. But because he cannot challenge Protagoras rhetorically, Socrates’ argument will have to be ironic and dialectical—he will have to show Protagoras’ confusion by appealing directly to the moral conflicts within the sophist’s own soul. Socrates does this by adopting a position that argues for a purely technical hedonism in order to take Protagoras’ nihilistic ethical position, as well as his claims to possess a knowledge that is teachable, to their logical extremes.

Socrates begins with the claim that one must have knowledge or wisdom in order to have courage—well divers that have knowledge of well diving are more courageous with regard to that activity than those who do not; in general, those with knowledge can perform otherwise dangerous acts with greater confidence than others, whether that be soldiering, well diving or traveling from town to town teaching rhetoric (350a-350c).

Indeed, this is not a real departure from Protagoras' initial claims and he generally seems to agree to this position. Socrates advances this by claiming that no human being voluntarily seeks out what he knows to be bad, rather they go after the things that seem to be good. Here Socrates explicitly associates goodness with pleasure—we all seek pleasure, whether it is victory on the battlefield, wealth and power in the city, or the satisfaction of base desires. And if this is the case, Socrates claims, then both the courageous and the cowards seek out what they take to be good or pleasurable: for the coward this involves hiding or running away in battle, while for the courageous this means heading toward the front lines. And it would follow then that for the just this means following the laws of the community and the pursuit of good citizenship, while for the unjust this involves the fulfillment of one's own interests. Put simply this position asserts that the cowards and the courageous, the just and the unjust, simply disagree about what they know to be good.

In this way Socrates begins to present courage as knowledge of what is and what is not truly pleasurable and thereby good—by this view the cowards and the courageous are both, in their own ways, pleasure seekers. However, Socrates suggests that if courage is associated with knowledge and wisdom, it stands to reason that the courageous should be able to better calculate how to achieve greater and truer pleasure. By this argument, the pleasure that the coward finds in hiding pales in comparison to what the courageous achieve in fighting on the front line—the courageous go into battle willingly because they *know* that doing so is noble, good and thus pleasurable (360a1-3).^{xv} This development takes advantage of Protagoras' earlier qualification of Socrates' depiction of pleasure and good, where Protagoras states that pleasure can only be good if one “should live his life by taking pleasures in the noble things.” (351c1-2)^{xvi} This allows Socrates to clearly attribute the values of good and bad to the words noble and shameful respectively.

Socrates then characterizes the many as being unable to grasp what is truly good and noble for them because they make mistakes in the calculation of pleasure and pain. Here Socrates suggests the possibility of an art or *techné* of counting or measuring that would enable the practitioner to accurately determine the best means to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in order to ensure or “save” pleasure in its best form (356c4-357e8). He implies that if courage, like the good and true pursuit of pleasure, is simply knowledge of what is noble then one should be able to arrive at such knowledge by purely rational means. Courage is now presented as type of calculation, a process of counting and weighing ‘units’ of pleasure; a *techné* as stable, reliable and therefore teachable as geometry. And indeed, by this view the courageous become those who know better how to calculate their pleasure (360a1-3). Socrates even seems to imply that under certain circumstances one might accurately calculate that it is better (more pleasurable) to run away and that this act would therefore be noble or courageous. Socrates’ final strategy is to violently disassociate courage from the noble or self-sacrificing qualities central to our commonsensical understanding of it. All that remains is a cold calculation of what is best or more pleasurable; courage is now simply “knowledge of what’s frightening and what is not” (360d-e); and moral value is reduced to arithmetic.

Socrates has now changed his position from one that denies the teachable nature of virtue to one that apparently embraces it. Indeed, he *seems* to be saying something like, “yes, let’s do away with the myths, convention and notions of common good; but let’s go all the way and have done with our irrational, sentimental, qualitative, and self-sacrificing notions of virtue as well; we should work on maximizing individual nobility and goodness, which, because they are in fact quantifiable units of pleasure, are knowable purely rationally and are therefore inherently teachable as some kind of *techné*.” However, even a brief look at Socrates’ technical hedonism will reveal the many problems and inconsistencies it contains.^{xvii} And this must be clear to Protagoras as well.

Socrates' outrageous theory is clearly not intended to show us how he really feels about the nature of virtue, and knowledge. Rather he makes this strange argument to demonstrate the inconsistencies in Protagoras' position and to force the sophist, the audience, and the reader to examine how they feel about courage, the noble, the good, and what these virtuous qualities mean. Indeed, after Socrates offers and develops this position, Protagoras refuses to continue the discussion. He does not attack the clear logical problems or even the violation of common sense this argument rests on—there would be no point; he has nothing better to offer. By insisting on this technical/hedonistic view of goodness, Socrates, has thrown the proceedings into the absurd. But in doing so he has made it impossible for Protagoras and for us to ignore the complicated relationship we have with ethical knowledge. Protagoras, it seems, has the same reaction to this rather bizarre technical version of courage and nobility that we do. He is disturbed by it because he admires the courageous, as everyone does, for their ability to risk their own pleasure and wellbeing for something other than themselves (395e1-4). Indeed, we are made to consider here the possibility that a certain kind of pain may be essential to true courage; that it may be knowledge of the value of pain, perhaps more so than pleasure, which enables us to think and behave ethically. However, everything in the dialogue thus far suggests that Protagoras should be happy to accept Socrates' technical hedonism. After all, what could be a more efficient and certain way to teach people to “manage one's own affairs...” and to rise above the ignorance and superstition of the many—especially if the goal of these activities is to satisfy desire for power and wealth, and thus provide pleasure?

By taking Protagoras' rather nihilistic ethical position, as well as his claims to possess a knowledge that is teachable, to their logical extremes, Socrates has effectively beaten Protagoras with his own argument and, it seems, forced him to examine himself. I suggest that Plato, through his discussion of courage and pleasure, attempts to reveal in

us the admiration for self-sacrifice as a political ideal—a recognition that true political virtue works towards the good of others as much as the self. Plato also seems to imply that if we are to understand the true meaning of virtue we must, of course, look to our laws and customs, but more importantly we must examine each other and ourselves. Can political virtue be taught? The answer seems to be yes and no: the customs, laws and beliefs may be and are taught by the political community, however these teachings and ideals must be focused by a self-reflective being who (it is to be hoped) possesses the strength of spirit to honestly interpret and continually question the *nomoi* with the best interests of the society in mind.

We leave the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* with more questions than answers. However, the problems these dialogues illuminate are important and entirely relevant today. Indeed, both dialogues reveal the various ways in which we may think ourselves to be in possession of knowledge of what is best when in reality we are deluded. All of Socrates' interlocutors think of themselves as understanding a certain truth about the nature of social reality that allows them success—influence, wealth, pleasure and so on. And they all ascribe to the *techné* analogy in order to give their pursuit of individual pleasure the appearance of an epistemic grounding. Callicles, of course, is the exception for his position is far more passionate—his morality is unashamedly irrational—but he does continually conflate what is pleasurable with some notion of what is good (thereby, perhaps, rejecting the ethical necessity of pain. With Polus and Protagoras, Socrates demonstrates the folly of conflating rhetoric and *techné*, as well as how the resulting confusion allows for pleasure, vanity and unmediated base desires to be disguised as ends in themselves.

Socrates reveals this to Polus by using a clear 'geometrical' schema of analogous equivalents: cosmetics are to gymnastics what apparent health of the body is to true

health of the body. Polus is shown that true *techné* requires hard work and entails the rigorous development of skill and knowledge towards a proper subject. Things like sophistic rhetoric and cosmetics, on the other hand, give only the easy illusion of such things and have no proper subject, only the rather vague and irrational fulfillment of pleasure. And while Polus may not completely understand the inherent goodness of noble acts, he does at the very least recognize their value on practical grounds. With the sophisticated Protagoras, Socrates uses the arithmetical or *techné* analogy ironically^{xviii} in order to show that the sophist's claim to *techné* and teachable knowledge with regard to justice are absurd and confused.

The exchanges with Polus and Protagoras offer us the opportunity to consider the ways in which we may be tempted or, indeed, persuaded to engage in activity or to pursue ends that merely appear to be good but that are harmful to us or to others in the end. Indeed, modern culture is almost completely dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure and the total rejection of pain; and much of our modern economy is dependent on maintaining the belief in appearances (of success, beauty, knowledge and so on). The now totally enmeshed industries of entertainment and advertising flatter, manipulate our vanity and insecurities from childhood in order to keep us consuming—always with technology's promise of something better or 'new and improved' luring us on. Desire itself is a carefully manufactured commodity; and of course there will always be those who claim to understand things as they are and who, as a matter of course, feel it to be their right to control or take advantage of the many. Additionally, we often seem to share Polus' confusion over what is noble and good. Of course, we all claim that justice is better than injustice—we punish our children not to increase their misery but to ensure their happiness later on. However, successful injustice is often tolerated, even praised in our society as long as it is executed with subtlety and in a way that maintains the appearance of excellence we associate with some ideal of the successful life. Perhaps more troubling

is the case of Callicles. His nihilism and anger is symptomatic of a certain degree of denial, helplessness, and frustration we all feel as political animals. But as Plato attempts to demonstrate, Callicles' cynicism is a form of weakness or cowardice—one that we should be aware of in ourselves as we attempt to formulate the ethical judgments that guide our lives.

Plato's arguments in these two dialogues are complicated and I have given only a partial reading of them here. Given what we have considered, however, we may begin to ask if we at the individual level must be completely intellectually and spiritually defined by our contemporary milieu. Plato appears to be suggesting that through the process of questioning our desires, as well as our unexamined notions of virtue and what *seems* to be in our best interests, we may be able to bracket out those spiteful and conflicting views imposed upon us by society, lay our souls bare, and be forced to confront our true selves. However, while Plato seems to suggest that such an activity may allow us to recognize our innate attachment to goodness and thus improve our lives, he also reveals that this process is painful as it often involves sacrificing immediate pleasures or even casting off problematic but closely held notions of who we are. He also shows the various ways in which we push this attachment to truth and goodness aside and how we harm ourselves in doing so. Self-reflection is no easy business and there is no guarantee that Gorgias, Polus, Callicles and Protagoras, now that some revelation of the immanent nature goodness has been revealed to them, will pursue self-knowledge with any dedication.

Conclusion: What is Ethical Knowledge?

We have begun to consider the ways in which Plato's Socrates seeks to draw out and identify confusion and ethical disorder in the minds of his contemporaries, and we have also seen the ways he uses various analogies—especially that of *techné*—ironically or as protreptic devices in order to bring others to understand his position or to reveal flaws in

the arguments of his interlocutors. But we still really have no idea in what ethical knowledge consists. If Socrates' use of the *techné* analogy in the *Protagoras* is indeed only an ironic device meant to debunk the great sophists claim to knowledge, then how does one go about attaining self-knowledge? While some innate sense of justice or goodness may be present and to us, how are we to properly understand it? The *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* prompt us to look at our relationship to rhetoric and technical knowledge and to consider what their limits may be. These dialogues also ask us to think about how this kind of knowledge or, indeed, the illusion of it, may be applied blindly (ethically speaking, like sophistic rhetoric) towards the fulfillment of unexamined desires and beliefs rather than towards the difficult pursuit of real excellence and goodness. And this is an especially important concern because in our modern techno/scientific culture it seems difficult to properly conceive of knowledge in any other way than as technical—not to mention the fact that we are constantly bombarded with rhetorical flattery from the media and advertising. Many of our activities as a society and as individuals are based around the marvels of technology; and much of our economy and immediate sense of wellbeing is driven by the luxuries provided by technological progress. Indeed, we have an attachment and dependency on *techné* that Plato could not have imagined. How then might we properly reconcile the quest for self-knowledge and the rather mysterious revelation of goodness that Plato seems to be advocating in these dialogues with the overwhelmingly complicated technological and pleasure driven Western world in which we live?

The humanist/rationalist project and the promise of progress it carries, both in Ancient Greece and in the modern world, has produced many outstanding achievements. Without it we would not have the kind of science, medicine, nor the many technological luxuries we enjoy today. *Techné* offers us a means by which we may take control over a great many things; because *techné* may be systematically taught and its results verified by

objective criteria—as is clearly the case with mathematics, orthography, or ship building for instance—it allows us a certain degree of control over contingency or, as Nussbaum refers to it, luck (*tuché*). Indeed, technical knowledge may be applied with positive results to the physical world with the goal of developing and approaching ideals based on function and efficiency (the organization of matter into a house, or ship, the building of a weapon or tool). Or it may be directed towards the construction of logically coherent statements, the discovery of abstract mathematical truths, or perhaps, the creation of linguistic devices that may influence the emotions, desires and rational processes of the human mind. The undisputed power of *techné* notwithstanding, the question remains, to what degree does *techné* and technical knowledge apply to ethics? With all we have considered thus far we may reasonably pose the following queries: (1) might technical knowledge, such as mathematics, aid us in a search for true ethical knowledge? If so, (2) are virtue and goodness knowable purely as *techné*? And (3), is there any way that the seeming disparity between nature and human values might be diminished or reconciled through the pursuit of ethical knowledge?

Plato, I think, would answer yes to 1 and 3 but no to 2. Although there exists a long tradition of distinguished scholars that sees Plato committed to the project of what Irwin^{xix} calls a “moral theory” (Irwin 1977), or, as Nussbaum puts it, “a science of practical reasoning” (Nussbaum 2009, p.89; Cf. Roochnik, 1996, p.8), this position plays down the degree to which Plato may be employing ironic devices in order to provoke deeper reflection on the nature of virtue and the degree to which it is teachable (as well as the limits of *techné* itself). As I suggested in my reading of the *Protagoras*, Socrates’ final appeal for a technical hedonism is, on the surface, based on vague speculation regarding the possibility of a *techné* that would allow us to accurately calculate what is truly pleasurable and thereby combat or cure weakness of the will (*akrasia*). In my reading this implies some kind of non-reflective linear or quasi-mathematical process that

would, in effect, tell an otherwise potentially self-reflective being what to think (about virtue, pleasure, and goodness) thereby negating the need for the examined life itself.

Again, Socrates is noticeably unclear how such a *techné* should come about or what it might entail. And while the lesser Sophists, Prodicus and Hippias, seem to be delighted at the proposition of the *akrasia* fighting *techné* (it seems to offer the possibility of yet another means by which they may drain the pockets of the rich through their teaching), Protagoras, seems to react differently and backs away from the discussion. As I have discussed above, Protagoras' reaction to Socrates' (as I see them) ironic claims reveals that he instinctively understands, as we do, that no person or thing (craft or art) can tell the soul how to be truly courageous or virtuous; and that true virtue can only come through difficult and painful self-reflection and even self-sacrifice—anything less would be the product of some form of flattery and would thereby be inauthentic.

So I suggest that a reading of Plato that takes into account possible ironic implications may open interesting and difficult questions with regard to, among other things, the relationship between *techné* and virtue. And while my reading certainly does not reflect the general view, there have emerged in recent years a number of scholars who have made compelling arguments against the position that sees Plato as an unrelenting technical optimist. David Roochnik writes, “Techné is important to Plato, to the rhetoricians, to us. It is paradigmatic of knowledge that gives us control. Because *techné* can be effectively, perhaps even systematically, taught, its possession can be certified. Because it so often treats subjects of pressing concern and usefulness, those who do possess it are well regarded, and frequently well rewarded by their communities. The *technitês* is, quite literally, a professor: he avows publicly that he knows. Moral knowledge for Plato is far more precarious and difficult to recognize, far less systematic and professorial, than this. It is non-technical, and it is a problem.” (Roochnik 1996)

This in contrast to Nussbaum, who takes Socrates' seemingly enthusiastic endorsement of the pleasure-measuring *techné* found in the *Protagoras* at face value; she sees nothing ironic here. Furthermore, Nussbaum deals with the problem of hedonism, which in no other dialogue is associated with goodness, by making assumptions about the putative development of Plato's philosophy. She claims that this was merely the young Plato's first attempt at creating a quantifiable ethics with the goal of 'de-fragilizing' goodness—"Socrates, *pro tempore*, tries out pleasure" (Nussbaum p.112)—a pursuit that, for Nussbaum and many others, defines most of the Platonic corpus.^{xx} Nussbaum also sees Socrates' technical hedonism as a kind of proto-utilitarianism that resonates with thinkers like Bentham and Sidgwick, but she neglects to take into account the highly social locus of their thought—Socrates' ironic pleasure quantifying, as we have seen, is altogether self-serving and therefore cannot be properly understood as utilitarian. This said, however, Nussbaum's reading of the *Protagoras*, despite its possible flaws, does offer a useful insight. She points out that the dialogue "shows us an apparently insoluble tension between our intuitive attachment to a plurality of values and our ambition to be in control of our planning through a deliberative *techné*. ... that Socrates' *techné*,^[xxi] like the arts of Zeus, creates new values and dependencies. ... [and that] the task of curing pain may involve putting an end to humanness."(Nussbaum 2009, p.119-120) However, as I have suggested, Plato's project may not be to 'cure pain' but rather to seek knowledge of its value and even its ethical necessity as part of a political ideal based on self-knowledge and, as the example of Socrates himself suggests, self-sacrifice.

The image of Plato as the stern rationalist that we have inherited from Nietzsche, and that has been developed in various ways by Nussbaum and others has created a perspective on Plato that scholars like Roochnik see as incomplete. Although Plato often uses *techné* as an analogy throughout the dialogues, and although Socrates clearly asserts the necessity of mathematics in "turning the soul around" towards knowledge of the forms, he also

constantly refers to other modes of knowledge that are not clearly compatible with *techné*. Socrates continually refers to his belief that knowledge is recollection; his mysterious *daimonion* offers him seemingly infallible direction on what he must not do, and his conception of ‘The Good’ seems to transcend notions of counting, measuring or any other kind of activity that may be associated with technical reasoning. Referring to Plato’s *Charmides*, Roochnik observes the following: “Suffice it to say here that *techné* implies a “linear” concept of knowledge: there is the subject, the knower who takes up the object or the subject matter. Because it is self-reflexive, self-knowledge, like the dialogue itself, is circular: the self knows itself knowing itself. As such it is entirely reasonable to expect this sort of knowledge to be “non-linear,” and hence to be “non-technical.” (Roochnik 1996, p.126)

Although Socrates may expose the various flaws in the sophistic position from his relatively secure position in Plato’s dialogues, it cannot be denied that Sophists put forward epistemic and ethical problems that persist to this day. And it is precisely because the Presocratics and the Sophists raise such powerful problems and questions about the nature of Being and ethics that we must continue to question whether reality itself may be permeated with some immanent value or quality (an *archê*) that allows us in some way or another to know the world in terms of ethical value; or if the contradictions, relativity and irrationality that appear everywhere in day-to-day experience are indicative of the illusory nature of ethical knowledge. Indeed, both of these dialogues end in a kind of impasse or an *aporia* with no definitive answers given to the principal problems at hand (can virtue be taught, what is justice, etc.). But the *aporiai* need not be understood simply as flaws in the dialogues. Rather they may be seen as openings to think for ourselves; they are invitations to query the discussion and our own perspective—to self-knowledge. Like Polus, Callicles and Protagoras we too may be struggling with the larger questions that dominate dialogues; but if we have been reading critically we find that, in

the course of things, we come to ask new questions that were perhaps previously unconsidered. And perhaps in this way Plato's dialogues offer us a starting point from which we may begin to question ourselves and the world more deeply—thereby allowing us to better understand, or at least to recognize our relationship to goodness. Plato does not want us basing our ethics simply on the word of authority and custom, or by crunching pleasure-numbers through some kind of ethics-algorithm. Rather he wants us to commit ourselves to the hard and ongoing work of self-examination that will allow us better understand the true ethical meanings of what we experience, what we say, and what we do. And indeed, without such self-knowledge any kind of purely technical understanding of things—regardless of how brilliant it may appear—is quite meaningless.

REFERENCES

- Annas, J. 1981. 'Plato's Moral Theories'. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. U.K.: Oxford UP
- Aristophanes. 1986. *The Clouds*. Translated by A.H. Sommerstein. New York: Penguin Classics
- Barnes, J. (editor). 1995. *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*. New York: Cambridge UP
- . 2001. *Early Greek Philosophy*. London: Penguin Classics
- Barrow, R. 1975. *Plato, Utilitarianism and Education*. London and Boston: Routledge
- Bartlett, R.C. 2004. "On the Protagoras." *Plato, "Protagoras" and "Meno."* Ithaca and London" Cornell UP
- Baudrillard, J. 1970. *La Société de Consommation*. Paris: Éditions Denöel.
- Bloom, A. 1968. "Interpretive Essay." *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cross, R.C., et al. 1964. 'Knowledge Belief and the Forms'. *Plato's Republic; A Philosophical Commentary*. U.K.: MacMillan.
- Dodds, E.R. 1968. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . 1973. *The Ancient Concept of Progress*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gadamer, H.G. 1986. *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*. Translated by P. Christopher Smith. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Irwin, T. 1977. *Plato's Moral Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Kagan, Donald. 1975. "Problems in Ancient History." In *The Ancient Near East and Greece*, 2nd edition, vol. 1. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Kirk, G.S., Raven, J.E. and Schofield, M. 1983. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP

- Kraut, R. 1992. 'The Defense of Justice in Plato's Republic'. *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. U.K.: Cambridge UP
- Levinson, R.B. 1953. *In Defense of Plato*. New York: Russell & Russell
- Long, A.A. 1999. *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge UP
- McPherran, M. 1996. *The Religion of Socrates*. University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State UP
- Nichols, J.H. 1998. *Plato, Gorgias and Phaedrus*. Ithaca: Cornell UP
- Nussbaum, M.C. 2001. *The Fragility of Goodness*. New York: Cambridge UP
- Plato. 1968. *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books
- . 1977. *Timaeus and Critias*. Translated by D. Lee. London: Penguin Classics.
- . 1977. *Laches. Protagoras. Meno. Euthdemus*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP
- . 1999. *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*. Translated by H.N. Fowler. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP
- . 1999. *Cratylus. Parmenides. Greater Hippias. Lesser Hippias*. Translated by H.N. Fowler. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP
- Plochman, G.K. and Robinson, Franklin E. 1998. *Friendly Companion to Plato's Gorgias*. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP
- Pomeroy, Burstein, Donlan and Roberts. 1999. *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. New York: Oxford UP
- Roochnik, D. 1996. *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato's Understanding of Techné*. University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State UP
- . 2003. *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's Republic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP
- . 2003. *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's Republic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP
- . D. 2004. *Retrieving the Ancients*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Popper, K. 1967. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. New York: Harper and Row
- Russell, B. 2004. *The History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Routledge
- Strauss, Leo. 1964. *The City and Man*. Chicago: Rand McNally
- Taylor, C. 1998. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press
- Thucydides. 1972. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by R. Warner. London: Penguin Classics.

NOTES

- i For more on Democritus' moral writings see Barnes 2001, p.227-253.
- ii For a concise but remarkably comprehensive account of this situation in 5th century Athens, see Woodruff in Long, 2007.
- iii My concern here is with problems Plato and Socrates found in the self-serving and unreflective sophistic rhetoric of Protagoras and Gorgias. However, Plato's relationship to rhetoric is complicated and Socrates alternately praises and despises it in different contexts. And indeed, Socrates often shows himself as a masterful rhetorician in his own right. For a more complete look at Plato's relationship with rhetoric see Nichols 1998, p.1-24.
- iv In effect I am arguing here against scholars like Nussbaum and Irwin, both of whom see nothing of the sort going on here.
- v For an extended look at Gorgias' possible reaction to the situation imposed upon him see Nichols, 1998, p.134-138. Also, as Roochnik points out, "Gorgias' characterization of rhetoric as value-neutral at 456d directly contradicts his claim to know *areté* at 459d" (Roochnik 1996, p.189).
- vi For a detailed look at the relationship between rhetoric and techné in the Gorgias see Roochnik, 1996, p.179-192.
- vii See Roochnik 1996, p.183. Also see the discussion of the 'Divided Oblong' in Plochman and Robinson 1988, p.53-73.
- viii See Nichols 1998, p.141.
- ix See Nichols 1988 p.143
- x For a similar interpretation, albeit one that is somewhat less emphatic about Callicles' repressed morality, see 'The Rhetoric of Justice' in Nichols 1998.
- xi My reading of the *Protagoras* often follows that of Bartlett's in 'On the Protagoras'. See Bartlett 2004.
- xii Protagoras, speaking in Athens gives a very practical nod to democracy.
- xiii See Bartlett 2004, p. 71-76.

xiv There is, of course, much more to be said about this section. For a more thorough account see Bartlett, 2004, p.76-79. In the *Republic*, Polemarchus also offers an appeal to the authority of Simonides that is pushed aside by Socrates (*Rep* I.331d–336a).

xv Bartlett writes, “the courageous man enters battle because he believes doing so to be noble, hence good—hence pleasant (351c1-2)!” I suggest that by the technical view being put forward here, the courageous man should have certain knowledge rather than mere belief. This compares with the knowledge the sophist is said to possess over the many who merely believe the myths and the conventions of the community.

xvi See Bartlett 2004, p. 82.

xvii See Bartlett, p.82-84.

xviii See Roochnik 1996, p.228.

xix The reader may wish to consider Irwin’s view of the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*. His detailed analytical treatment yields conclusions that are quite different than those I offer here with my more interpretive and literary approach. See Irwin 1977, Ch. IV & V.

xx See Roochnik 1996, p.230.

xxi If we can say that Socrates possesses a *techné*. This refers to what I suggest is Socrates’ ironic mock *techné*—the hedonistic counting Nussbaum takes at face value.

Copyright © 2011 Minerva

All rights are reserved, but fair and good faith use with full attribution may be made of this work for educational or scholarly purposes.

Dylan van der Schyff is a musician and independent scholar in the Humanities.

Email: dbvanderschyff1@sheffield.ac.uk