

Spartan philosophy and Sage wisdom in Plato's *Protagoras*
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This paper argues Socrates' baffling digression on Spartan philosophy, just before he interprets Simonides' ode, gives a key to the whole of Plato's *Protagoras*. It undermines simple distinctions between competition and cooperation in philosophy, and thus in the discussions throughout the dialogue. It also prepares for Socrates' interpretation of Simonides' ode as a questionable critique of Pittacus' sage wisdom "Hard it is to be good." This critique stands as a figure for the dialogue's contrast between Protagoras' and Socrates' pedagogical methods. Protagoras advances an emulative view of education against Socrates' self-knowledge model. The paper concludes with some thoughts on Protagoras' claim that talking about poetry is as much about virtue as the earlier back-and-forth exchange about virtue's unity and teachability.

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A strange interlude about an ode

In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates agrees to defend an ode written by the poet Simonides for the tyrant Scopas.¹ Protagoras has observed a contradiction in the ode (339a8-d8). As the first part of that defense, Socrates gives its generic context (342a6-343c7). He starts with an historical observation, that "philosophy is older and more abundant in Sparta and Crete than anywhere else in Greece" (342a9-10). His principal evidence appears to be the stunning effect of laconic (Spartan) speech, and its supposed adoption by the early-sixth century Seven Sages. Because crisp and plausible moral precepts earned their popularizers great honor, Socrates argues, Simonides wrote his ode to undermine the most famous statement of the sage Pittacus, "hard it is to be good" (χαλεπὸν... ἔσθλόν ἔμμεναι, 339c5). Socrates goes on to substantiate his claim that nearly every line of Simonides' ode advances the poet's charge against his elder (343c8-347a3). This interpretation famously throttles Greek word order (343e4, 344a4-5, 345e6), and to many it looks to import—either anachronistically or just idiosyncratically—Socratic theses into Simonides' reasoning.² Yet Socrates provides a peek at a morally fascinating ode, whatever the violence he does to its proper sense, and his reading has its own charms, not all of which might misrepresent Simonides' intentions. In any event, Socrates luxuriates in his suited element: talk about virtue, goodness, maturity, and their relation to natural phenomena and public esteem.

In fact, Socrates' attention to the ode's internal context has won much closer scrutiny than his attention to its generic, or external, context.³ That he gives three times more space to the internal context does not explain the differential in scrutiny. The apparent irony, even absurdity, of the generic context has led those few readers who have commented on it to take it as essentially comic relief.⁴ Dorothea Frede denies that "we should read any *Tiefsinn* into this banter": "little needs to be said" about this "rather fancy description" than that it is "a chatty eulogy of short speech."⁵ W.R.M. Lamb gives it at least a role in the unity of the dialogue, taking it as "a mocking answer to Protagoras's eulogy of sophistry."⁶ This idea comes from Socrates himself, who likens his ignorance-pretending Spartan sophists to the secret sophists against whom Protagoras earlier contrasted himself (342b1-4, referring to 316d4-317c7). Alex Long agrees but further deprecates the discussion's value by saying that this story "demarcates the exegesis [of the Simonides ode] as distinct from Socrates' usual dialectical practice," and helps Socrates bide his time until he can get Protagoras back into direction discussion about virtue.⁷ Several authors find at least some value in the digression to the reader beyond its humor. Glenn

¹ 542 Page (= Page 1962, 282-3) is the generally accepted reconstruction. Beresford 2008, 242-3, and 2009 proposes a new reconstruction. The argument below does not depend on one reconstruction or another, though I doubt Beresford's conclusions made on the basis of his reconstruction, that Plato so dislikes Simonides' ethical modesty that he wants simply to mock and disfigure the poem.

² That the Simonides-interpretation suggests Socratic ideas, see recently Frede 1986, 731, 737-8, 740-5, Most 1994, 131, Woolf 1999, Ford 2005. Allen 1996, 206n25, is more doubtful.

³ Most 1994, 129, 131-2, provides the language for and an emphasis on Socrates' appeal to both "external" and "internal" context; his article also provides an excellent bibliography of the literature on the Simonides' ode passage.

⁴ There are good reasons to find comedy—though perhaps not comic relief—in this dialogue: it appears to have spoofed comic drama, perhaps Eupolis' *Flatterers* in particular, also located at Callias' house and featuring Protagoras, on which see most recently Nightingale 1995, 62-3, 186-7, Charalabopoulos 2001 and 2012, 70 and bibliography in n105, and Arieti and Barrus 2010, 7-13.

⁵ Frede 1986, 740. Ledbetter 2003, 105, dismisses the passage in two sentences. See also Lavery 2007, 210.

⁶ Lamb 1937, 194n1.

⁷ Long 2005, 6-7.

Most offers that “it provides an example of the *kind* of story” a contextualist reading requires (where Protagoras utterly forewent context in his charge against the ode).⁸ Charles Griswold suggests that Socrates calls Spartans philosophers to bring out, through their model, his self-reliance and independence.⁹ Most recently, Franco Trivigno claims that Socrates “makes the poem out to be about philosophy, his own area of proficiency.”¹⁰ One might also think the digression eases tensions and bridges the two halves of the conversation about the unity of virtue.

The *Protagoras* has dozens of episodes worthy of rigorous and capacious attention; commentators deserve forgiveness for their brief remarks about this long section on brief remarks.¹¹ Yet several features of the “Spartan philosophy” section, as I will call it, make it worth renewed and vigorous consideration. Itself long, it introduces one of Socrates’ longest uninterrupted speeches in all Socratic literature. This speech contributes to a kind of discussion that Protagoras claims to continue their conversation about virtue, only in the poetic key (339a7). It contains at its climax, immediately before Socrates’ recapitulation, a reference to the pinnacle of Greek and Delphic wisdom, the “Know yourself” (γνῶθι σαυτόν) and “Nothing in excess” (μηδὲν ἄγαν, 343b4). Elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues, references to the *gnōthi sauton*, apparently off-handed, signal something profound (*Chrm.* 164d4-165b4, *Phdr.* 229e6, *Alc.* 124a8, 129a2, 132d2, *Phlb.* 48c8, *RL* 138a7, *Hipparchus* 228e2); and in the *Protagoras* Socrates suggests regularly the importance of self-investigation and self-testing. We find all the dialogue’s references to philosophy, but for one, in this passage, and that outlier reference has programmatic relevance to the entire conversation, a conversation reflecting critically on itself, and at length, just before the passage (334c8-338e6). Plus, calling philosophy “Spartan” is so arresting and so bizarre as to draw special attention to that phrase. Finally, this passage seems especially attuned to the image of Socrates, as someone who demands laconic speech of others (334d1-335c10), and who may have come to seem Spartan in other respects (e.g., Aristophanes *Birds* 1281, Plato *Crito* 52a).

The following paper aims to understand the way this passage contributes to the point of the dialogue, and even to Plato’s Socratic project. I take a particular piece of information as crucial for doing this. Protagoras is presented as the preeminent pedagogue in mid fifth-century Greece (309d1).¹² Others knew it, and he did too (318d8, 328b2). He draws the avid attention of the young men of Athens (310b7), has befriended the richest of literary patrons (311a2), places himself above all previous teachers in Greece, even Homer (316d4-317b5), and sees fit to judge Socrates, regarded excellently in his own right, from a yet higher perch of authority (361d8-362a1). The *Protagoras* depicts Socrates giving him his comeuppance. Socrates shows Protagoras that he has failed to defend his view that the virtues differ in kind and their relationship to knowledge. This failure embarrasses Protagoras before a great crowd of colleagues, admirers, and potential students (cf. 362a3). Such conversational success seems destined to thrust Socrates into even greater public and intellectual esteem. The dialogue *Protagoras* thus depicts Socrates’ ascendancy over against Protagoras. Unless Plato wants to instruct us only in Socrates’ preeminently clever argumentation, however, or in Protagoras’ pitifully thin skin, or in the difficulty of thinking about the unity of the virtues, the dialogue must

⁸ Most 1994, 129, 131.

⁹ Griswold 1999, 304.

¹⁰ Trivigno 2013, 519-20.

¹¹ Lavery 2007 provides a good historiography of the changing scholarly attitudes toward and interests in the dialogue in the English-language literature.

¹² On dramatic date of *Protagoras*, see Walsh 1984, Wolfsdorf 1997.

mean more. It is hard to see how Socrates' momentary success over Protagoras would otherwise advance our understanding of Socrates, or the nature of conversation, or the theory of ethics.

It does show us more, and in a way that Protagoras' fame as a great sophist is not merely incidental to the philosophical lesson. The dialogue contrasts two pedagogical modes, represented by two exemplary practitioners. On the one hand we have Protagoras. He aims to teach his students the skills appropriate for political success. He appears to think that such learning proceeds through emulation of ideals and criticism of poetry. He probably expects his notoriety for wisdom to entice students to study with him. On the other hand we have Socrates. He aims for his students to take responsibility for making themselves into good people. He appears to think that such responsibility comes through practices of self-knowledge. He probably expects his inimitable curiosity and honesty to entice his companions into mutual investigation. The result of this comparison is not expressly, however, to denigrate Protagoras' teaching method, given that we see no explicitly bad results of it. It is rather to reveal Socrates' procedure against a backdrop of famous instruction. What the *Protagoras* reveals, perhaps better than any other work of Socratic literature, is the way Socrates is an exemplary exponent of the γνῶθι σαυτόν—the “first-fruit” of the Seven Sages' wisdom (343b1)—in its pedagogical context.

As the dominant speakers in the dialogue, any reader might feel inclined to contrast Socrates and Protagoras. This paper gives a further reason to do so. Socrates' reading of Simonides' ode puts a figure for the contest between Protagoras and him on display before the students and sophists at Callias' party. As Socrates tells it, in both his provision of the poem's supposed generic-historical context (about Spartan philosophy and the γνῶθι σαυτόν) and its internal argumentative context (showing how the ode's lines contribute to the goal), the ode effects a competition between an established sage (σοφός) and an aspiring one. The competition concerns the proper analysis of a powerful, plausible, but ultimately underdetermined and defeasible moral precept. The dialogue suggests ways that the ode-contest provides structural parallels for the contest at Callias' house.¹³ The precision of the parallels may only go so far, of course, and the conflicts may have their own ironical point. For example, it may at first appear obvious that Socrates represents Simonides, the younger upstart seeker of wisdom, and Protagoras Pittacus, if not the éminence grise of Greek learning then the man to be beaten. Socrates rediscovers the unity of Simonides' ode just as he discovers the unity of virtue, and he finds in the ode assumptions about the importance of knowledge and intentional action that he himself accepts. Pittacus' apparent claim, that being good is difficult but possible sounds like the pedagogical optimism intrinsic to Protagoras' livelihood as sophist; it is also exactly the claim that Socrates doubts when he doubts the teachability of virtue. For all this symmetry, however, Socrates says that Simonides uses his ode to excel all other teachers, and this looks like Protagoras' ambition. Similarly, Socrates understands Simonides to be saying that he will praise anyone for money, and this indiscriminate mercenary work seems rather more Protagorean than Socratic. Finally, Pittacus' maxim, that it is hard to be good, may actually reflect what Socrates really thinks, given his patient and unrushed striving for goodness, and by contrast Protagoras markets his curriculum as fairly easy and guaranteed. Protagoras introduces his curriculum by saying that “on the day you associate with me, you'll go home having become better, and on the next day, the same; and each and every day you will advance in goodness”

¹³ Trivigno 2013, 513-4, 518-19, recognizes the contest, though for different reasons than I do; he also assimilates Simonides to Socrates (522, 525) without the caution discussed later in the paragraph above.

(318a-b1).¹⁴ So in this other respect Socrates looks to represent the traditional, Pittacan view, and it is Protagoras who shares with Simonides the life of the world-traveling speech-making seeker of money, intellectual prestige, and fame. This contrast, then, between the way Socrates reads the ode to Scopas and the way we read Socrates' interpretation of that ode—and thus between two competitions for wisest teacher—opens a question about Socrates' real lesson. It is here that we find, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, talk of the means to and the value of self-knowledge. What we find, concretely, is Socrates' advocacy of self-knowledge as the route for becoming good.

I start this discussion by studying Socrates' references to the “Spartan philosophy.” Socrates' claims about the “Spartan philosophy” advance the view that philosophy may be in part the exchange of condensed pieces of wisdom where the goal of these exchanges is the adequate deployment, unpacking, and defense of the clever sayings. This discussion notably omits any disclaimer that such exchanges are competitive or cooperative. Such an omission suggests that it does not matter. Conversational exchanges are philosophical—and thus promising, productive, and conducive to understanding the good life—whenever people talk in an engaged, sincere, actual, and truly dialogical fashion. Such sincere engagement may include testing and overturning and baffling, as long as they benefit those party to it.

Spartan philosophy

Socrates turns to the historical-generic context of Simonides' ode after two abortive semantic attempts to explain away the contradiction that Protagoras identified. He had earlier called on his expert language friend Prodicus to assert (but really to exaggerate) the difference between the two verbs Protagoras took as meaning “to be” (γενέσθαι and ἔμμεναι), and then to claim that the adjective translated “hard, difficult” (χαλεπόν) can also mean “terrible, bad.” Protagoras finds these resolutions unconvincing, and Socrates disavows having taken them seriously in the first place. He says that he deployed them solely to test whether Protagoras could save his own argument (ἀποπειρᾶσθαι, εἰ οἷός τ' ἔσει τῷ σαυτοῦ λόγῳ βοηθεῖν, 341d9-10). In Socrates' third attempt to explain the ode to Scopas, by contrast, he says that he will explain what he himself thinks Simonides meant by it. He will report on his own beliefs.¹⁵ To explain what Simonides meant in his ode, especially the apparent contradiction between Simonides' judgment of Pittacus' remark and his own beliefs, Socrates needs to explain the competitive condition that Simonides as writer found himself in.

The competitive condition is the result of a Spartan practice. The Spartans started and most broadly adopted philosophy.¹⁶ Their philosophy manifests itself in “short and coiled up” (βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον) zingers, dazzling unsuspecting interlocutors. Any Spartan has such stunning laconic phrases at his ready. The previous century's Seven Sages emulated the Spartan fashion by adopting their own pithy and poignant sayings. The fame of those sages, inscribed in the stone at Delphi, hearkens to the Spartan tactic, destabilizing opponents with the power of some few words. Just as the Seven Sages reaped joint honor from the γνῶθι σαυτόν and μηδὲν ἄγαν, Pittacus' currency as one of those Seven Sages depended in part on his own pithy saying, “hard it is to be good” (343b5-c5). Simonides judged that he could vault himself over Pittacus,

¹⁴ ἢ ἂν ἡμέρα ἐμοὶ συγγένη, ἀπιέναι οἴκαδε βελτίονι γεγονότι, καὶ ἐν τῇ ὑστεραίᾳ ταῦτα ταῦτα· καὶ ἐκάστης ἡμέρας ἀεὶ ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιον ἐπιδιδόναι.

¹⁵ Socrates reiterates that it is his appraisal: ἃ μοι δοκεῖ διανοεῖσθαι Σιμωνίδης (341e9), ἃ γέ μοι δοκεῖ (342a6), ὡς μοι φαίνεται (343c7), ταῦτά μοι δοκεῖ... Σιμωνίδης διανοούμενος (347a4).

¹⁶ The Cretans could too, but Socrates mentions them only incidentally again: like the Spartans their young do not leave home (342d2).

and thus either into the Seven or over them entirely, by refuting that precept (ῥῆμα, 343c7). That vaulting to wisdom's heights, Socrates says, is the goal of the ode to Scopas; the details of Socrates' interpretation go through the steps of the argument Simonides uses for this end.

Socrates' discussion opens with the word "philosophy." He had mentioned the word once before this passage. When he finds Protagoras' loquacious speeches unbearable, he threatens to leave Callias' party. Callias begs Socrates not to. Should Socrates leave, Callias says, the remaining conversations (οἱ διάλογοι) would hardly be the same. How undesirable this would be; Callias says that he enjoys nothing more than listening to Socrates and Protagoras having conversations (διαλεγόμενων). Socrates is moved by Callias' entreaty, and notes that he always admires Callias' "philosophy" (τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἄγαμαι, 335d10), none more so now. By "philosophy" Socrates clearly means Callias' commitment to the discussions depicted heretofore in the *Protagoras*. Such discussions have been well-ordered and cogent, and have addressed virtue, education, politics, and the other topics typical of Socratic discussions and the debates among sophists. These particular conversations have hewn to norms of clear reasoning, plausible argument, and openness to criticism, all norms conducive to finding the truth. These norms allow a broad range of kinds of conversation, including the telling of stories, the asking of minute questions, the use of analogies and concrete instances, and other modes that contribute to better understanding. Callias' interest in salutary and wisdom-oriented talk of all sorts is obvious.¹⁷

What is not obvious is whether Callias perceives the conversations he hosts as cooperative or competitive. It is not obvious that anybody has a clear idea. Protagoras at first presents his lecture and conversation—supporting his claim, against Socrates, that virtue can be taught—as explanatory or apologetic (320c1-7). He later admits, however, that he speaks in contests (ἀγῶνα λόγῳν), with opponents (ἀντιλέγων), and for the sake of winning a name as the best sophist in Greece (335a3-8). Socrates picks up the sort of language associated with contest, using an analogy of foot-racing; but he speaks only of keeping up with a faster runner, not triumphing over or even competing with one (335e2-336a5). Callias simply says that he thinks fairness requires letting Protagoras speak in his chosen fashion (336b3-6). The ensuing discussion—Alcibiades reiterating Socrates' position, Critias encouraging continued discussion, Prodicus' fine distinctions about types of conversation and debate, Hippias' vaunting of civil accord, and Socrates' compromise allowing Protagoras to take a turn asking questions—returns five times, from five perspectives, to the difficulties distinguishing cooperative and competitive talk (336b7-338e2). A reasonable assumption is that "philosophy" does not encode the way a pertinent conversation ends, or the attitude toward honor its participants have, in other words, whether it is competitive or not.

Socrates uses the word φιλοσοφία or cognates on three occasions in the Spartan philosophy passage, each time when referring specifically to the "Spartan" philosophy. Socrates says that the Spartans "have been educated best in philosophy and speeches" (πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν καὶ λόγους, 342d7-8). Socrates does not clarify the relation between these two topics, fields, or results of education. "Philosophy" could conceivably refer to the content of "speeches," and "speeches" could refer to the ways of presenting those contents. Alternatively, "philosophy" could refer to conversational talk, and "speeches" to monological talk. But neither the first possible distinction, "form/content," nor the second one, "many/one," gets any substantiation here. In fact, a few lines after Socrates said that the Spartans are supremely educated in philosophy and speeches, Socrates says that when you engage with (συγγενέσθαι) a Spartan, he

¹⁷ On Callias' profligate commitment to sophists, ideas, and Protagoras' ideas, see *Apol.* 20c, *Tht.* 65a, *Xen. Symp.* 1.5, and Wolfsdorf 1998, 127-9.

at first looks incompetent with respect to his way of talking with you (ἐν τοῖς λόγοις), but then, as his and your talking (λεγομένων) continues, the Spartan shoots off an utterance worthy of remark (ῥημα ἄξιον λόγου). Because it is this power and brevity of speech that Socrates has called “philosophy,” it is likely that “philosophy” and “speeches” are practically synonymous. The “and” (καί) would be explanatory, and since “philosophy” is a rarer word than “speech,” φιλοσοφία could be an honorific name for some exemplary λόγοι.

Socrates’ next use of “philosophy” comes several sentences later. Socrates says that “those who laconize [emulate Spartans] philosophize (φιλοσοφεῖν) rather than avidly pursue exercise (φιλογυμναστεῖν), knowing that being able to utter such perfect remarks (τοιαῦτα... ῥήματα φθέγγεσθαι τελέως) is appropriate to the educated person” (342e10-343a2). In philosophizing one strives to speak as crisply and insightfully as possible, presumably in a way that shows off one’s learning and attention to details.

Socrates’ last use of “philosophy” comes at the end of this section. Socrates closes his historical remarks by justifying them: he says that he just wanted to show that “the philosophy of the ancients was pithy and laconic” (βραχυλογία τις Λακωνική, 343b6). That their “philosophy” could be pithy means that it refers to a way of engaging with people. The fact that Socrates had just mentioned the precepts of the Seven Sages, which are generally taken as morally edifying, implies that these conversations conduce to wisdom and living well. Taken together, Socrates’ four uses of φιλοσοφία or φιλοσοφεῖν in his remarks on Sparta suggest that he is talking about a kind of talking grounded in and concerned with education, dealing with questions of virtue, wisdom, and being good, and oriented toward truth. On this interpretation, *philosophia* describes well the kinds of conversations depicted in Socratic dialogues and taking place in fifth-century Athens.¹⁸

But as with Socrates’ use of φιλοσοφία to refer to the object of Callias’ love, we cannot say whether Spartan philosophy is oriented toward victory in agonistic engagements or toward mutual advantage, or whether these orientations may readily be distinguished. Spartans hide their philosophizing from outsiders by striking poses of ignorance (ἀμαθεις, 342b2). Their philosophizing accounts for their dominance (περίεισιν, 342b4, 6) in the Aegean, and they fear that should others discover this fact they would copy and catch up to them. They reveal their philosophy in potent conversation:

If someone wishes to interact with even the most meager of the Spartans, in the first moments of the talk he will find that he appears somewhat meager, but then, as it happens sometime in the talking, he shoots in a worthy statement, short and coiled up, just as a trained darter would do, to the point that he will make his interlocutor appear nothing better than a child. (342d10-e6)¹⁹

These zingers are unexpected, dense, and perfectly apt. They apparently cause their respondent to stammer, be silent, or speak unintelligently.²⁰ That Spartan conversation is likened to being struck by a dart suggests that it has an antagonistic, or at least competitive, side. At the same

¹⁸ The word’s meaning in the *Protagoras* is consistent with the meaning of the two uses in the *Charmides* (153d3, 155a1), a dialogue relatively close in dramatic date.

¹⁹ εἰ γὰρ ἐθέλει τις Λακεδαιμονίων τῷ φαυλοτάτῳ συγγενέσθαι, τὰ μὲν πολλὰ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις εὐρήσει αὐτὸν φαῦλόν τινα φαινόμενον, ἔπειτα, ὅπου ἂν τύχη τῶν λεγομένων, ἐνέβαλεν ῥήμα ἄξιον λόγου βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον ὥσπερ δεινὸς ἀκοντιστῆς, ὥστε φαίνεσθαι τὸν προσδιαλεγόμενον παιδὸς μηδὲν βελτίω.

²⁰ At *Grg.* 482b, acting like a child involves speaking without clarity; at *Phlb.* 14d7, childishness is a concern for matters incidental to the thrust of an argument.

time, however, Socrates attributes to the laconic phrases of the Spartans the idea for the Delphic inscriptions, and these stun for non-competitive reasons; they are presumably to enrich their readers and to make them wiser. Likewise, advice from a sage to a novice may stun, and yet the sage does not mean to gain victory over his pupil. So while the Spartans know their philosophy gives them a political and at least momentary conversational edge, it is not clear that their practice is entirely competitive.

The nature of Spartan philosophy is obscured further by the paucity of Socrates' remarks about it. Socrates gives no examples of things Spartans say. He also does not say how they speak in private conversation (342c5-10). At most, Socrates' account appears to imply that, just as athletes train for brief events with much longer practices, and warriors train for intense battle with many months of drills, the Spartans consolidate their "short and coiled up" statements from the concentrated results of less-compressed discussions. We may infer this from several remarks. Socrates compares philosophy both to Spartan martial excellence (342b5-6) and to their commitment to physical training (342e10), both of which take much cooperative practice. He says that this wisdom puts them at the forefront of Greek power, but mere zingers tossed at visitors to Lacedaemon would not suffice for this. Only accumulated and broadly-shared thoughtfulness and insight would. The Spartans desire to have unrestrained philosophical conversations with their own sophists, and apparently have them at such length as to require visitors to leave (342c4-10). It seems probable, then, the Spartans baffle their interlocutors by distilling whatever wisdom they come upon—through their usual cooperative philosophical practice—into their various catchy and poignant phrases, and then directing them at visitors as the situation demands.

Socrates accomplishes several tasks by talking about the so-called Spartan philosophy. He implies even more forcefully than we saw from his exchange with Callias that philosophy is ambivalent between competition and mutual aid. This ambivalence seems a result of the search for truth, which depends on making the most persuasive arguments and criticisms. A wholly cooperative conversation might lack the sense of fight that draws a contender past acquiescence or equanimity to a striving for the epistemic benefit of oneself and one's partners. Competition seen as a race to the best definitions or explanations would be a legitimate and useful part of philosophy. But competition as the hunger to prevent one's opponent from continued participation would not advance the interests of philosophy. This ambivalence arises again in Socrates' interpretation of Simonides' ode. As he interprets it, Simonides competes against Pittacus. But his competition is not simply a swamping of Pittacus' precept—were that Simonides' goal, he would not have cited it. He aims to improve on it. Unfortunately, Pittacus cannot respond and cannot check Simonides' reasoning, so Simonides' one-sided competition fails to be a properly useful competition.

The tale of Spartan philosophy serves also to show off Socrates' conversation with Protagoras from a grander vantage. Both here and late in the dialogue we see parallels between the conversation at Callias' house and the practice that Socrates claims for the Spartans. Protagoras had just stunned him with his crisp charge of Simonidean inconsistency. Socrates says it was like being knocked out by a good boxer, for he blacked out and went dizzy (339e3). Protagoras did not use a one-liner, but his argument was swift and to the point. Socrates recovers, and twenty pages later, he metes out his own punch. With the clinching words of Socrates' knock-out argument about courage's basis in knowledge, Protagoras himself goes silent (360d8). Again, Socrates did not use a one-liner, but each of his questions were as short as could be (359c1-360d7). By assimilating the present conversation to the practice at the origins of

philosophy, a practice responsible for the greatest wisdom and strength in Greece, Socrates vaunts its significance. He puts it beyond pleasant chatting, or showing off before an audience of students, and sets it squarely in the midst of the grand traditions of Hellenic wisdom.

A third outcome of Socrates' tale of Spartan philosophy is a renewed wonder at the similarities and differences between Socrates and the Spartans. His own pretensions to ignorance (cf. ἂ αὐτὸς ἀπορῶ ἐκάστοτε, 348c9) and his short questions with shattering conclusions (cf. μικροῦ τινός, 329b8) are Spartan. Likewise, at least in the story, Socrates' commitment to argument and the power that wisdom provides. But there is also a certain contradiction between Socrates' apparent admiration for βραχυλογία and his own tendency to expansiveness, sometimes in individual speeches but more often in his commitment to follow the argument whither it goes. We also may doubt the truth of Socrates' account of the crypto-philosophy of the Spartans, but we are less likely to doubt Socrates' fervor for careful discussion.

Finally, Socrates' tale of crypto-philosophers has enough weirdness that it practically demands to be interpreted, interpreted just as Simonides' ode to Scopas is interpreted. It must be given an external context, a reason for Socrates' production of it. With luck, Hippocrates and the other audience-members at Callias' house will come to see something important about the nature of the conversations that Socrates takes to be more important even than those Protagoras himself can provide.

Yet we cannot forget the most important purpose of Socrates' excursus on Spartan philosophy: explaining the tradition of competitions of wisdom among the Seven Sages and those desiring to join their ranks. Spartan success in βραχυλογία brought fame to Delphic-style precepts, which became the vehicle through which the most elite and legendary minds jostled for position. Socrates interprets Simonides' ode as manifesting such jostling; how this is I show in the next section. Socrates surely does not interpret the ode that way simply to undermine Protagoras' claim that the ode contradicts itself; this I show in the section after next.

Debating sage precepts in Simonides' ode to Scopas

It is likely that Socrates does not quote the entirety of Simonides' ode when he discusses it; he probably omits the parts explicitly about the tyrant Scopas himself, and perhaps any information about the occasion for the ode itself.²¹ It does seem, however, that he quotes most of it, and so despite his hectic play with the ode's syntax, we might expect that his interpretation is constrained into near-plausibility by the fact that he must explain the vast majority of the text. We might doubt that the ode primarily represents Simonides' quarrel with Pittacus, but it is not impossible that the representation of such a quarrel could contribute to whatever commission Simonides has from Scopas. For this reason, we can take Socrates' interpretation at least somewhat seriously.²²

The ode begins in the narrator's voice, claiming that it is hard to become actually (ἀλαθέως) and comprehensively (κερσίν τε καὶ ποσὶ καὶ νόῳ) good, so good as to be "without

²¹ Beresford 2008 thinks the ode is complete, but he does not mention Scopas (and while he cites in his bibliography Most 1994, a paper concerned to understand the point of the ode's address to Scopas, he does not mention it in the article proper).

²² Baltussen 2004, 26-32, treats Socrates' analysis as consistent with the history of complete commentaries on poetry; Ford 2005 treats it as a good-faith attempt to reconstruct a wise but opaque set of remarks; Ledbetter 2003, 99-114, and Trivigno 2013 both treat it as Socrates' way of ridiculing sophistic tendencies but also revealing his own interpretative principles. Parry 1965, Dickie 1978, and Most 1994 all show the error in supposing that the ode presents a change in the meaning or emphasis of ἀρετή, which was the dominant interpretation throughout the twentieth century, as in, e.g., Bowra 1934, Woodbury 1953, Donlan 1969, Adkins 1973.

any blame” (ἀνευ ψόγου, 339b1-2).²³ At some later point in the ode, Simonides (or properly his narrator, but neither Protagoras nor Socrates differentiate author from narrator) states that he disagrees with the sage (σοφοῦ) Pittacus, who claims that “it is hard to be good.” The reason is simple. In asserting that it is hard to be good, Pittacus implies that it is nevertheless possible to be good. But, contrary to Pittacus’ implication, Simonides says, it is not possible for humans to be good—that is, to remain good. Only god maintains such stability of goodness (341e4). For men, disaster is unavoidable and irresistible; it makes all men, at some point, bad (344d9-10, c4-5). The narrator concludes on this basis that he doubts he will ever find someone “absolutely free of blame” (πανάμωμον, 345c11), for he recognizes that fate has its own ways (345d6). As a consolation, he will instead praise (επαίνημι) those who simply try to avoid shameful actions (d4-6).

The most promising interpretation of Simonides’ ode takes it as a possibly preemptive, possibly an apologetic, in any event a concessive praise of Scopas, and simultaneously an exculpation of Simonides’ association with Scopas.²⁴ As a tyrant, Scopas was sure to attract blame for all manners of supposed crimes, whether of commission or omission. The ode argues that such blame is ill-deserved. It assumes an overly-high standard for human behavior. Those blaming or liable to blame Scopas wish him to live as a god rather than as a man. Goodness as we know it is hard, really hard—impossibly hard to achieve. Look instead to what Scopas is trying to do; and be happy if he tries to avoid doing what we would all count as disgraceful. In saying this—reframing the standards for political praise—Simonides praises Scopas, claiming that Scopas has in fact tried to avoid shameful deeds. He also vindicates his association with a potentially dubious fellow. It is appropriate for Simonides to praise even a man sullied (as might be the case) by unavoidable fate. As Scopas is blameless, so too is Simonides. Perhaps Simonides should even be praised for seeing clearly into the nature of things and having the courage to defend a man who may heretofore have seemed indefensible. Indeed, even Pittacus has misunderstood our ethical imperatives, challenging us to be good. He seems to have lacked the wisdom to see that this was the wrong challenge: for we ought instead try to accept our fates and simply try not to mess up.

In his interpretation of the ode, Socrates picks up on the challenge Simonides makes to Pittacus’ precept. Of course, whereas Simonides’ real emphasis may have been on the question of blameworthiness, Socrates takes it to be on the duration with which we may remain good. In other words, whereas Simonides may have opened his ode with “hard it is to become truly good [etc.]” to mean, litotically, that it is effectively impossible to be good, Socrates takes it to mean “becoming good” is hard, but at least possible. This emphasis comes out when Socrates argues that Simonides indeed defends the possibility of momentarily becoming good. After all, Socrates says, Simonides claims that a person can become bad, and one becomes bad only if one had been the opposite, good. All the same, it is evident that there is a contest between sages and their wisdom. According to Socrates, the point of Simonides’ ode is to overturn Pittacus’ precept. Perhaps this is because Pittacus is the most esteemed sage, or the precept the most esteemed piece of wisdom; of course it could also be because the precept is vulnerable to being shown up.

Pittacus’ precept is of a piece with Spartan and sage wisdom. The two Delphic examples cited, “Know yourself” and “Nothing in excess,” could easily be rewritten “It is hard to know yourself” and “It is hard to avoid excess,” in perfect parallel with Pittacus’ “It is hard to be

²³ Johnston and Mulroy 2004, 6, argue that Simonides’ reference to being “foursquare in hands and feet and mind” is a reference to herms, and is “simultaneously a symbol of the ideal and of the failure to reach it.”

²⁴ The interpretation in this paragraph follows Most 1994.

good.” In fact, this is how Thales and Ion of Chios present the γνῶθι σαυτόν. Pittacus’ precept seems obviously true, and in fact it is stunning: it captures so much of the frustration we have in life, in so few words. It is hard to respond to: claiming that being good is in fact easy sounds morally shallow or deceived; claiming an exception would seem special pleading; claiming its irrelevance would show callousness.

Socrates’ interpretation of Simonides’ ode, then, depicts a contest over a precept. Whether he gives a plausible interpretation or not, Socrates seems right to find Simonides vaunting himself by trying to overturn a traditional piece of advice. Yet Socrates goes on to dismiss talk of poetry, at least as a source of insight into the nature of virtue (347e5-10). This too seems right; the ode has hardly the detail to constrain the reader to either the non-Socratic reading (that goodness is impossible; trying hard is all we can hope for) or the Socratic reading (goodness is at best a temporary state). As Socrates says, we should test our own ideas about virtue, where we can answer whatever questions our interlocutors might have (348a8-b1).

Given the inefficacy of interpreting poetry as a source of knowledge about the nature of virtue, Socrates must have some other reason to go into such interpretative detail. I claim that it points us to a different contest, the one between Socrates and Protagoras.

The sage competition between Socrates and Protagoras

As we saw above, we must take care not to assimilate Socrates too readily to the position of Simonides. Granted, Socrates claims to find the ode well constructed (339b7) and takes Simonides to make assumptions that we might associate with Socrates’ beliefs or judgments. Socrates says that only the loss of knowledge causes things to go badly (345b6), and that none of the wise men would say that anybody ever errs intentionally (345d10-e2). But Socrates never affirms Simonides’ overall view, or his dismissal of Pittacus’. He shows only how the ode’s verses could plausibly support the poet’s views. Socrates treats the supposedly Socratic assumptions as common belief, not as his idiosyncratic point of view. And Socrates would not readily agree that a person becomes bad through external misfortune, or that an ethic of mediocrity or a chastened realism befits our human life. Indeed, while Socrates begins his conversation with Protagoras denying that a person could learn to become good (319b1, cf. 361a4), he finds that he actually believes that virtue, as knowledge, could be learned (361b4), and thus that goodness is possible, quite the opposite of Simonides’ belief.

Just as we would have to strain to connect Socrates with Simonides, there is good reason to associate Protagoras with Simonides. In his earliest remarks, Protagoras acknowledges Simonides as one of the striving sophists like himself (316d8). But he also claims that they have failed in their task, thereby implying that he surpasses the pinnacles of Greek wisdom, succeeding at the task Simonides hoped to achieve, preeminence among the preeminent. Protagoras, like Simonides, would doubt Pittacus’ claim, about the difficulty of becoming good, on the (perhaps different) grounds that in fact it is not so difficult after all. You start by learning from everyone around you, and then graduate to someone like Protagoras himself, who is available right now for lessons, conveniently enough (324b10, 328a1, b1-2). Protagoras finds Simonides’ claims to be inconsistent; but then again, Protagoras comes to find his own claims to be inconsistent (333b4, 349d5, 360e1-5).

It seems reasonable, then, to associate Socrates with Pittacus. Pittacus’ claim is that it is hard to be good, and Simonides tries to show that it is impossible and thus pointless to try to become good. What is Socrates’ equivalent claim? I think there’s reason to think it is the precept Socrates brings up in the Spartan philosophy section, one of the first fruits of sage wisdom,

“Know yourself.” For the sake of parallel, as noted above, it could be, “Hard it is to know yourself.” Sage wisdom could probably be formulated equally as an imperative or a declarative of its difficulty.²⁵ Good but especially onerous tasks require encouragement—were they not onerous, people would do them unbidden. The γνῶθι σαυτὸν is the most condensed of sayings, and is requited only with significant labor. Socrates might say that in fact knowing oneself is not just hard; possession of complete knowledge of oneself is impossible for humans, and appropriate only for the gods.²⁶ But if we take “know yourself” as inchoative, as “coming to know oneself,” then though it is hard it is all the same possible. And just as Socrates says that, for Simonides, acquiring knowledge makes a person good and thus more completely the kind of person his is, we might imagine that acquiring self-knowledge makes a person good and thus more completely a human being. After all, we speak of coming to forget or ignore or neglect ourselves, when we want to disown responsibility for actions that, while somehow originating with us, were not truly authorized by us. We admire those who flee self-deception and self-satisfaction and who are thereby halfway toward being self-knowing. These people strive to be something other than the sum of their historical influences.

These are simply the first clues that we are to read the dialogue as a competition between Socrates and Protagoras that reiterates the competition between Pittacus and Simonides. We can get a better picture of this by looking at Protagoras’ theory of education, one that appears to disregard the value of self-knowledge to one’s maturation as a citizen.

Protagoras’ theory of education

Protagoras advances an emulation view of education. He treats human cultivation as the result of external models, correction, and the acquisition of productive skills. This may recollect the emulation view adumbrated in the Palinode of the *Phaedrus* (253b6-7). But there the young person emulates someone who makes his own decisions and who critiques his desires. We do not see the same advocacy of critical self-engagement in Protagoras’ view. We also see a similar view in the early stages of the *Republic* education. Again, however, the Guardians are expected to finish off their emulation with years of intellectual reflection. In any event, Protagoras’ system of education differs from the one Socrates appears to espouse in the *Protagoras*.

In the time before sunrise, which the early part of the *Protagoras* depicts, Socrates adduces Hippocrates’ understanding of sophists. A student pays tuition “on behalf of [him]self” in order to become either a sophist in his own right, or a practitioner of a skill suitable for a private and free person (312b4). In particular, the student learns to speak cleverly and say the wisest things. Socrates does not here doubt that sophists can cause learning, but he suggests that sophists’ lessons enters a person’s mind as the nutrition from a chef’s food enters the bloodstream. It need not undergo a process of critical assessment before assimilation; it requires no mediation by the learner. And just as the learner need not know the lesson’s quality before absorbing it, the sophist too can convey the lesson without himself knowing its quality. The pedagogical image here—food purveyors ignorant of their wares handing pies to food buyers equally ignorant of their purchase—recalls the image of capillary action from the *Symposium*, a dialogue featuring many of the *Protagoras*’ characters. Agathon, whose victory in a dramatic festival the party celebrates, and with whom Socrates ends up having a contest of wisdom, says to his friend:

²⁵ There is a similar precept, χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ, cited at the end of *Hippias Major* (304e10).

²⁶ The interpretation of Most 1994, 137-8, turns on the linguistic claim that χαλεπὸν can mean both “difficult” and, euphemistically, “impossible”; he provides evidence at nn.28-30.

“Come here, Socrates, lie down next to me, so that, if I should touch your wisdom, I might enjoy what came to you on the porch. It is clear that you have found that and have it. You would not otherwise have gotten up.” Socrates sat down and said “it would be well, Agathon, if wisdom would be such a thing as to flow from the fuller to the emptier of us, if we might touch one another, just as the water in a cup flows through wool from a fuller one to an emptier one.” (*Symp.* 175c7-d7)

In both images, the wry claim is that certain people think of wisdom as externally transferrable. Central to the idea of transference is the idea that its physical proximity suffices to imbue the possessor with its quality. Just as the food-buyer, by eating, has energy, and the drinking cup, by having water in it, is full, the wisdom-buyer, by being filled with wisdom, becomes wise. Of course it is Socrates, not Protagoras, who offers these visions; Protagoras deploys more subtle pedagogical imagery. We will see, however, that though more subtle it is not fundamentally different.

Protagoras claims that when students associate with him, they become gradually better (cf. 328b2-4). In response to Socrates’ direct question, he explains what he means for men to become good: they acquire “good judgment” (εὐβουλία) in personal and civic affairs, influence in speech and action, and facility with the “political art” (πολιτική τεχνή). Protagoras does not say how this happens.²⁷ Perhaps his silence protects a trade secret; his collegiality at Callias’ house might distract us from seeing that he still must compete with other sophists for tuitions. But perhaps he thinks that an association with him, which is the opportunity to hear his many set-speeches, will suffice.

Socrates suggests that Protagoras thinks of teaching as a kind of outfitting. When Socrates says that he doubts that the elements of becoming a good citizen may be “taught” (διδασκόν, 319b1, 3), he rephrases it as “being provisioned from men to men” (ὑπ’ ἀνθρώπων παρασκευαστὸν ἀνθρώποις, 319b3-4), and Protagoras does not object. But Socrates wonders whether this provisioning is really necessary: many abilities require no prior learning (319d6-8); other abilities are picked up as cattle graze, chanced on here and there (ἐὰν ποῦ αὐτόματα περιτύχῳσι τῇ ἀρετῇ, 320a2-4). Socrates thus asks Protagoras to “show us, more vividly, that virtue is teachable” (320b10-c1).

In response, Protagoras offers a two-part self-defense. In the first part, he explains that everyone starts out with a share in justice. He supports this view (either that this is true, or that people believe it to be true) by telling the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus. The two gods “shaped” and “mixed” (τυποῦσιν... μίξαντες, 320d2-3) all the creatures from the basic cosmic elements. Then they “allotted” (νέμει, 320e1) all the capacities. When Epimetheus failed to allot enough to humans, Prometheus “gave a gift” (δωρεῖται) to them of technical wisdom and fire (321c9-d5). Even this was not enough, so Zeus gave (δοίη) to each human justice and shame (322c7). And thus it seems necessary that everyone must participate in justice, if he is to be human (323c1-2). Whatever else it means, as a creation story it treats humans as molded by sympathetic or begrudging masters, capable from the receipt of gifts, and thus largely passive.

In the second part of his defense, Protagoras argues that teaching does occur, and explains how. He opens with the point that punishment occurs and makes sense only on the assumption that people may gain in virtue. He continues at a domestic level (325c6-326e2). Protagoras observes that the whole household combines to teach and admonish (νοθευοῦσιν), to

²⁷ See Woodruff 2008 for a sympathetic reconstruction.

point out (ἐνδεικνύμενοι) which actions and words of the child's are just, beautiful, pious, and obligatory, and to correct (εὐθύνουσιν, 325d7, cf. 326e2) with force the child who deviates from propriety. Children are taught to read, and then to study good poets, whence they again are admonished and are now given well-praised examples of good men. Children then emulate and imitate these exemplars (326a1-4). When they study good ode-makers and practice rhythmic and harmonic music, they become themselves rhythmic and harmonic in life (326a10-b7). The equivalent holds for their study with physical trainers. Once children graduate from school, the city gives them laws as patterns and outlines to follow and punishments by which to be corrected (326c9-e2).

Because Protagoras says nothing about his own mode of teaching, he leaves open that his own system, for older and ambitious students, follows on the one that parents use for children and the city uses with its citizens. Society treats the young as needing to be molded, imprinted, and infused to fit an external standard. Culture is set upon the youth, as a dance is set upon the corps. The pupils, as much as the dancers, are active participants, talking and acting and practicing and playing. But the source of that activity is outside of themselves. This account of teaching seems not just totally plausible, but also reasonable. Since Protagoras wants to contribute to people "becoming fine and good" (328b4), it would not be surprising if he thought he could provide the models toward which his students should strive.²⁸ The importance of emulation seems brought out by Protagoras' most explicit statement about the education: "I deem, Socrates, the greatest part of education for a man to be cleverness regarding verses, that is, being able to understand the things said by poets as having been composed correctly or not, and knowing how to distinguish them and, being asked about them, to give accounts" (339a). This ability surely has significant rhetorical value, for contests of the sort he challenges Socrates to here; but it may also help pick out the best models for imitation.²⁹

Socrates does not directly critique Protagoras' view of virtue-acquisition. That does not mean he assents to it. Socrates critiques an associated claim. During his long defense, Protagoras switches between talking about individual virtues and talking about virtue in general. He does not defend this switch. In fact, Socrates shows, Protagoras seems not to understand the nature of the virtues, in particular their coextension with one another and their dependence on knowledge. The failure to think about the unity of virtue suggests a failure to think about the unity of the person, a unity perhaps forged through the melding of one's dispositions and values, or, put in another way, through a more comprehensive understanding of what is good.

Though Socrates does not directly critique Protagoras' view, he suggests his own route. It is conversational self-reflection and testing in the service of self-knowledge, and self-knowledge might itself be the source of, or equivalent to, virtue. To that we now turn.

Socratic self-knowledge

Self-knowledge, Socrates shows, comes about through testing oneself in conversation. Obedience to the rules of conversation—saying what you think, answering honestly to all questions asked, following inferences whither they go—reveals what one believes. Obedience to the rules of rationality—believing only what one has reasons to believe, changing one's beliefs

²⁸ Carson 1992, 124-5. Frede 1986, 735n17, observes that Protagoras' idea that people learn through "conditioning" or "osmosis" does not seem to suffice for the acquisition of "statesmanship" or the "special training for virtuoso players." Drake 2005 points out the importance of imitation to self-discovery and self-knowledge, as one tries out the desires one might like to have, yet effectively acknowledges that Protagoras' system of teaching does not encourage discovery of one's ignorance and confusion, and so cannot generate true desire for knowledge.

²⁹ On Protagoras' likely views on the value of poetry-training for rhetoric, see Rademaker 2013.

under threat of contradiction, accepting the entailments of one's beliefs—modifies and creates what one thinks. Indeed, since one could hardly be said to “know” what one believes unconsciously, indistinctly, or irrationally, one comes to know one's beliefs only once they are articulated, rectified, and defended in conversation. So self-knowledge, in conversation, is self-constitutive. Because one's beliefs may turn out to be false, or because one may turn out incapable of defending what really does seem true, and others will recognize this to be so, the process is painful. Because it may not be obvious which beliefs are false, or how to replace one's beliefs with more defensible ones, the process is difficult. So self-knowledge is difficult.

Throughout the *Protagoras* Socrates emphasizes self-reflection, especially his own and others' need for it. Indeed, the dialogue opens with Socrates reflecting on what he had been paying attention to, and forgetting to pay attention to, earlier in the day (309b9-10), and on what he finds beautiful (309c4-d2). As he reports on his conversation with Hippocrates, he notes that he spent the morning by “putting him [i.e., Hippocrates] to the test,” “investigating him” and “interrogating him” (ἀποπειρώμενος... διεσκόπουν... ἠρώτων, 311b1-2). This series of questions gets Hippocrates to realize how inchoate his desire to study with Protagoras is. Socrates chastises his young friend for seeking tutelage without having thought it over, getting knowledge about Protagoras, or reaching out for advice (313a1-c3). Hippocrates at least has his youth to excuse himself; when they go on to Callias', Socrates spends much time helping his interlocutors think about themselves, their beliefs, and their knowledge; he does so by taking ahold of the conversational norms that Protagoras himself wishes to manage.

After his interpretation of Simonides' ode, Socrates outlines the proper structure and object of conversation as self-directed. He likens agonistic poetry-interpretation to the activity of symposiasts distracting themselves with extraneous entertainments.³⁰ He disdains symposiasts who are “unable to associate in drink with each other through themselves, not even with their own voice or their own speeches, due to their lack of cultivation” (διὰ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι ἀλλήλοις δι' ἑαυτῶν συνεῖναι ἐν τῷ πότῳ μηδὲ διὰ τῆς ἑαυτῶν φωνῆς καὶ τῶν λόγων τῶν ἑαυτῶν ὑπὸ ἀπαιδευσίας, 347c5-7). He welcomes instead those who are “themselves capable of associating with themselves... through their own voice, both speaking and listening, in proper turn, to themselves” (αὐτοὺς αὐτοῖς ἰκανοὺς ὄντας συνεῖναι ... διὰ τῆς αὐτῶν φωνῆς, λέγοντάς τε καὶ ἀκούοντας ἐν μέρει ἑαυτῶν κοσμίως, 347d5-7). Gatherings of this sort—the sort in which Socrates' interlocutors surely count themselves—require no “foreign voices” (347e3), and thus no poets. They require only a certain kind of self-directed attention. The best conversationalists

say goodbye to these sorts of [multi- and foreign-voiced] associations, and associate with themselves through themselves, taking and giving tests to each other in their own speeches. These sort of men it seems to me that both I and you ought rather to imitate, setting down the poets themselves and making speeches to each other through ourselves, taking tests of the truth and of ourselves. And if you wish still to question me, I am ready to give myself over to you to answer; but if you like, give yourself over to me, regarding which we stopped going through in the middle, to put an end to those things. (348a1-b1)³¹

³⁰ Trivigno 2013, 512-39, discusses Socrates' critique of Protagoras' and his own interpretations.

³¹ ἀλλὰ τὰς μὲν τοιαύτας συνουσίας ἑῶσιν χάρειν, αὐτοὶ δ' ἑαυτοῖς σύνεισιν δι' ἑαυτῶν, ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῶν λόγοις πεῖραν ἀλλήλων λαμβάνοντες καὶ διδόντες. τοὺς τοιοῦτους μοι δοκεῖ χρῆναι μᾶλλον μιμεῖσθαι ἐμὲ τε καὶ σέ, καταθεμένους τοὺς ποιητὰς αὐτοὺς δι' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι, τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πεῖραν λαμβάνοντας· κἂν μὲν βούλη ἔτι ἐρωτᾶν, ἔτοιμός εἰμί σοι παρέχειν ἀποκρινόμενος· ἐὰν δὲ βούλη, σὺ ἐμοὶ παράσχε, περὶ ὧν μεταξὺ ἐπασάμεθα διεξιόντες, τούτοις τέλος ἐπιθεῖναι.

Socrates is recommending not just any self-directed attention. At this point in the dialogue, Socrates struggles to return Protagoras to the conversation. He succeeds with a flattery that harps on Protagoras' narcissism. "You have so trusted yourself" (οὕτω πεπιστευκας σαυτῶ) to be good at teaching people, Socrates says to Protagoras, that "you have heralded yourself (σεαυτὸν ὑποκηρυξάμενος) to all the Greeks" and "you have named yourself 'sophist'" (σοφιστὴν ἐπονομάσας σεαυτόν, 348e5-a2). Protagoras' self-directed attitude is confidence and pride in himself. The truly cultivated symposiasts rely on themselves, speak for themselves, and investigate their own ideas. They may have the confidence to critique their own ideas and to survive that scrutiny, but this confidence requires self-examination and even self-refutation. Not all self-directed, self-motivated, or self-reliant actions have the same ethical quality. "Knowing yourself" should be hard, not easy.

What cultivated symposiasts do is take turns putting each other to the test. This is the style of conversation Socrates has worked to enforce and justify through the *Protagoras*. As he does most humorously in the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates again distinguishes sharply between the questioner and the answerer (331a1). Views belong to the answerer alone; thus only the answerer is liable to critique. This is appropriate, because the answerer, in answering, is asserting a belief, is projecting (part of) himself into the public world. A position left undefended speaks badly about the answerer; the questioner is innocent of blame. As Protagoras says before encouraging Socrates to test Simonides, they both believe that that poets who contradict themselves (ἐναντία λέγει αὐτὸς αὐτῶ) fail to compose well (339b). This remark gains pathos when, late in the conversation, Protagoras admits that the earlier agreements force him to reject his earlier view as impossible; he finds that he has contradicted himself (360e4-5).³²

Yet while in a conversation the answerer bears responsibility for his views, and thus also for the contradictions coming from them, it is clear that the conversation is not solely about him. In the cultivated symposium, the symposiasts "take tests of the truth as well as of themselves." When Protagoras, early in the conversation, tried to give an insincere affirmation to Socrates' question, saying "if you wish it, let it be so" (331c3), Socrates stops. "I do not want this 'if you wish it' and 'if it seems to you' to be tested, but instead both me and you: and by this 'both me and you' I mean that it seems to me in this way that the argument will best be tested, if someone of us should take out the 'if'" (331c4-d1). Shortly thereafter, Socrates avows that his first concern is with testing the argument (cf. 360e7). A byproduct is the test of both interlocutors (333c), presumably to the extent that the interlocutors are liable to accept this commonly-available argument. Socrates makes a similar set of points as they reenter the question-and-answer conversation after the Simonides section: Socrates says that he investigates what he himself is puzzled about (348c5-7); states the importance of two going together in searches (d1-3); says that Protagoras is the best possible investigation partner (e1); and says that there are matters that should be investigated by everyone.

It is certain that Socrates de-emphasizes the *ad hominem* quality of conversational testing so that he does not alienate Protagoras. It remains clear throughout the conversation, after all, especially to Protagoras himself, that Protagoras must accept responsibility for his claims, and

³² Long 2005 claims instead that Socrates wants to gain consensus around his ideas, thinking this to be the best proof for them; but this construes Socrates' conversations rather instrumentally. Griswold 1999, by contrast, shares the sentiment of the present paper, suggesting that Socrates' concern for give-and-take conversation shows his commitment to responsible ownership of one's ideas; Protagoras' expostulations aim simply to give people views to imbibe.

that Socrates has shown him, in front of his colleagues and potential students, that he cannot account for the nature of the virtue he claims to teach. Lording over Protagoras his own failure would hazard a repeat of the conversation's earlier derailment. Yet Socrates expands the function of conversation beyond mere triumph over an opponent. We see that such expansion is not merely rhetorical. The argument, abstracted from Protagoras' defense, is tested; since it fails, it needs either a better defense or a different set of premises. Without an explicit rehearsal and vigorous representation of the argument, its qualities, power, and resilience would be hard to judge. To the extent that Socrates might find the argument appealing and consistent with other views he maintains or entertains, he himself is tested. Some readers will assume that Socrates already accepts some strict thesis about the unity of the virtues, and that he therefore has little to learn in his exchange with Protagoras.³³ It seems possible that in this particular conversation Socrates really has little to learn. But this does not take away from the principle that even the questioner, or bystander, or reader may have his (actual or candidate) views tested. And in other conversations, like the one Plato depicts in the *Parmenides* and implicitly in the *Hippias Major*, Socrates may be a proper and non-ironic respondent and his views may be directly tested.

This says something important about self-knowledge. Knowing oneself occurs productively in conversation. Because self-knowledge may come about in conversation with another person who has a view, and because this view may be abstracted from any particular answerer, self-knowledge is neither solely personal nor solely impersonal. It is impersonal in that it is about the world—the nature of virtue, for example. It is personal in that it is about one's own view of virtue, and about the correctness of one's view, and about one's ability to defend the view, and how truly one really accepts the truth of some deeply significant view. It is standard to think that Socrates distills the idiosyncratic from "self-knowledge" so much that the impersonal part alone is the "self-knowledge." This is implausible, however, because for the impersonal part he already has a name: "knowledge," not self-knowledge. Redefining self-knowledge as knowledge mistakenly eliminates both the "self" and the sense of the imperative γνῶθι σαυτόν. Knowing yourself is an activity. It is the activity of determining one's knowledge: discerning what one *knows*. Discerning, by contrast, what one *believes* may rely mainly on introspection and memory, and it unveils one's private history. But discerning what one *knows* depends on rigorous testing procedures. These procedures require standards distinct from one's private idiosyncrasy. These standards may be the standards of conversation, or those accepted by a more epistemically-promising person. Knowledge has a universal quality that belief does not. But *knowing oneself* remains importantly private, even if necessarily done in public: it is a work one does on oneself. In being *between* or *both* public and private, getting self-knowledge is like being in a conversation. The ideas are shared, but require individuals to contribute and reflect on them.

Thus Socrates' turn toward the self is a turn toward conversation, and his turn toward conversation is a turn toward the self. Protagoras cares about himself and the benefit of his students, but does not reflect on the procedure and product of conversation.³⁴ Someone like Prodicus may care about the niceties of conversation—in particular, coming to agreement about

³³ O'Brien 2003 shows, contrary to Vlastos and Penner, that the *Protagoras* does not in fact show that Socrates is convinced of any particular virtue-unity thesis.

³⁴ Denyer 2008, 140-2, and Gonzalez 2014, 41, note that Callias' house provides practically no examples of conversation except Socrates'. Gonzalez, at 55, goes on to describe the way that Socratic dialogue exemplifies the virtues, including a sound-minded "knowing oneself," that Protagoras simply does not. But Gonzalez's argument that Socrates cares mostly about a wisdom "that can judge and evaluate" potential curriculum (40) seems inadequate; Socrates appears also to care about a wisdom (perhaps the same one) that allows for self-improvement.

the words used—without caring adequately about conversation’s ability to test individual conceptions. This is the conversational view of knowing oneself.

Conclusion

Protagoras does not say why he thinks that his challenge to Socrates about a purported contradiction in Simonides’ ode continues their discussion about virtue—its teachability and unity—if only in the key of poetry. One possibility comes from his belief that “the greatest part of a man’s maturation is his cleverness with respect to verses” (339a1). This includes being able to understand and explain what has been correctly (ὀρθῶς) rather incorrectly constructed (a2-3). Thus the ensuing discussion is about virtue in that it is about the ode’s virtue (as good or bad, coherent or incoherent) or Socrates’ virtue (as good or bad at distinguishing the ode’s virtue). A second possibility is that poems are *about* virtuous or vicious people (326a1-4). A final possibility is that Simonides’ ode is about the difficulty or impossibility of becoming good; if Protagoras assumes that Simonides has virtue in mind, then an assessment of Simonides’ reasoning is an assessment of virtue’s teachability.

Yet Socrates’ analysis of Simonides’ ode suggests a fourth possibility. He points out a range of ways of *discussing* virtue: short zingers, Delphic maxims, asynchronous poetic competition among sages, secret philosophizing, literary analysis, and public conversations. Some of these ways conduce more readily to testing and self-testing, thus to self-knowledge and virtue. This broad set of ways is contracted to two when we compare Protagoras and Socrates in general, even though each knows the skill of the other. The one stands for triumphant speech-making, the other for the conversations in which one races alongside an impressive other, and in doing so each makes the other faster, and better.

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