

## SOCRATES AND PROTAGORAS ON JUSTICE AND HOLINESS

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**P**ROTAGORAS 330c–331e, WHICH ADDRESSES the relationship between justice and holiness, has been widely discussed and criticized, but uniformly on the assumption that Socrates' intention in this dialogue is to establish his own doctrine of the unity of the virtues.<sup>1</sup> I propose in this paper an interpretation of *Protagoras* 330c–331e that treats the argument it contains (a) as *ad hominem*, i.e., as testing Protagoras' claims and probing his words, and hence (b) as not necessarily arguing for a Socratic view.<sup>2</sup>

Let us begin by considering the context in which the question of the relationship between justice and holiness arises. The dialogue begins (310a–314c) with Socrates cautioning the young and impressionable Hippocrates to be on his guard against the eloquence and expert sales techniques of the sophists. This warning is undoubtedly meant for the reader as well. It is offered, significantly, outside the home of Callias before Socrates and Hippocrates enter the den of sophistry.<sup>3</sup> Not only Hippocrates but all of us are susceptible to the rhetorical wizardry of a sophist of Protagoras' caliber. We must enter that house as warily as Hippocrates.

Socrates meets Protagoras and proceeds immediately to ascertain what he

*This paper and the next one were submitted independently at about the same time. When both were accepted Professors Weiss and McKirahan agreed each to take the other's submission into account in preparing the final draft. The following are referred to by author's name in both papers:*

J. Adam and A. M. Adam, *Platonis Protagoras* (Cambridge 1893); P. Friedländer, *Plato*, tr. H. Meyerhoff (New York 1964); D. Gallop, "Justice and Holiness in Protagoras 330–331," *Phronesis* 6 (1961) 86–93; T. Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973) 35–68; C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato. Protagoras* (Oxford 1976); G. Vlastos, "The Unity of the Virtues in the Protagoras," in *Platonic Studies*<sup>2</sup> (Princeton 1981) 221–265.

<sup>1</sup>Professor McKirahan's discussion is squarely within this tradition, as he contends that Socrates argues for his own belief in the identity of justice and holiness.

<sup>2</sup>Since limitations of space do not permit a defense of my view of Socrates' broader purpose in the *Protagoras*, I shall simply state it here. In my view, the argument concerning justice and holiness is a first strategic step in Socrates' larger project of reducing *arete*, insofar as it is to be taught by *sophists*, to the single science of calculating pleasure and pain; Socrates does not defend his own view of *arete*.

<sup>3</sup>It is interesting to note the scornful attitude of the doorman at Callias' home, who, when Socrates and Hippocrates arrive, says, "Ah, sophists," and slams the door in their faces. It is only when Socrates protests that they are not sophists that he reluctantly opens the door (314d).

means to teach young men like Hippocrates. Protagoras agrees to define his subject as the political *technē* and the making of good citizens (319a4–5), and is then challenged to answer two Socratic objections: (a) that the Athenians apparently do not believe that the ability to give advice on political issues depends on the possession of a *technē* (319b5–d7), and (b) that the wisest and best Athenian citizens are unable to pass on their own *arete* to others despite their wish to do so, and, in some cases neither attempt to train others themselves nor entrust this instruction to any other teacher (319d7–320b3). Protagoras defends his profession in a lengthy speech (320c8–328d2), containing both myth and *logos*, after which Socrates (by his own admission) sits spellbound, has to make an effort to collect himself, and declares that he values very highly what Protagoras said (328d4–e1). But is Socrates convinced that Protagoras teaches what he claims to teach?

Upon closer inspection, it appears that all Socrates has been convinced of is that it is through human *epimeleia* (diligence) that good men become good (328e1–3). But he has a small difficulty with Protagoras' view that *arete* is teachable (329b6–7), the very view whose truth Protagoras sought to establish. Protagoras' discourse, says Socrates, is similar to those one might hear from Pericles or some other proficient speaker for whom Socrates shows disdain: these are capable only of long speeches and not of answering questions. For Socrates, one shows one's mettle in the elenchus—not in long speeches. If Protagoras succeeds in a Socratic question-and-answer session, he will then have proved his worth.

It is the small difficulty (σμικροῦ τινος—329b6) that Socrates has with Protagoras' speech that gives rise to the elenchus on justice and holiness. Socrates bases his present questioning of Protagoras on something Protagoras said in his speech, thus setting the tone for the *ad hominem* approach he adopts throughout the passage in question. Socrates presents the issue of the relationship among the *aretai* not as originating with Socrates, but as resulting from the careless, loose, and unclear way that Protagoras refers to the *aretai* and to *arete* itself in his discourse.

As Socrates expresses the difficulty in Protagoras' speech, it is that at times Protagoras talks of Zeus' bestowing justice and *aidos* (a sense of shame) on mankind, but at other times he speaks of justice and temperance and holiness and all the rest as summed up in one thing, *arete* (329c2–6). As we look over the speech, we find that at 323a2, temperance, rather than *aidos*, is coupled with justice; at 323a6–7, the expression used is "justice and the rest of political *arete*," and similarly at 323b2; at 323b6, "justice" alone substitutes for the earlier "justice and the rest of political *arete*" of 323b2; at 323e3–324a1, injustice and impiety, etc., are the one thing that is the opposite of political *arete*; at 325a1–2, justice and temperance and

holiness are summed up in one thing, human *arete*.<sup>4</sup> It is to Socrates apparently not quite clear whether the virtue-terms denote or connote things similar enough to warrant their indiscriminate use, or whether the virtue-terms denote or connote things different from one another and from *arete* itself. Although none of these possibilities is strictly incompatible with Protagoras' way of speaking, the ease with which he passes from one expression to another and the fact that he even fails to mention some of the *aretai* by name suggest that if the parts of *arete* are different from one another, their difference is of no importance to Protagoras in his role as a teacher of *arete*; not once does he imply that his teaching *arete* involves teaching a subject whose five components differ significantly from one another.

Since Socrates is unsure about what Protagoras has in mind, he asks: does Protagoras believe that the *aretai* are the same as *arete* itself and as each other, or does he think, on the contrary, that they differ from *arete* itself and from each other—both in themselves and in their functions (*δυναμείς*)?—329c–330b.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the first alternative, Socrates supplies the gold analogy: the parts of a piece of gold do not differ (*οὐδὲν διαφέρει*, 329d7) from the piece of gold itself or from each other (except in size).<sup>6</sup> To illustrate the second alternative, Socrates employs the face analogy: the parts of a face, i.e., ears, eyes, nose, and mouth, differ from the face itself and from each other—both in themselves and in their functions (330a–b). Socrates' question then is: which of these two analogies expresses Protagoras' view of the relationship among the *aretai*? Furthermore, does Protagoras hold that it is possible to have one *arete* without the others, or does he think that a man who possesses one *arete* must necessarily possess them all (329e2–4)? Protagoras responds that the *aretai* are not the same but differ from *arete* itself and from one another both in themselves and in their functions; he favors the face analogy (330b2–3). Also, he says, it is indeed possible to have one *arete* without the others (329e5–6); one may be brave but unjust, just but not wise.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion of justice and holiness immediately follows this Protagorean response, and is, in fact, the first of four discussions whose purpose it is to probe this response. Socrates' *elenchoi* challenge Pro-

<sup>4</sup>The expression at 325a1–2 is, in Friedländer's words, the "source of the intellectual comedy" in this dialogue, since in it Protagoras insists upon the very unity of *arete* that he so strenuously resists later (15–16).

<sup>5</sup>The notion that the *aretai* differ both in themselves and in their functions appears at 330a4–5, 330b1, and 349c5.

<sup>6</sup>The gold analogy actually implies the indistinguishability of the *aretai* from one another—except in size (as Socrates himself points out), in number, and spatio-temporally.

<sup>7</sup>We may note Protagoras' inconsistency here in the use of contraries and contradictories: brave but *unjust*, just but *not* wise.

tagoras' initial blanket insistence that the *aretai* are as different from one another as are the parts of a face by confronting him with pairs of specific *aretai*: justice and holiness, wisdom and temperance, temperance and justice, courage and wisdom.

In considering the relationship between justice and holiness,<sup>8</sup> Socrates commits himself to eight propositions: (a) Justice is a thing (πρᾶγμα); (b) Justice is itself just (rather than unjust);<sup>9</sup> (c) Holiness is a thing; (d) Holiness is holy (rather than unholy); (e) Nothing could be holy if holiness itself were not holy; (f) Justice is holy (rather than not-holy or unholy); (g) Holiness is just (rather than not-just or unjust). On Protagoras' behalf Socrates recasts (f) and (g) as (h): Justice is either (1) the same as holiness or (2) very like it or, most of all (μάλιστα πάντων), (3) justice resembles holiness<sup>10</sup> and holiness resembles justice.

Of these eight propositions, Protagoras assents to only five: (a), (b), (c), (d), and (e). He is not sure about (f) and (g), but seems to think that even if (f) and (g) are true, (h) does not follow from (and, *a fortiori*, that (h) does not say the same thing as) (f) and (g).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Socrates wisely begins with justice and holiness about which Protagoras has not said that a man may have one without the other (as he has about courage/justice and justice/wisdom). Also, Protagoras had the gods in his myth give prominence to justice (322c2, c7, d5), perhaps leading Socrates to suspect that Protagoras believes that by being just one carries out the divine plan for man and thus behaves piously.

<sup>9</sup>There seem to be two acceptable ways of saying "Justice is just," (1) ἡ δικαιοσύνη . . . δίκαιόν ἐστιν (330c4–5), and (2) ἐστὶν . . . τοιοῦτον ἡ δικαιοσύνη οἷον δίκαιον εἶναι (330c7–8). οἷον, often translated "of such a kind/nature/class," here actually means "(is) a *thing* that (is)" and is used as equivalent to "is." When Protagoras agrees with Socrates that justice is—ἐστὶν—just, Socrates concludes that they both think that justice is a thing that is—οἷον—just. Similarly, in the case of holiness, Socrates says "Holiness οἷον holy," but continues that "Nothing else would be (ἄν . . . εἴη) holy if holiness itself will not be (μὴ . . . ἔσται) holy" (330d6–e1). Finally, at 331a7–b3, Socrates says: ". . . if he [the questioner] goes on to ask us: 'Is holiness a thing which is not οἷον εἶναι just and justice not οἷον holy?' . . . I would say for myself that justice is (εἶναι) holy and holiness just." The use of οἷον with the neuter adjective serves to underscore that justice and holiness are πράγματα, so that to say that justice οἷον εἶναι just is to say that justice is a *thing* that is just. Cf. Gallop 88, n. 3.

<sup>10</sup>The word οἷον when applied to the relationship between justice and holiness means "resembles." Although when the term οἷον links "justice" with "just" or "holiness" with "holy," it underscores that justice is a *thing* that is just, and although Socrates then treats οἷον expressions as equivalent to their corresponding straightforward "is" expressions, when οἷον links "justice" with "holiness" in (h) (3) it must be rendered "such a thing as," signifying resemblance, since Socrates already offered the alternative that justice is holiness, i.e., that they are the same, in (h) (1).

<sup>11</sup>Adam and Adam translate the ὅτι (in Socrates' statement that he will make the same reply in Protagoras' name, ὅτι . . . , as "because" rather than "that" (134). It appears to me that this translation is one to which the translators are driven by their failure to see how what follows the ὅτι can possibly be intended to say the same thing as what precedes it. In offering a plausible account of how Socrates' assertion and the one he wishes to make in Protagoras' name can be equivalent, I hope to obviate the need to render ὅτι "because."

Much of the scholarly discussion of this argument revolves around the ontological status of justice and holiness and around what it might mean for these to be just and holy. It is extremely difficult to discern either what Socrates has in mind when he states that justice and holiness are things (πράγματα) or what Protagoras has in mind when he assents to this. Furthermore, the notion that justice is just and holiness holy is, if possible, even more opaque. There have been admirable and astute attempts to assign meaning to these phrases, yet, to my mind, many of these distort or contradict the language of the dialogue. Vlastos, for example, translates "Justice is just" as "All the instances of justice (i.e., just people or acts) are just," thereby doing injustice, I think, to Socrates' insistence that justice and holiness are things (πράγματα). Another view regards justice and holiness as states of the soul and interprets their being just or holy as their rendering those who possess them just or holy. Yet this approach seems to me to distort the notion that justice is itself just and holiness holy (see Taylor 108, and Penner). There are also those who believe that it is the Form Justice and the Form Holiness that are just and holy<sup>12</sup> and for them the question of self-predication immediately arises, i.e., of whether a form (viewed as a predicate) can be predicated of itself.<sup>13</sup> Weingartner is among those who view justice and holiness as forms, yet he characterizes them as "perfect exemplars"—not predicates.<sup>14</sup> This view at least preserves both the idea that justice and holiness are things (πράγματα), namely, exemplars of justice and holiness, and the idea that they are, *qua* exemplars, just and holy. As perfect exemplars, furthermore, justice and holiness are just and holy in a way different from other just and holy things, for they are *perfectly* just and holy.

Though I am generally sympathetic to Weingartner's approach as being most faithful to Socrates' language, I hesitate to confer the ontological status of "form" on justice and holiness in the *Protagoras*. I prefer to regard them respectively as simply the perfectly just thing and the perfectly holy thing. It furthermore seems likely to me that by virtue of their being

<sup>12</sup>G. E. L. Owen, for example, points to Socrates' use of αὐτὴ ἡ ὁσιότης (330d8–e1) as proof that Plato means the Form Holiness. (See his "The Place of the 'Timaeus' in Plato's Dialogues," in *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, ed. R. E. Allen [London 1965] 313–338, at 319, n. 4.) Yet, this factor is not decisive. In this very dialogue, Socrates speaks of pleasure itself (τὴν ἡδονὴν αὐτὴν 351e2–3)—and surely does not mean the Form Pleasure; similarly, he speaks of enjoyment itself—(αὐτὸ τὸ χαίρειν 354d1)—and surely does not mean the Form Enjoyment. Cf. *Cratylus* 413b–c: αὐτὸ τὸ πῦρ.

<sup>13</sup>See George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* 2 (London 1888) 76, n. d; J. P. Sullivan, "The Hedonism in Plato's *Protagoras*," *Phronesis* 6 (1961) 10–18, at 14; R. K. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy* (London 1962) 28 n.

<sup>14</sup>Rudolph H. Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogue [The Cratylus, The Protagoras, The Parmenides]* (New York 1973) 71.

respectively perfectly just and perfectly holy they have the power or function (δύναμις) of causing other things to be just or holy.

If this is even nearly correct, we can understand why, in asking if justice is just and holiness holy, Socrates offers Protagoras only contrary alternatives, i.e., justice is either just or unjust, holiness either holy or unholy. As the perfectly just thing, justice cannot fail to be just; to suggest that it is anything but just, i.e., not-just, is as preposterous as suggesting that it is unjust. Similarly for holiness: as the perfectly holy thing, it cannot fail to be holy; to suggest that it is anything but holy is as preposterous as suggesting that it is unholy. Indeed, as Socrates remarks, nothing else could be holy if holiness itself were not holy (330d8–e1). This is so both because if the perfectly holy thing is not holy, then, *a fortiori*, nothing else could be,<sup>15</sup> and also (probably) because it is this perfectly holy thing that has the power to make other things holy.

It is now possible to turn to (f) and (g) and consider the second source of controversy in this argument, i.e., Socrates' alleged confusion of contradictories (not-holy/not-just) with contraries (unholy/unjust). It is in connection with (f) and (g) that Socrates introduces his imaginary questioner who functions apparently as a vehicle for reminding the reader that Protagoras subscribes to the face analogy as appropriate to the relationship among the *aretai*. This reminder is critical to the procedure of the argument, whose purpose it is to reduce Protagoras' acceptance of the face analogy to absurdity.

If, as the questioner is reminded, Protagoras believes that justice and holiness differ from one another as much as do the parts of a face, then, Socrates reasons, Protagoras ought to be willing to say that holiness is not just and justice not holy, or even that holiness is unjust and justice unholy.<sup>16</sup> Socrates declares that *he* believes that justice is holy and holiness is just. And he would like to say the same thing on Protagoras' behalf, i.e., he would like Protagoras to concede the folly of maintaining that holiness is not-just or unjust and justice not-holy or unholy, and agree, along with Socrates, to the only other possibility, i.e., that (f) justice is holy and (g) holiness just. What this possibility amounts to, says Socrates, is (h): Justice is either (1) the same as holiness or (2) very like it or, most of all (μάλιστα πάντων), (3) justice resembles holiness and holiness resembles justice. But, one may ask, do (f) and (g) truly amount to (h)? Yes; for if justice is holy, then justice is either holy in the way that holiness is holy, i.e., perfectly so,

<sup>15</sup>I. M. Crombie, "Plato's Metaphysics," *Classical Review* ns 16 (1966) 311.

<sup>16</sup>It should be noted that Socrates considers the contradictory and the contrary possibilities separately. He asks first if holiness is not just and justice is not holy, and then if holiness is not just and thus unjust and justice unholy (331a7–b1). There is even a 'de' inserted before the contraries are mentioned.

in which case justice and holiness would be the same, or justice is *very* holy, in which case justice would be very similar to holiness, or justice is somewhat holy, i.e., it is to some extent what holiness is perfectly, in which case there is just some resemblance between them.

At this point, Protagoras is not quite sure what Socrates is after, though he is certainly not willing to concede defeat or to renounce his face analogy as yet. He tries *granting* Socrates that justice is holy and holiness just while expressing reservations. Having heard three possibilities to which this admission might commit him, among them that justice and holiness are the same, Protagoras is understandably cautious. He sees a difference (*διάφορον* 331c2), presumably among the three possible interpretations of "justice is holy and holiness just," and is hence not sure that he is ready to say that justice is holy and holiness just. But he is hopelessly confused. For when Socrates demands that he simply say what he thinks, Protagoras makes a desperate attempt to salvage his initial denial of resemblance while conceding that justice is holy and holiness just.<sup>17</sup>

Protagoras maintains that the degree of resemblance between justice and holiness entailed by saying that justice is holy and holiness just may be so small as to be negligible. After all, he says, everything resembles everything somewhat, yet we do not say that, e.g., black resembles white, or hard soft, or the parts of a face one another. If we did, then things that have only a very slight difference between them would have to be said to differ from one another (331d1–e4). Even if Protagoras is right to some extent, his words miss their target. For although Socrates' argument strictly interpreted *would* show that even a slight resemblance between two things constitutes grounds for saying that they resemble each other, he does not extend this claim to cover every *kind* of slight resemblance. What Socrates argues is that as long as something cannot be said to be not-*x* or un-*x*, it can be said to be *x* to some extent, and since it is *x* to some extent it can be said to resemble, to that extent, that which is perfectly *x*. Certainly black and white do not resemble each other in this way even slightly. White does not resemble black by being somewhat black; white is positively *unblack*. Similarly, a nose and mouth do not resemble each other in the way described: a mouth is not somewhat nose; it is not-nose. Thus Socrates is offended by Protagoras' remarks—Socrates describes himself as

<sup>17</sup>The major source of disagreement between myself and Professor McKirahan is probably our assessment of Protagoras' performance in this passage. Whereas Professor McKirahan believes that Protagoras fares well in this exchange, maintaining finally that the *aretai* justice and holiness resemble each other somewhat but are not, as Socrates believes, the same, I believe that Protagoras fares poorly. Protagoras would like to deny resemblance but Socrates prevents this. He would like to deny any but the very smallest resemblance but Socrates prevents this. He concedes to Socrates all that Socrates asks: since justice is holy and holiness is just, justice and holiness resemble each other in a significant way.

surprised—and says: “And this is how you suppose justice to be related to holiness, that they are alike in some (τι) small way?” (331e4–6).<sup>18</sup> What he is saying, in effect, is that the resemblance between justice and holiness is not just *any* resemblance.<sup>19</sup> Protagoras agrees that the resemblance between justice and holiness is not like that which he described<sup>20</sup> but insists that it is not like that described by Socrates either. Although Socrates drops the argument at this point, noting Protagoras’ annoyance (δυσχερῶς . . . ἔχειν 332a2), we must realize that Socrates has succeeded in securing Protagoras’ agreement to the proposition that justice and holiness resemble each other, and in a somewhat more significant way than do black and white, hard and soft, and even the parts of a face. When Protagoras qualifies his assent by saying, “but not, on the other hand, as you seem to me to believe” (332a1), Socrates probably takes him to be referring to the *first* possibility he suggested earlier in Protagoras’ name, i.e., (h) (1): that justice and holiness are the same. Thus Socrates is not speaking falsely at the end of the next argument, when he says (333b5–6) that justice and holiness were shown to be σχεδόν τι ταῦτὸν ὄν, “nearly the same.”

According to this analysis, Socrates probes Protagoras’ careless reference to *arete* and the *aretai*, challenges Protagoras’ choice of the face analogy to describe the relationship among the parts of *arete*, and secures Protagoras’ admission that justice and holiness are related more significantly than black and white, hard and soft, and the parts of a face, and hence that there is resemblance (though not identity) between justice and holiness. Having secured this admission, Socrates moves on. He has achieved his goal.

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<sup>18</sup>Socrates is on his guard against Protagorean rhetoric and is therefore not taken in by the sophist’s effusion.

<sup>19</sup>Gallop tries to defend Socrates by arguing that Socrates could have avoided (a) self-predication, by saying that justice and holiness resemble each other in that they are both fine (καλόν), and (b) the contrary/contradictory problem, by saying of justice and holiness that each is fine without saying that each is fine because not base (αἰσχροῦν). What Gallop fails to realize is that the resemblance Socrates has in mind is not one of having just any trait in common. If it were, Protagoras’ objection that having something similar (ὁμοίον τι) does not make two things similar would successfully refute Socrates’ argument. Indeed, Gallop thinks Protagoras does triumph, but this too is incorrect. For Socrates gets Protagoras to admit that the similarity between justice and holiness *is* greater than that between things that have only something similar (ὁμοίον τι). J. P. Sullivan, too, thinks that Protagoras’ argument is justified: “Socrates asks irrelevantly whether Protagoras thinks the likeness between justice and holiness is small” (above, n. 13, 15). But how can this question be irrelevant when Socrates is addressing Protagoras’ claim that one may not call things similar when the likeness is small?

<sup>20</sup>Protagoras’ expression is οὐ πᾶν (331e6), which may mean either “not exactly” (C. C. W. Taylor), “Not quite that” (Guthrie) or, more emphatically, “Certainly not” (Jowett)/“Nullément” (Croiset).