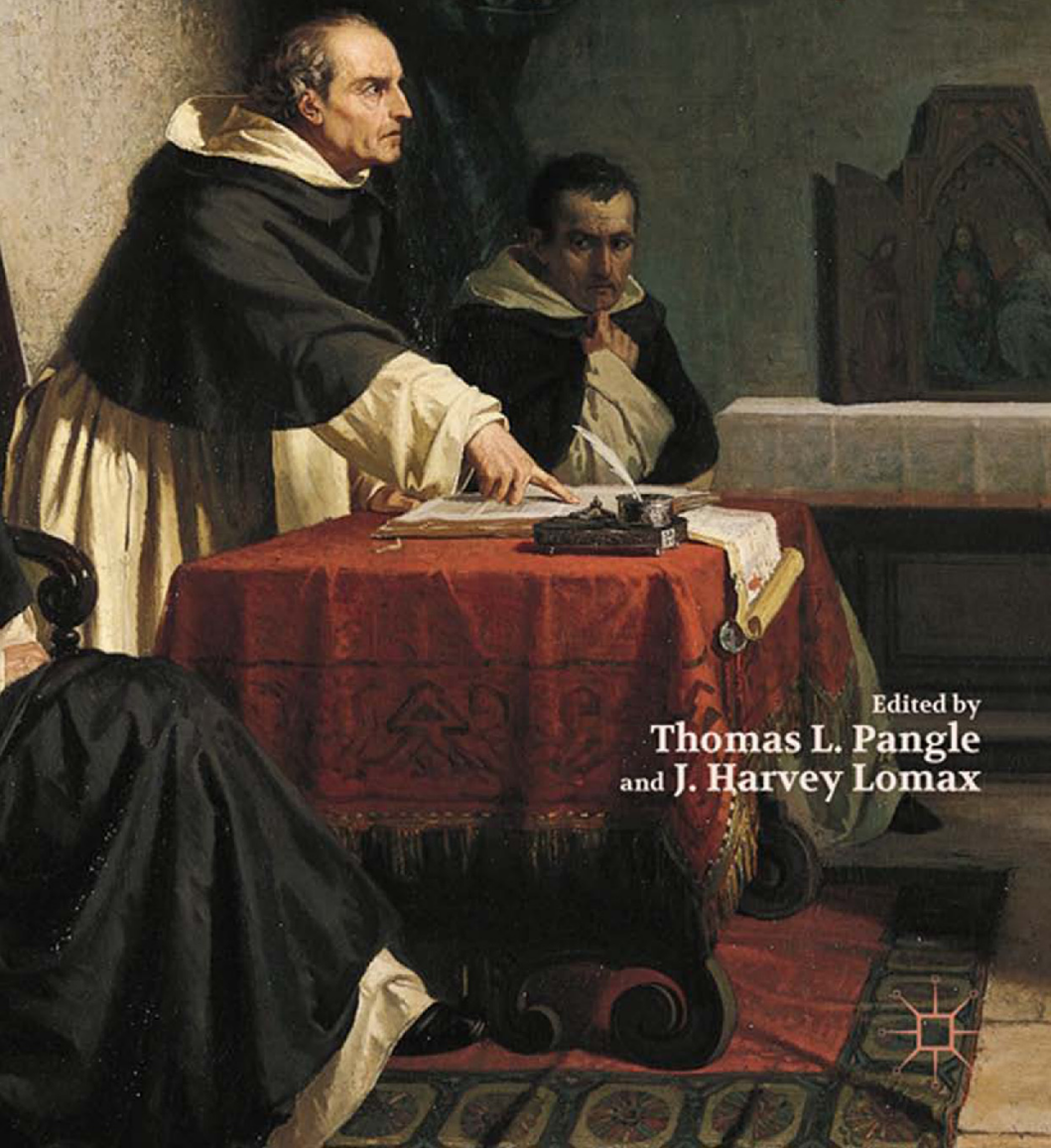




RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Political Philosophy Cross-Examined

Perennial Challenges to the Philosophic Life



Edited by
Thomas L. Pangle
and **J. Harvey Lomax**



POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
CROSS-EXAMINED

RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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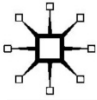
PERENNIAL CHALLENGES TO THE
PHILOSOPHIC LIFE

Essays in Honor of Heinrich Meier

Edited by

Thomas L. Pangle and J. Harvey Lomax

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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY CROSS-EXAMINED

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NOTE FROM THE SERIES EDITORS

Palgrave Macmillan's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series was founded with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives. This invigorating challenge has provoked a searching reexamination of classic texts, not only of political philosophers, but also of poets, artists, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series publishes studies that endeavor to take up this reexamination and thereby help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as studies that clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The interpretive studies in the series are particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which both censorial persecution and didactic concerns have impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early-modern, and late-modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life.

This volume of essays honors the life and work of Heinrich Meier by combining the careful interpretive efforts of a distinguished, international group of scholars of political philosophy. The contributors consider serious challenges to the philosophic or rational life, and the responses to those challenges that have been given by philosophers ancient and modern. The greatest challenge to which the essays draw our attention is the prophet's claims to divinely revealed knowledge. The very possibility of philosophy depends on an adequate answer to this challenge. As this volume demonstrates, the challenge was recognized by Protagoras, but was adequately addressed—in a manner that preserved the possibility of philosophy—first by Socrates and then by Socratic political philosophers, from Aristotle and

Tacitus right up to Maimonides. It was addressed in a new way by modern political philosophers, from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. With its unique focus and yet broad range across nations and across millennia, the volume will attract the interest of students and scholars in many fields as well as intelligent and curious citizens.

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The University of Memphis deserves acknowledgment for a research grant that served to support this and other projects. Special thanks are due to Henry Kurtz, Linda Bennett, and Matthias Kaelberer. Anna Schmidt, Hasso Hofmann, and Nathan Tarcov contributed generously to the planning and preparation of this volume. In particular, Professor Hofmann and his wife munificently defrayed all fees for translation. From the very beginning, Matthew Kopel proved a solicitous, reasonable, and patient editor at Palgrave Macmillan. Desiree Browne and Scarlet Neath of Palgrave gave us indispensable assistance as well. A thoughtful, philanthropic donor, Dr. Robert L. Stone, Esquire, paid for the rights to the cover photograph. Finally, Timothy Burns played a crucial role as series coeditor, and we are especially grateful for his role in delicate negotiations that led to congenial solutions for everyone.

INTRODUCTION: THE PHILOSOPHIC LIFE IN QUESTION

Thomas L. Pangle and J. Harvey Lomax

The chapters of this book have a common theme: philosophy as a mode of existence put into question. Political societies frequently regard philosophers as potential threats to morality and religion, and those who speak for politics often demand a defense of philosophy. Beyond politics, theoretical people, too, advance a sophisticated panoply of charges against philosophic rationalism as a tenable or defensible basis for life. It is variously contended that everything is in flux and thus human reason is theoretically impotent, that divine will transcends and reveals the impotence of human reason, that philosophy self-destructs because it is based ultimately on faith rather than reason, that full philosophic independence and freedom are morally and psychologically unattainable will-o'-the-wisps, and that the profound disagreements among the greatest philosophers constitute undeniably decisive evidence of their failure to arrive at rationally demonstrable truths as regard the most important matters. The authors of the present volume—ranging widely over intellectual history from the Socratics to Maimonides and the Bible, from Machiavelli, Bacon, and Hobbes through Rousseau to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and beyond, and then back again to Socrates—aspire to reopen the case for the philosophic life in the face of, and while doing justice to, its most severe challengers.

To our knowledge, no single volume has been previously published with this thematic focus and yet with analyses of so wide a chronological and substantive range of thinkers. Making such an enterprise possible are the common efforts of 12 accomplished scholars, all recognized, senior academics, and over half holding distinguished chairs.

Moral Indictment and Political Enmity

Challengers, critics, and enemies of philosophic activity have played a central role throughout the history of the love of wisdom. Even before the

Athenian jury condemned Socrates to take hemlock for disbelieving in the city's gods and corrupting the young, Athens had pronounced the same death sentence upon Anaxagoras, who avoided execution only by fleeing the city. Aristotle, too, reportedly had to escape Athens in haste to avoid the fate of Socrates. Similar stories are legion. Nero ordered the death of Seneca. Theodoric had Boethius strangled. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake. Galileo Galilei was interrogated before the Inquisition; accused and found "vehemently suspect" of heresy, a capital crime; compelled to "abjure, curse, and detest" his doctrines; and sentenced to incarceration (commuted to house arrest) for the rest of his life. Algernon Sydney was executed for treason. Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and Pierre Bayle were all accused of atheism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was charged with crimes punishable by death for his anti-Christian teachings, and his books were burned. Fichte lost his university post and, at least temporarily, his good reputation over his religious heterodoxy. Even in recent, more liberal climates of opinion, philosophers have sometimes been charged with undermining religion and morality. In brief, political societies frequently regard philosophers with suspicion or downright hostility, and demand a defense of the philosophic mode of existence.

Deep Theoretical Objections

Theoretical criticisms augment the moral-political challenges. To take only a few examples: (1) Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger complain that the deepest truths elude reason, at least as traditionally conceived. Thus, the values that derive from Western metaphysics cannot be sustained. Ultimately, metaphysics itself must collapse. (2) Political theologians of various stripes assert that all principles ultimately rest on unprovable tenets or on faith. Philosophy, too, they contend, is based on faith. Given, however, that philosophy claims to follow reason and only reason, philosophy self-destructs once it sees its true ground. (3) Defenders of the Bible remind us: the Almighty, holy God orders us to love Him with all our might and to follow His commandments in humble obedience. Supernature transcends nature, just as the will of the Lord transcends mere human reason. (God will also severely punish those who, relying on their human reason, rebel against him.) (4) Some would contend that philosophers pursue a freedom and independence unattainable on this earth, while they disdain the achievable garden of earthly delights. (5) Others complain that philosophers remain in permanent discord among themselves and therefore offer eloquent testimony to their incapacity to arrive at any evident truth. (6) Similarly, some thinkers argue that because everything is in flux, and because human beings experience only a manifold of appearances, the things of the world lack

knowable natures. Consequently, human reason is impotent. Clearly, one must fully appreciate this panoply of charges in order to establish in our time a plausible justification of philosophy.

The Best Prosecutors and the Best Defenders

Tacitly or explicitly, the chapters of this work develop the charges against philosophy and the rebuttals in its defense much better than the editors can do in any prefatory remarks. With only a single gloss, then, we will now let our worthy authors speak on their own behalf. Here, we simply add that the disagreements among philosophers over the ages diminish if we take into account their multifarious strategies for dissembling and concealing their truest views in threatening circumstances; and those disagreements shrink even more if we inquire into what the great philosophers share. What the philosophers have in common is the philosophic life, and the felt need to understand and to appreciate, to radically call into question, and even more thoroughly to defend that way of life. The most persistent, penetrating doubters of philosophy must of necessity be at the same time its strongest bulwarks, namely the philosophers themselves.

Homage to Heinrich Meier

The contributors to this festschrift wish to express admiration and gratitude to the honoree, Heinrich Meier, for his seminal contributions to political philosophy. We congratulate him on his sixtieth birthday. The life in question has been well devoted. No one of his generation has done more to deepen the cross-examination of political philosophy or to succor and enliven in our time the ineluctably fragile possibility of philosophic life. We honor him for his generous spirit, his towering scholarship, his inimitable friendship, and his wicked wit. Long may he flourish!

Austin, Texas and Tours, France
August, 2012

CHAPTER 1

SOPHISTRY AS A WAY OF LIFE

Robert C. Bartlett

Socrates's life is noteworthy not least for its unnatural end: Socrates was executed by democratic Athens on a twofold charge of not believing in the city's gods and of corrupting the young. Inasmuch as Socrates's way of life and the death to which it led are intended by Plato to be instructive and even exemplary, he seems intent on indicating a fundamental tension between the philosophic life as Socrates lived it and political life, even when, as in the case of Athens, it is characterized by considerable freedom and enlightenment. This tension is treated most directly in the four dialogues that depict the trial and execution of Socrates (*Euthyphro*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*). Yet interwoven with these most political works are three dialogues that record conversations originally occurring immediately before (*Theaetetus*) and immediately after (*Sophist*, *Statesman*) the initiation of court proceedings against Socrates (*Theaetetus* 210d1–4). And this trilogy of dialogues presents Socrates in his relation to the two great camps of philosophy prior to him, that represented by (among others) Heraclitus, who stressed the fundamental importance of motion or a certain kind of “relativism,” and that of Parmenides, who evidently denied motion altogether (consider *Theaetetus* 152e2–5). Moreover, this trilogy has a special status in the Platonic corpus. It alone is presented as consisting of conversations transcribed by a companion of Socrates, Euclides by name, who repeatedly verified his written account with Socrates himself, as he waited in jail, and who corrected it accordingly; these dialogues were “pretty much” written up by Euclides, which is to say that they are the closest thing we have to books written by Socrates himself (*Theaetetus* 143a1–5). At the end of his life, Socrates cooperated with an effort to leave behind a record, shaped by him, of these very theoretical conversations that not only allow no doubt

as to his status as a philosopher, a truly theoretical man, but also distinguish him from other philosophers or schools of thought. They therefore also serve to highlight his peculiar achievement as a thinker.

In the seven dialogues that together treat Socrates at the end of his life, then, Plato compares Socrates both to his fellow citizens, on the one hand, and to his fellow theoreticians, on the other. To accomplish the latter task, Plato shines a light on the sophists especially: the central dialogue of the trilogy is entitled precisely *Sophist*; and the bulk of the *Theaetetus* treats the answer to the question “what is knowledge?” given by Protagoras, the most famous sophist of antiquity. The *Theaetetus* is therefore a kind of sequel to the dramatically earlier *Protagoras*, and together they constitute our most important source of knowledge about the man. Plato evidently thought it helpful, in understanding Socrates’s way of life, to contrast this with the sophists in general and Protagoras in particular. The following remarks are intended to be an introduction to Plato’s two-part presentation of Protagoras in the hope that they may be useful in coming eventually to understand the achievement of Socrates.

The Moral-Political Teaching

The task of recovering Protagoras’s understanding of himself and the world is complicated by the fact that he rarely speaks his mind or that he is an immensely “wise” speaker (*Protagoras* 310d6, e5–7). Protagoras does present himself to the world as a sophist, it is true, the first to do so according to his own account. He is therefore marked by a certain outspokenness or frankness, he whose name happens to mean “first to speak out.” This outspokenness is remarkable in that those known or suspected to be sophists were deeply mistrusted by many respectable people, by the Athenian democrat Anytus, for example, whose hostility to sophists was equaled or exceeded only by his eventual hostility to Socrates (*Meno* 91c1–5; *Apology of Socrates* 18b3). Even young Hippocrates of the *Protagoras*, whose eagerness to study with the visiting sophist affords the occasion for the whole dialogue, blushes at the mere thought of becoming a sophist himself (*Protagoras* 312a1–7). And yet, Protagoras admits that such frankness is itself a mark of his prudence or the product of calculation: the poor job of concealment effected by the crypto-sophists before him served only to exacerbate the problem. And, besides, Protagoras has devised certain other, unspecified means of concealment that have permitted him to practice sophistry for decades, so far unscathed, dangerous though that practice remains. Protagoras therefore trumpets a frankness that is in fact far from complete and that is guided not by respect for honesty, for example, but by the demands of self-protection. As will be confirmed in the *Theaetetus*, where we learn that the now-deceased

Protagoras used to teach one thing to the “unwashed many” while reserving his “secret” teaching for his students (*Theaetetus* 152c8–10), Protagoras is a consummate liar. He avails himself of myths and other such means of indirection that, “to speak with god,” have kept him safe all these years.

Why then does Protagoras *need* to proceed as indirectly as he does? Once we strip away the dazzling rhetoric, and follow up on his hints and indications, we arrive at this understanding of the man: Protagoras contends that the so-called virtues of moderation, piety, and justice are in fact tools that every community relies on to transform naturally isolated and selfish human beings into unnatural citizens, or sheep, who obey the law more or less willingly. In doing so, they serve mostly the good of others while sacrificing their own—virtuously, as they think, but stupidly in fact. According to Protagoras, then, human beings are not by nature political animals except in the attenuated sense that they attempt to form societies in order to flee the harshness of our truly natural condition, one of wretched misery stemming from the original scarcity and of heart-pounding terror at the hands of predatory animals, other human beings not least.

It hardly needs to be said that Protagoras is an atheist, a fact he cleverly conveys even as he speaks with apparent respect of Zeus and Hermes and the rest: anyone who is actually unjust would be crazy to *admit* to that injustice, Protagoras notes (323a5–c2), and his deed here, in the form of his long speech, suggests that it is a good idea too to promote in others the idea of a lawgiving god in heaven who unfailingly punishes the unjust. And once we are rid of the good that justice and piety are supposed to be in themselves or for their own sakes, it is a short step to identifying pleasure as the good that remains, one’s own pleasure. Pleasure is a good whose immediacy and certainty bespeak the natural in a way that the demands of justice or piety or moderation cannot match. Protagoras *is* a hedonist. But by the time this question of hedonism is broached in the *Protagoras*, he has been having a hard time of it, thanks to Socrates’s insistent and indelicate queries, and he has been rendered too cautious to cop to hedonism. He will say only that considerations of “safety,” with a view to his life as a whole, lead him to say that he pursues only “noble” or respectable pleasures (351c1–d7). As punishment for this caution, Socrates proceeds to give, on the basis of an avowed hedonism that has baffled many commentators, a much better advertisement for sophistry than any Protagoras had managed to that point.

If we put all of this together, we see that Protagoras is an atheistic, amoral hedonist. He conceives of a world that is beyond good and evil—though evidently not beyond good and bad, because we can be guided in it by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. If there are delights to be had in figuring important things out for ourselves, then surely Protagoras takes no small pleasure in lifting the curtain that conceals the true character of

polite society, in seeing, with godlike strength or courage, the utter falsity of the deepest opinions that guide most people most of the time.

What does all this mean for the life Protagoras leads? He is in the first place a very famous and wealthy teacher; his arrival in Athens, recorded in the dialogue that bears his name, causes a stir even beyond the likely circles. The case for pursuing fame and wealth is easier to make on the basis of hedonism, of course, fame and wealth being in themselves trifles, perhaps, but leading to pleasures nonetheless. As for Protagoras's activity as a teacher, it must be complex. When we first see Protagoras, he is walking about in a private home, surrounded by students, some of them local Athenians, others whom he has collected as he passes from town to town, entranced as they are by his Orpheus-like voice. Closer inspection suggests that in fact there is an inner circle of students who are surrounded by others at a certain remove; and that inner circle includes one Antimoerus, a foreigner, who is Protagoras's best student and is himself training to become a sophist. In contrast to him, the vast majority of Protagoras's paying pupils are, like Hippocrates, attracted by the promise of realizing their political ambitions; to these students he presumably conveys the principles of effective rhetoric, so that they may become "most powerful" in their respective cities when speaking about the city's affairs (consider 318e5–319a2). Whatever else Protagoras teaches them, about the so-called virtues and the gods, for example, it must be compatible with the persistence of political ambition or act as no corrosive on that ambition: all but one of those in his train do not seek to become sophists themselves, although it is true that those who leave their hometowns to follow Protagoras must cease to be the citizens they once were. If we judge by the life he himself leads, as an itinerant teacher and hence perpetual foreigner, Protagoras is without political ambitions in any ordinary sense. His concern with politics—the realm of the merely conventional—seems limited to avoiding the ire of the few powerful in every city, as distinguished from the majority, mere fools, according to him, who "perceive as it were nothing." Protagoras must have a largely political teaching, then, that appeals to and to some extent aids the political ambitions of the young; and some versions of this political teaching keep intact the student's basic moral opinions: at one point Protagoras boasts that he allows students to pay him as much as they think the instruction is worth, with the proviso that the student must go to a temple and swear to a god that the amount he will pay—when it is less than the advertised price—is his sincere opinion of the instruction's worth. Hence, Protagoras too relies on, or exploits, the piety of at least some of his students. But as for his theoretical teaching, to the likes of Antimoerus, the core of it is contained not in the *Protagoras* but in the first two-thirds or so of the *Theaetetus*.

The Theoretical Doctrine

Early on in his conversation with the gifted young mathematician Theaetetus, Socrates resurrects the dead Protagoras and has him both explain and defend himself. Socrates does so because the young fellow's second attempt at a definition of knowledge—"knowledge is nothing other than perception"—amounts to the same thing as Protagoras's famous dictum that "human being is the measure, of the things that are, that they are and of the things that are not, that they are not." Socrates gradually transforms Theaetetus's perhaps commonsensical suggestion of the crucial importance of sense perception to knowledge into Protagoras's momentous contention that each of us can know only the world constituted by our necessarily private or individual perceptions of things. We can know only the content or character of our perceptions and not the things in themselves that "give" us or somehow cause those perceptions; still less can we know the fundamental cause or causes of the coming-into-being, persistence, and perishing of the things as what they are or of the world that would seem to be constituted by the sum of such things.

Socrates sets forth this doctrine in stages, each one appearing to be more radical or far-reaching than the preceding. And so—to look ahead a bit—attempting to track down Protagoras's final view of things is a tall order: Protagoras's doctrine of "human being as measure" is sometimes linked with the thought that all things are constantly in motion or changing—both perceiver and perceived, actions active as well as passive—and it includes the assertion that no forms or fixed classes (*eidē*) can be known to exist but are instead constructions in human speech traceable to communal habit and a lack of precisely knowledge (157a7–c2). According to what may well be the final stage of the exposition of Protagoras's doctrine, not only can one not speak intelligibly of beings any longer, but even "becoming" should be banished from one's thought, if not also from one's necessarily imprecise speech. For if there are no intelligible classes or kinds, then there can be nothing fixed that persists through the process of coming-into-being or becoming. And so Socrates's very attempt to capture Protagoras's doctrine in speech amounts to assigning, in violation of the doctrine, a fixed characteristic (e.g., constant motion) to "things" that cannot be known to be such; in violation of the doctrine, Socrates attempts to bring the world to a halt by describing in speech its finally ineffable motion. Partly as a result of this difficulty, Socrates's account of Protagoras's doctrine, especially inasmuch as it is linked with the motion doctrine, is itself constantly in motion. It thus presents in deed or before our eyes the central contention of the argument—an explanation by way of imitation.

Protagoras seems to have begun from reflection on the readily available experience of sense perception: one of us may be chilled by a wind that another does not experience as cold at all. Of the wind “itself by itself” we cannot say anything; the qualities of the wind depend for their existence entirely on their being perceived and hence on the perceiver. But this proves to be only a preliminary stage of the argument. More serious is Protagoras’s “secret” teaching, intended for students only, of the fundamentally relational character of our experience of the world—all the qualities we assign to things as we experience them depend on the act of contrasting and comparing: “If you address something as big, it will appear also small, and if heavy, light, and in fact all things together [*sumpanta*] are this way, on the grounds that there is no one thing that either is something or is of any sort whatever” (152d2–6). In addition, all the things that we assert “are” and wrongly address as such, in fact come into being through varieties of motion: locomotion and motion and mixing with one another. For nothing ever “is” but is always in the process of coming-into-being, of changing.

After stating and evidently abandoning an argument according to which all such ceaseless motion is for the sake of and to that extent guided by the good (153a1–d7)—an argument that depends entirely on a very free interpretation of two lines of a tragic poet—Socrates returns to following out Protagoras’s argument (153e4; cf. 152b1). He does so by explaining how we perceive color. This explanation stresses the centrality of the isolated experience of the perceiver (154a3–8) and the impossibility of supposing that a given color (or other quality: size or temperature) is “in” the thing perceived. More important still is the example Socrates gives next of three sets of dice: 4 dice set next to 6 will prompt us to say that the 6 are more than the 4 (and by half as much as the 4); but when 12 dice are set next to the 6, we will say that the 6 are fewer than the 12 (and by half as much as the 12). There is here both a striking fixity—the 6 dice remain throughout what they are, a collection of 6 like things that we group together as a unit called “six” (dice)—and a disorienting motion—the six are both more and less, greater and fewer, simultaneously. From this example, Socrates indicates that we have to abandon the following, otherwise very powerful thoughts: that nothing could ever become greater or lesser in bulk or number while remaining equal to itself; and that whatever something was not previously it could not subsequently be without becoming and have come to be. In other words, the six dice do become lesser while remaining equal to themselves, and they do subsequently become what they were not previously while undergoing no change in themselves. These examples are meant to bring home to us how much the qualities we assign to things as though they were inherent in them depend somehow on the active presence of the

classifying mind. And with what confidence can we speak of “the things” themselves, those that bear these unstable qualities?

It is nonetheless possible to give, on this basis, an explanation of what is happening “behind” the world of our perceptions—Socrates offers here a second account of the perception of color—an explanation that classifies kinds of motion according to their active and passive qualities as well as their relative speed. Yet, Socrates also dubs this a “myth”: it is at most a plausible hypothesis, since it turns out, according to the comprehensive conclusion Socrates here draws (157a7–c3), that we really cannot speak of any form, any *eidōs*, whether of a stone (cf. 156e6 with 157c1) or even of a human being. All such terms are devices to bring to a halt in speech what is ceaselessly in motion and hence changing. And when, at the end of Protagoras’s vigorous rebuttal of the charge that everyone reasonably distinguishes between true and false perceptions—and hence that perception as such cannot be knowledge—we are evidently left with his contention that there is no ground on which to deny to anyone the truth for him of his perceptions, he who as perceiver is constantly changing in the midst of a world that is also constantly in motion, as Protagoras perceives it.

Protagoras’s position seems to deny the possibility of knowledge and even of saying very much about the world at all, as distinguished from our individual perceptions; his stance divides “the world” into greater awareness of individual perception on which each of us is wholly and necessarily dependent, on the one hand, and the utter mysteriousness of all that may lie behind or cause that perception, on the other.

Theory and Practice

The closest points of contact between Protagoras’s view of political virtue and his theoretical doctrine are found, first, in the atheism on display in the *Protagoras*: according to the details of his famous myth, the world is fundamentally “Epimethean” as distinguished from “Promethean”—that is, thought or mind is subsequent to, it is the product of, dumb matter in motion; there is no divine mind prior to the world that brought the world into being and governs it, as is confirmed by the misery of our existence, absent human art and invention. Or, to speak in the language of the myth, the basic stuff out of which we came to be was itself formed by unnamed subterranean gods who worked without light and hence blindly. The second point of contact between the two dialogues consists in the application of Protagoras’s thoroughgoing relativism to things “just and noble,” or to morality. This latter first occurs as if in passing in the *Theaetetus*: without being quite aware of what he is doing, Theaetetus easily agrees to include morality (“good and noble”) in the flux (consider 157d7–11).

Helpful in seeing the implications of Protagoras's theoretical doctrine is Socrates's first important criticism of him: he wonders why Protagoras didn't begin his book called *Truth* by stating that a pig or baboon—or some other, still stranger thing possessed of perception—is the measure of all things. For although we think of Protagoras as being “like a god” (161c8), his argument suggests that all human beings are equally wise in that all have equally correct and “true” perceptions. Far from being above human beings in the manner of a god, then, it is hard to see why Protagoras is wiser than any sentient being, be it pig or baboon. And so why pay him large fees for his wisdom?

In response, Protagoras indicates that Socrates has not shaken the soundness of his thesis at all: “I assert that the truth is as I have written: each of us is the measure of the things that are and that are not, but one person differs vastly from another in this, in that some things are and appear to one, others to another” (166d1–4). What is more, Protagoras contends that he *can* speak meaningfully of wisdom and the wise: “I say that this very one is wise: whoever effects a change in any one of us, to whom bad things appear and are, such that good things appear and are” (166d5–8). It is not a question of true and false but of better and worse, of healthier and sicker. The doctor, by means of drugs, will alter the patient's perception of the bitterness of what he eats, a perception due to a defective state of body (167b1). But Protagoras is less concerned with doctors and healthy bodies than with wise orators and politics: he contends that “the wise and good orators cause the useful instead of the harmful things to seem to the cities to be just” (167c2–4). He elaborates, “Such things as seem in the element of opinion [*dokēi*] to be just and noble to each city also are for it, for so long as it believes in [recognizes: *nomidzēi*] them” (167c4–5). It falls to the wise orator, in other words, to present the useful or advantageous course—a proposed treaty, this or that war—as just and noble to the community, and if the skilled orator can persuade the city that a given treaty is just, it actually becomes just: unlike the useful or advantageous, justice owes its existence entirely to being held or recognized. That is, a treaty may prove to be suicidal for a city, however advantageous it may have held it to be, but *whatever* a city holds to be just is by that fact alone just for it: the just is “relative” to the city and cannot trace its existence to anything—to nature or to gods—apart from the opinion itself.

Protagoras's statement that “human being is the measure” implies a relativism in regard to the beings generally and in regard to the just and noble things, or to morality. It does not extend, however, to the good. His position could be said even to rest on the fixity of the good: to be meaningful, such categories as healthy and sick, useful and harmful, advantageous and disadvantageous, depend on the possibility of knowing what is good—good for a plant, animal, human being, or city.

But in what constitutes the greatest mystery in a very mysterious dialogue, Socrates suddenly raises the possibility that he and Theaetetus were wrong to have had Protagoras concede that some are superior to others in wisdom because they have a superior understanding of “what pertains to better and worse” (169d6–7 and context). Could it be that Protagoras affirms the relativity of even the good? “It makes not a little difference whether this is so or otherwise,” as Socrates puts it (169e4–5). Socrates immediately indicates how difficult it would be to consistently deny that some are wiser than others—in times of crisis, for example, human beings look for salvation to those preeminent in the requisite knowledge, as if to gods (170a6–b6, esp. 170a11)—and he proceeds to give the version of Protagoras’s argument that stands up best of all, one that affirms the relativity of the just, noble, and pious but denies the relativity of the good. Yet it is crucial to see that Socrates attributes this apparently stronger version to “all those who do *not* in every respect state Protagoras’s *logos*” (172b6–7, emphasis added): Socrates’s final word here suggests that Protagoras does maintain the relativity of the good in addition to that of the just, noble, and pious.

This means, then, that whatever a city holds to be just, pious, or good *is* just, pious, or good for it, there being no referent in the world against which to measure such opinions. There is therefore nothing just by nature, no “natural right,” according to Protagoras, and what Socrates labels a “digression” that follows the statement of this fact has as its chief task to indicate Socrates’s own understanding of or approach to justice. And immediately after this digression, Socrates repeats that the motion thesis applies above all to what a city holds to be just, but he then adds that “concerning the good things,” “no one is still so courageous as to dare to contend that whatever things a city supposes to be beneficial and sets down for itself, also are beneficial for so long as they are laid down” (177d2–5). But why does Socrates insist on drawing our attention to so radical a possibility? More to the point, what might prompt Protagoras to “dare” to include what is good in the unknowable flux? For in doing so, Protagoras reduces our knowledge of the world to virtually nothing.

Socrates proceeds to argue that each individual may well be the only judge of his own sense perception—of white, heavy, light, and so on—but, “shall we assert, Protagoras, that . . . the sorts of things that [the individual] supposes will be, also come to be for him who so supposed?” (178b9–c2). This new argument concerning the knowledge of the future helps us understand why “courage” would be necessary to “dare” to make the argument that Protagoras was at least tempted to make concerning the good: every expert claims knowledge of specific things in the future—physician, farmer, musician, cook, and orator are among Socrates’s examples—but doesn’t one kind of expertise make special claims about knowledge of the future