

The '*Simonides Agon*' As A Pivotal Discourse In Plato's *Protagoras*

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The sophistic debate between Socrates and Protagoras over Simonides' merit as a poet has generally been dismissed as an interruption in the main argument on whether *arete* can be taught.¹ The *agon* might be allowed a thematic or dramatic role, but it is not thought to contribute anything that advances the main argument.² I hope to show that it does.

In terms of the dramatic narrative, Protagoras' introduction of an *agon* on Simonides enables Socrates to grasp the essential opposition between his own position as 'philosopher' and that of Protagoras as 'sophist', which has caused their argument concerning the nature of *arete* to break down. Socrates cleverly parlays his exegesis of Simonides into a discourse that introduces the Platonic distinction between 'becoming' and 'being'. The recognition of this distinction constitutes the ground of philosophy; the ignorance or confusion of this distinction provides a platform for sophistry. The introduction of the Platonic doctrine of becoming enables the main argument on *arete* to be renewed, on different ground than before, and with a new direction. The Simonides *agon* thus functions as a pivotal discourse in the *Protagoras*. This is not to deny that it is an interruption or a digression from the main argument on *arete*; rather, it is to see the

¹ The Simonides fragment embedded in the debate has received considerable attention in its own right. See the bibliography of Hugh Parry (1965) for earlier work, of which most useful is Woodbury (1953). Thayer (1975) offers an interesting comment on Plato's use of Simonides in the *Republic* and *Protagoras*. See the appendix for my own transliteration and translation of the Simonides text in the dialogue. The Greek text of the *Protagoras* is the *OCT* of Burnet.

² For example, the *agon* is dismissed outright by Guthrie (1975) for doing "nothing to advance the main argument," by Weingartner (1973) as an "entertaining digression into 'comic relief,'" and by Grube (1958) as simply where Socrates "outsophisticates the Sophists". Friedlander (1964) finds a "thematic" connection between the "substance" of the Socratic moral doctrine, which appears in the *agon*, and that of the main argument. But the connection is tenuous, since the *agon* remains an inconsequential interruption to the main argument. This remains true even for the more attentive reading of Rutherford (1992), and the detailed analyses of the argument by Adam and Adam (1962), Taylor (1976) and Coby (1987). Adam and Adam, and Taylor comprehend the *agon* within the more general thematic context of education; Rutherford and Coby emphasise Socrates' concern with the form of argument. Coby's analysis particularly demonstrates the liberty Socrates takes with Simonides' text.

agon as an utterly necessary interruption without which the argument on *arete* could not be renewed.

The function of the Simonides *agon* becomes apparent when its philosophic doctrine is brought to bear on the *aporia* which Socrates' argument for the unity of *arete* met in Protagoras' assertion that the good is relative. It becomes evident that the necessary hypothesis of Socrates' argument for the unity of *arete* is the Platonic hypothesis of an objective and absolute idea of good as the principle of being and not-being. Being is thought relative to the absolute self-identity of the good, as is not-being. Protagoras' idea of good is subjective and relative; being and not-being are relative to human determination. In other words, 'man is the measure of all things, both of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not.' For the Platonic Socrates, man knows himself as measured by the good.

In Protagoras' demonstration of the relativity of the good, there is present an indeterminacy that is the ground of the Protagorean measure.³ In his example of the uses of olive oil, the oil may be something good, not-good, or indifferent. The possibility of indifference reveals the indeterminate nature of the thing itself that is measured. Oil in itself is neither good nor not-good; it is an indeterminate nature which is indifferent to man's measuring. Just as Socrates must assume the absolutely self-determinate nature of the good, so must Protagoras' doctrine of the relativity of being and not-being assume the underlying existence of the indeterminate, a kind of absolute not-being, which is yet thought to be there.

In the immediacy of their confrontation, the Socratic absolute and the Protagorean relative and indeterminate mutually negate one another as universal first principles. Dialectic is no longer possible until one side comprehends the other. In their dispute on method, Plato makes clear the need for a withdrawal from the main argument and the digression into a mediating content that will serve to bring out the logic of their confrontation. That mediating content is the debate on poetry, an unconstraining content that suits the purpose Plato has in mind for the Simonides *agon*.

The initial arguments of the Simonides *agon* serve to bring out the cause of the *aporia* which has collapsed the dialectic on *arete* into a sophistic debate on poetry. It will suffice to sum up briefly the argument to where Socrates begins his exegesis.

Protagoras has accused Simonides of contradicting himself when he censures Pittacus in one passage for saying the same thing as he says himself in another passage. In effect, the poet is found guilty of saying it both is and is not hard to be good. On their agreement that a poem is not composed well if a poet contradicts himself in it, Protagoras refutes Socrates' opinion of the poem as well-composed.

³ A fuller treatment of Protagoras is found in *Theaetetus*. See esp. pp.15-25 in J. A. Doull, "A commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*", *Dionysius* 1, 1977, 5-47.

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Invoking the aid of Prodicus, Socrates defends himself and Simonides by establishing a semantic distinction between Simonides' use of the word *genesthai* and Pittacus' use of the word *emmenai*. On the basis of the difference in meaning of becoming and being, Simonides is not guilty of self-contradiction. The poet said initially that it is hard for a man to *become* good; when he censured Pittacus afterward it was for saying something quite different, namely, that it is hard for a man to *be* good. Socrates then goes on, however, to dismiss Prodicus' science of meanings as really have no objective ground.

The purpose of these semantic arguments is to bring before Socrates an interesting ignorance on the part of Protagoras. It is difficult to say whether Socrates himself had a prior grasp of the ontological implications of the distinction between being and becoming. It would seem more likely that it is here, because of the prior assertion of the Protagorean indeterminate and relative good against the Socratic absolute, self-determinate good, that Socrates is seen to give birth to the Platonic doctrine of becoming.

The *agon* now passes over into Socrates' exegesis of Simonides' poem, which Socrates presents as a defence of his thesis that the poem is a composition by Simonides *contra* Pittacus. The thesis conveniently represents the opposition between his own position and that of Protagoras. For Socrates, the 'being' of Pittacus is equivalent to the relative 'being' of Protagoras. What Protagoras-Pittacus hold to as 'being', Socrates-Simonides know to be really a 'becoming'.

Socrates attempts to establish his thesis in the text by correcting what he considers a possible misreading of the first passage. Socrates could not allow for Simonides to say that "it is hard indeed to become truly good." To read the text that way would imply the possibility of either a becoming "truly good" or "good but not truly". He then reads the verse so that Simonides is saying, "indeed it is truly hard for a man to become good." This reading places the emphasis on the distinction between the position of Simonides and Pittacus so that it appears that the poem is introduced with the purpose of refutation clearly declared.

The emphasis on the distinction between a 'becoming' that belongs to man and a 'being' that belongs only to a god serves to lay down the primary distinction in the doctrine of becoming - that it is a different state from an absolute being, yet has some kind of reality to it. Becoming is a permanent state that can be described neither as a state of being nor as a state of not-being; rather, as the argument will show, it is an intermediate state between being and not-being.

Socrates' initial ruling out of "truly good" and "good but not truly" as the contraries of becoming is a necessary assumption from which he is able to develop in his exegesis the doctrine of becoming. The notion of a "good but not truly" belongs to the Protagorean indeterminate underlying the relative good. Oil is good relative to whatever it is good for, but to itself it is neither good nor not-good; therefore, as relatively good, it is "good but not truly." "Truly good" and "good but not truly" take on the significance of a contrariety between a Socratic absolute as 'being' and a Protagorean indeterminate which is equally absolute as 'not-being.' If these were allowed to be contraries of becoming, contrariety

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would be the essential character of things, and one would have an intolerable dualism. Such an absolute contrariety could never permit a 'becoming' since, as primary, equal and contrary absolutes, being and not-being negate the possibility of one another.

So far as it belongs to the original Socratic position in the dialogue to hold to the good as an absolute principle and universal measure of being and not-being to which there can be allowed no contrary, to that position belongs the development of the Platonic doctrine of becoming which assumes the nature of the Socratic good as its first principle. At the same time, it is understood that the Protagorean position develops into an impossible dualism of contraries so far as it permits the existence of the indeterminate; or, to look at it another way, so far as it permits the non-existent an ontological status equal, yet contrary, to the existent. It therefore becomes a real concern of Socrates' exegesis to rule out the indeterminate even as he develops a doctrine of an otherness to the single absolute which is yet not its contrary.

Commenting on a mere five verses of Simonides' poem, Socrates outlines the nature of becoming in three stages of reflection on the text and its image of an *amechanos sumphora* or "irresistible misfortune", treated here as a poetic image of becoming. The Simonides text thus gives rise to three orders of questions that are logical steps in Socrates' account of becoming.

The first stage of Socrates' reflection on the Simonides text gives rise to the question of whom, in the command of a ship, could misfortune throw down. Neither man simply, nor man fallen could be overthrown; rather, it must be man standing. The order of his reflection is to lay down the inner structure of becoming as a motion or change constituted out of contraries. In the image of the contrariety between man standing and man fallen as subject to misfortune, Socrates presents being and not-being as the stabilising elements of a constant motion. The idea is that change or motion can only take place between contraries.

To rule out fallen man is to rule out of becoming the possibility of a change which does not contain, and is not contained within, contrariety. There can be no change between being and being or not-being and not-being, for since there is no difference or division, no change is possible. Ruled out with simply man is the possibility of the indifferent, the element of indifference which co-existed alongside the Protagorean being and not-being. The indifferent, the indeterminate, cannot assume the status of a terminus for change.

The implication of the first stage of reflection prepares one for the second stage. The moments of being and not-being which Protagoras holds as separate and mutually negating one another, are to be understood as contained within a becoming which by its very nature, properly understood, reveals their underlying connection. As the elements or contrary extremes of a single becoming, being and not-being are no longer understood as separate moments unto themselves, but moments of one another as moments of a becoming of each other. Stabilised in contrariety, becoming takes on the appearance of being, for it is ever constant in the nature of its change.

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In his second stage of reflection, the text allows Socrates to wonder what sort of man may be caused by misfortune to fall from good to bad. The man who is already bad cannot become bad, he must remain as he is; rather, it is, to quote another poet says Socrates, "the good man who is at one time good, at another time bad." Whereas the first order of question was about the inner structure of becoming, the second order of question is about the relation of that structure to the principle which it necessarily assumes to lie outside it.

The ruling out of the bad man who cannot become bad because he already is bad is the ruling out of the indeterminate as the possible underlying principle of becoming. For Protagoras, there is ever present the indeterminate not-being of the thing itself which lies beyond and is yet necessarily assumed by the man who measures relative to himself. The indeterminate is an absolute otherness to the relative being and not-being out of which he constructs a reality for himself. Yet, because he knows this reality as relative only to himself, with no relation to the object of his measuring, this reality, this world, is ultimately the reality which belongs to a Heraclitean concept of change as endlessly indeterminate. For Heraclitus, the reality of all things is an indiscriminate flux. What Heraclitus measures as changing, Protagoras measures as unchanging; namely, the indeterminate as the underlying reality. The indeterminate is not allowed by Socrates just because he has hold of the determinate principle of reality as absolute rather than as relative. To allow the indeterminate would admit an intolerable dualism between an absolute being and absolute not-being which yet somehow is. Human thinking would be ever caught in the constant assertion and negation of one over the other. Taken separately, they represent the opposition of the Heraclitean indeterminate to the Parmenidean absolutely self-determinate. Where Protagoras has an affinity with Heraclitus, Socrates has an affinity with Parmenides.

It is not then the bad man but the good man who is capable of becoming both good and bad. There is of course an assumed distinction between the good of the man as fundamentally good, and the good of becoming good and bad. That is the initial distinction made between becoming and being. Now, however, the distinction reappears not as absolute; becoming is not absolutely something other than being, but the otherness of being to itself. The good that the man becomes, as the contrary of bad, is neither identical with the absolute good which underlies his becoming, nor contrary to it. Rather, it is a likeness or image of it.

Laid down in the second order of question, then, is that the underlying reality which informs and determines becoming is the absolute and universal being, which is yet distinct from becoming as its principle. There is no way to explain further how being is the being of becoming, and how becoming is the becoming of being, that would not seem endlessly repetitive. The third stage of reflection takes up the last two in its completion of the account of becoming.

Quoting Simonides' conclusion that, given man's state, any man who fares well is good, while he who fares ill is bad, Socrates raises the question of who it is that is able to fare well, and who ill. Ruled out is the possibility of the common, or in this case the

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ignorant man; rather, it must be the man who already is a this or a that, doctor or lawyer, that may then become a good or bad doctor or lawyer. Becoming is here considered as the image of human knowing. At the beginning of the dialogue, one had Socrates asserting that the true life of the soul was its rational life, a man being what he knows, and becoming what he learns. Here, however, knowing is an image of becoming.

The order of the question in this third stage is a reflection upon becoming as the becoming of being, which is shown to be the state of being in becoming. Ruled out in the ignorant man is once again the indeterminate, only here most explicitly as the impossible state of absolute not-being. Here is made explicit the doctrine of becoming as eliminating the possibility of something coming from nothing. There is neither a beginning nor an end to becoming. Rather, it is an ever present state, the image of the unchanging in the changing, of the eternal in time.

In terms of a *mathesis* and *steresis* of *episteme*, Socrates presents a final image of the intelligible structure he has uncovered in the world. Becoming is regarded here as the whole self-contained cycle of generation and corruption in which change is ever present in that which as a whole never changes, but is always a becoming what it somehow already is, yet is not.

Turning to the conclusion of the *agon*, one finds Socrates imposing his doctrine that 'no one does wrong willingly' upon the Simonides text. Simonides may be abused, but it serves to point out the significance of the whole *agon*.

What is now possible is to think one's way from the contariety of being and not-being to a becoming, the nature of which points to a first principle. A self-knowledge such as Socrates is seeking is now possible. The soul does not know itself directly but only through a knowledge of what is other to it. In effect, Socrates is now able to set forth a way for the soul to find its way home to its principle, through a knowledge of the world to a knowledge of itself as the otherness of the good. That this is the greater implication of the Simonides *agon*, as realised more fully in the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, is made evident from the structure of the concluding arguments of the *Protagoras* on the nature of *arete*.

Possessing a clear understanding of Protagoras' position, Socrates constructs an initial argument that forces the underlying indeterminate essential to the doctrine of relativity out into the open. Protagoras is seen to withdraw into a definition of courage that asserts the indeterminacy of *phusis* as the true life of the soul. Socrates is able to overcome Protagoras' destruction of the soul as rational precisely by creating an argument by which the natural, as the life of the soul, is demonstrated to be a structured reality, a reality in which its moments of pain and pleasure are brought into a determinate relation to an absolute good.

APPENDIX

Simonides text in *Protagoras* 339b-346d.
[Translation is my own.]

andr' agathon men alathews genesthai chalepon
chersin te kai posi kai nowi tetragwnon,
aneu psogou tetugmenon:

Hard it is, on the one hand, a good man truly to become,
Perfectly squared both in hands and feet and in mind,
Well-made without fault.

oude moi emmelews to Pittakeion nemetai,
kaitoi sophou para phwtos eirhmenon:
chalepon phat' esthlon emmenai.

Nor does this proverb of Pittacus sit well with me,
Though pronounced by a wise man:
"Hard it is to be noble."

theos an monos tout' echoi geras,

Only a god could attain this honor

andra d' ouk esti mh ou kakon emmenai,
hon [an] amchanos sumphora kathelhi.

It is not for a man not to be bad
Whom irresistible misfortune would cast down.

praxas men gar eu pas anhr agathos,
kakos d' ei kaksw.

For faring well every man is good,
But bad if he fares badly,

touneken ou pot' egw to mh genesthai dunaton
dizhmenos kenean es aprakton elpida moiran aiwnos balew,
panamwmon anthrwpon, euruedous hosoi karpon
ainumetha chthonos:
epi th' humin heurwn apaggelew,

Wherefore never shall I vainly throw away
My allotted share of life on an impossible dream,
Seeking that which cannot come to be,
An all-blameless man,

Where so many of us feed upon the fruit of the broad-
seated earth:
I'll send you word if I find him.

pantas d' epainhmi kai philew
hekwn hostis erdhi
mhden aischron: anagkhi d' oude theoi machontai:

But all those,
Whoever does nothing disgraceful willingly
I love and praise:
Not even a god makes war upon necessity.

emoig' exarkei hos an mh kakos hi
mhd' agan apalamnos, eidws t' onhsipolin dikan hugihs
anhr:
ou min eg mmsomai

For me at least any man suffices
Who is neither bad nor utterly useless,
A healthy man knowing justice,
The good of the city:
Him shall I find blameless.

tw'n garh lithin apeirwn genethla
For the race of fools is endless

panta toi kala, toisi t' aischra mh memeiktai.

All that is noble, whatever is not mixed with the
disgraceful.

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