Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics

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I was going to have said that Hegel was blunt, but his reputation precedes him, no doubt, and such an obvious lie would have cast suspicion on the rest of my contribution. Let me say, instead, that he has the virtue of being certain of his interpretation of the history of philosophy, certain of how each part fits into the framework he provides, and certain that providing a framework is the task of philosophy as such. And if even Hegel can be forgiven for any particular misreading, the more troubling betrayal lies in the certainty that philosophy is defined and framed through the articulation of claims – through situating the agency of language in the action of contestation oriented by the progress of science. This framing is the most difficult for academics to avoid, for the technologies of argument (whether consciously Hegelian or not) dominate teaching and publishing throughout the modern academy. That this technology is at stake, and that merely arguing for a more humanistic technology or more open stance toward unconventional claims will not solve the problem, is the difficulty and contribution I seek to draw out of Plato’s Protagoras.

At the broadest level, the Hegelian frame is the embodied structure of subjective grasping or comprehension, and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are seen as the great precursors to Hegel’s insight. Hegel is not accusing the Athenian philosophers of believing that humans possess rationality, or use some sort of rationality as a tool; in fact, his continuing attraction for continental philosophers rests in the idea that participation in the activity of the world constitutes a developing language, unbound by a priori rules of reason or reified ideas of subjectivity. The Athenian trio, Hegel tells us, were the first to turn to the authority of a moral claim in a subject’s apprehensions (Socrates’ emphasis on the task of philosophy), of the conceptions themselves (Plato’s ideas), and
then finally of the process of perfecting those conceptions in a self-conscious appropriation of the reality of one’s situation (Aristotle’s ἐνέργεια as ontological foundation grasped in ἐντελεχεία). The authority of one’s own certainty, as guaranteed by the process of staking claims and counterclams in terms of powerful and explanatory grounds, is the crux of the turn to the subject in modernity – and to pretend to argue against it from the grounds of a different framing would be to miss the point. To simply refuse the beginning of thought, and the task of thinking with others, by ceding the ground to those who are certain that, at the very least, the task of philosophy is to make well-formed and intelligible claims, is to betray the claim of authority, beyond the self.

Hegel’s clearly demarcated march from Socrates through Aristotle around the authority of subjectivity, as engaged in knowing the world as the true place of one’s own activity, has been replaced in our times with a rather muddy sense that people produce meaning, and my purpose is to make the productivity of the frame explicit as well as to demonstrate why this general frame of actively produced meanings is inappropriate to at least part of Plato’s project. The final section, in fact, suggests that “framing” is the wrong metaphor for philosophical work in Plato’s own terms. By way of foreshadowing, one can say that Hegel’s Aristotle returns to λόγος at the end of the process of a grasping act, as the truth of the meaningfulness of the situated self, in an apprehension of what is completed, and thus communicable, for thought. The authority of λόγος rests in achieving a delimited form that expresses the truth of a subjectively grasped situation. For Hegel’s Socrates, the λόγος is already there in the beginning (ἀρχή), but the knowing subject is stripped of its situation, and thus philosophy relies on the authority of λόγος as ἀρχή, without understanding the true place of communication in causation (specifically, the active giving of form). In Socrates, the λόγος is internalized, then separated from itself; in this separation, meaning becomes transcendent, becomes universal or common (κοινός) to all, but loses its contact with its own true ground in actuality.

This separation from embodied consciousness that Hegel here identifies as a weakness in Socrates, in order to then overcome it in the progress toward the Aristotelian framing of philosophy, we will see as the authority of beginning, and as the refusal of a framing through determinate judgement. More simply, the authority of beginning, in a λόγος that evokes reasons that it cannot possess, will allow us to break with the frame where truth must only have a determined or achieved form. Hegel is more comfortable than I am with separating Socrates from Plato, and we should note that, in some of the texts under consideration, he is offering an account of Socrates as he leads into Plato. My interest, again, lies in the frame that the account of Socrates provides for the general opposition between Plato and Aristotle, which in turn becomes the basic framing movement of all philosophy as such as understood by Hegel and those of us who follow – or drown – in his wake. Whether Hegel’s claims about Plato and Socrates create a coherent and convincing set of true statements about the content of Plato’s writings is not particularly material for this task, even if it is otherwise interesting.
In a volume on recent appropriations of Greco-Roman philosophy, it is worth mentioning that Hegel’s arguments about the Greeks resonate with contemporary concerns, and also worth mentioning that the difference between resonance and framing is itself already at stake in reading Plato against Hegel. As with the seemingly endless deferrals Plato inserts at the beginning of his dialogues, as one friend recounts to another what someone else said about a conversation, the beginning does not establish the frame within which the answer will be redeemed, but it does begin the question that sets the stage and marks what will have been resonant or empty – signal or noise.

I read Hegel reading Plato because Derrida wanted to resurrect a certain subjective productivity, an inescapable violence, as a tool against the Heideggerian attacks on technology and humanism. These polemics are wrapped both within and against the politics of a waning Marxism and Foucault’s anti-humanist histories, and at our distance we can now see Derrida as a last great defender of the careful study of the humanities while the academic establishment bunkers into an increasing irrelevance and complains of being under attack from both modern technology and deconstruction. But to contextualize the interpretation of a historical moment this way is to imitate the pedantic footnotes to the Symposium explaining what a youthful Alcibiades might mean to Plato’s readers, while it is instead necessary to understand the resonance of the questions, and how a philosophical tone can span generations. In other words, what is in question is the meaning of the claim that context determines the production of meaning; inserting that question into the trajectory of a particularly resonant historical reading of Plato is the task at hand.

We pretend to remember – as a retelling of the story, so not beyond contestation, but not as part of the argument – that Derrida had used a certain return to Plotinus, and the idea of the trace, to resuscitate Plato against Heidegger, and to establish the force of intelligible presence in the world, as text, and not in the individual, as conscious. The echoes of this deployment are felt throughout contemporary thought as the demand to read attentively to differences at the margins, or to celebrate the explosive potential of careful exegesis. Frames are imposed, but since they “never arrive” at a completed framing that exhausts the material at hand, they also provide the movement forward – such is the justice of deconstruction. Except for those directly in Derrida’s wake, however, the call to recapture the study of the humanities through a rehabilitation of critique feels increasingly stale – it smells of humanism, in one form or another, and there is a great anxiety to avoid any sort of subject-oriented philosophy.

Instead of responding from within the (admittedly shared) anxiety, though, let us ask why we feel that compulsion of the subject – and whether, as Hegel had claimed, we live within the claim of the subject, and the authority to speak of one’s own situation, or whether we are ruled by a different beginning. With the philosophical ἀρχή, with the authority of beginning, we ask a question of how time enters into our philosophical account of the world – or whether it does such as a constant frame, like the supposed fact that everything happens “in” time, framed by the past, or conditioning our present. If the event of...
time, as the embodiment of novelty in the apprehension of a shared world, is a constant aspect of every framing, then the hope for redemption is contained in every moment, as the promise of transcendence. The idea that hope, as a hope for a messianic future, is hope for the fulfillment of a promise already given, and that the embodiment of this hope is the activity of language, is the core of Hegel’s enduring legacy, from Bloch and Benjamin to Derrida – that is, the self’s presence to the world is supposedly filled with contour, with the feeling of its force, and Hegel teaches us that these contours constitute the truth that the words must strive to capture. The alternative we pull from Plato’s *Protagoras* is that the ἄρχη does not demand truth, nor a passage through the embodied feeling of a soul framed by its conditioning context; rather, it demands that we begin, and remain true to the orientation toward beginning. It is not the fact of an overdetermined present, with too many people saying too many things, that makes it possible to speak; it is the call to speak well that makes it imperative to engage with the confusion and to begin.

In the short account of Socrates from the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* I wish to consider, Hegel begins by offering a translation of an early paragraph of Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia*, and then explains its meaning in his own terms. First, and with attention to Hegel’s German rendering, Aristotle:

Socrates has spoken better about virtue than Pythagoras, although also not completely right, since he made the virtues into a kind of knowing [Wissen] (ἐπιστήμας). This is clearly impossible. For all knowing is tied to a ground (λόγος); the ground, however, is only in thinking; with this, all the virtues are set within insight [Einsicht] (knowledge [Erkenntnis]). In this, he works against himself since he effaces [aufhebt] the illogical – receptive – side of the soul [Seele], namely passion [Leidenschaft] (πάθος) and ethical life [Sitte] (ἦθος), which indeed also belong to the virtues.9

In the *Magna Moralia* Aristotle goes on to say that Plato makes progress by separating the logical and illogical parts of the soul, but fails to separate virtue from being and truth. Hegel ignores this side of Aristotle’s criticism of Plato for now. For his sights are set on the implicit and unified ontological truth that would ground Socrates’ turn to the ethical subject, and he does not want to follow Aristotle in a categorization of different modes of subjective being. Now Hegel:

This is a good criticism. We now see that what Aristotle saw lacking in the determination [Bestimmung] of virtue in Socrates was the aspect of subjective actuality – what we nowadays call heart. ‘The good is essentially only an inward seeing [Eingesehernes].’ Knowledge [Erkenntnis] is thus the singular moment for virtue. Virtue is determining [bestimmen] yourself according to universal goals, not according to particular goals. However, virtue is not only this insight
[Einsicht] or this consciousness, that virtue would be, [since] it is still lacking the man, the heart, the soul [Gemüt] that would be identical with it – the moment, we can either say the being or the realizing in general; and this aspect of being is that which Aristotle names the illogical. If the good has this reality, as universal reality, then it is, as universal being, ethical life; or the reality as individual consciousness, that is passion; for passion is also a determination [Bestimmtheit] of the individual subjective will. Insight lacks, so to speak, substantiality or material. However, it is in the vocation [Bestimmung] of virtue to allow for this [materiality], which, as we saw, had actually vanished – this is the real spirit of a people, where consciousness returns into itself. Even so, this [Socratic conception of virtue] is merely the subjective determination of insight, without the reality of ethical life and, for the individual, [without the reality of] pathos.10

Allow me, schematically, to point to two claims that are problems for Hegel’s account, both as exegeses of Plato’s texts and as possible philosophical positions in their own right: (1) the good is seen inwardly in an act of apprehension, (2) virtue is embodied in placing the interests of society over those of the individual, since society provides the true determinations of individuality. Hegel’s claim is that Socrates has already seen that one must turn to the subject as frame for correct predication (or delimitation) of the truth, but that an unclear grasp of the meaning of objectivity makes it impossible to see that orientation as anything but the subjugation of the individual to the abstract and foreign authority of λόγος. Because λόγος is internal and has no communicated or exterior truth – or rather, because the authority of what is communal and illogical but still actual and capable of causing effects is not recognized – the moral subject remains oriented within a merely abstract frame. One might be tempted to translate Hegel’s complaint here into ontological terms by saying that Socrates forgets that no virtue exists without the individual who instantiates the quality in a concrete situation or determining social context. Beyond the fact that this would be a poor reading of Plato, this formulation of the problem risks misunderstanding the very specific frame that the act of completing a judgement provides in Hegel’s account. Only after Socrates’ supposed insight into the nature of seeing the good (as an inward apprehension controlled by knowledge), does the return to the situation serve as a genuinely philosophical frame.

For Hegel, the determinations of experience frame thought, which in turn, once it achieves a recognized form within the community, acts as determination and frame for the next experience. This insight into the subject as enacting a frame when grasping reality is hence the measure he uses to interpret all of philosophy, and the lens that lets him see philosophical history as truthfully culminating in the subject who becomes conscious of her or his historical being. In this Hegelian light, Socrates’ success is to have seen the active or productive role of the subject’s conceptions; his fault was to have presumed to
know them in their empty universality as orientation toward the truth, as if beyond the embodied context of a specific time. Our question is whether we can give some space to a thought that is not determined by the paradigms of production and thus understand what type of ground Socrates' turn to λόγος might otherwise provide.

Although Socrates and Plato perhaps do share with Hegel a sense that the subject constitutes the proper place of philosophical inquiry, the meaning of that turn, I will argue, is not embodied in some nascent – but incomplete – understanding of the subject’s apprehension of a distinct and intelligible determination of thought. The subject does not occupy the place of λόγος in order to frame experience as meaningful or to give light to bare intuition. To deny this τέλος to the structure of the inquiry, on my part, allows me both to avoid the reification of a knowing subject who occupies the place of a completed separation from the world and to see the sense of the philosophical project as such in terms of an orientation – a gesture or a bodily attitude – that grounds the place that the knowing and rational subject will later come to occupy. The subject is controlled by the demands of knowledge, or of λόγος more generally, and does not have knowledge at his or her disposal for any particular purpose in order to do anything – not even in order to express the truth of the situation we already find ourselves within. Beginning with the orientation toward, with the search for a truth beyond one’s particularity, need not imply the abandonment of the place of that beginning, however. The education to virtue is not completed in the political individual, capable of action, but rather education is always begun in the determination to turn toward the good that lays claim to us. The moral claims of the beginning (ἀρχή) are not, in themselves, claims for authority based on having caused or empowered the actual. A claim that holds us but does not rest on the power of creating effects thus provides the clue that lets us break with the metaphysics of subjective framing that Hegel makes explicit for us.

Perhaps because I am a masochist, my plan is to reread one of the dialogues that would seem most clearly to embody the deliberate transition toward identifying virtue with determined contents of thought already implicitly possessed by a pre-existing rational subject. That dialogue – Plato’s Protagoras – is not one of the most frequently read works, and I will begin with a bit of a summary of its argument before moving toward my brief account of how knowledge and virtue are connected in its unfolding conclusions.

THE MOVEMENT OF PLATO’S PROTAGORAS

The revival of rhetoric and relativism has occasioned a growing interest in the doctrines of Protagoras – who continues to be best known for the claim that “man is the measure of all things,” attacked by Socrates in Plato’s Theaetetus and Cratylus. In the Theaetetus, Protagoras’ saying is supposed to be synonymous with the idea that perception (αἴσθησις) is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). Plato
then has Socrates equate perception with seeming (φαινόμενον) and shows that it is impossible to have true statements derive from seeming, since all men equally possess seeming and there would be no way to distinguish a true from a false λόγος on the basis of seeming alone. In the Cratylus, the aphorism means, quite directly, that things are what they seem to each of us, without reference to sensation. The refutation is similar, although this time we speak of whether a man may be wise, not of the truth of individual propositions. Plato has the interlocutor accept the claim that things must have a distinct reality or substance (οὐσία) of their own, independent of us, since otherwise one could not distinguish the wise from the ignorant. Both dialogues use Protagoras as a foil for separating claims of truth from human affective presence, and both would seem to support the idea that Socrates and Plato do not understand what it would mean for affective presence to fulfill an intuition, or for the intuition to become common when it takes on communicable limits. In the secondary literature in general, it is still taken for granted that the search for a proper discourse determines meaning and that truth is attained when subjects learn to control their language. At stake is the commonplace that knowledge is advanced through claims that can be affirmed or refuted, and that are guaranteed by following the form of inquiry Socrates embodies (as opposed to the sophists). Unfortunately, this commonplace conclusion inverts the sense of truth’s relation to the subject, as a power to speak the truth displaces the claim of the truth upon a speaker. To see the difference, I should aver, is not to capture a more subtle claim within the discourse, but to pay attention to the time in which the claim arises – so that time’s emergence as claim can make sense as a post-subjective understanding of truth and the call to speak in its name.

The dialogue entitled Protagoras, for its part, does not contain the claim that man is the measure of all things. It may, in fact, contain representations of Protagoras’ own views, especially in two long monologues – one a μῦθος and one a λόγος – purporting to explain the nature and origin of mankind and his virtues. These monologues are, perhaps, more or less accurate representations of Protagoras’ own writing, given that they contain numerous elements that exceed the dramatic frame Plato provides. The dialogue as a whole is usually taken to be aporetic, and is also usually taken to represent one of the “early” or “Socratic” dialogues. It is usually said to be a moral dialogue, since it is concerned with the virtues of men in society, although like many dialogues it does occasionally play on an idea of ἄρετη that would be foreign to our current sense of virtue. If I am correct in my interpretation, there is a strong sense in which all of Plato’s dialogues are moral, since each concerns the proper stance of the subject who possesses, and is possessed by, λόγος.

In its broadest strokes, Plato’s Protagoras concerns itself with the question of whether virtue can be taught. It is initially framed within an encounter between Socrates and an unnamed friend intent on getting some sexual gossip concerning Socrates and Alcibiades. Socrates, instead, tells of his encounter with a wisdom that far exceeds physical beauty and begins to recount his meeting with Protagoras. The story Socrates tells begins before dawn, when a
youthful friend who wishes to engage Protagoras as a teacher asks Socrates to act as an intermediary; however, instead of closing the deal for the youth, he enters into an examination of what is taught by a sophist. Socrates asks him what a sophist is, and what they claim to teach. He seems intent on showing that unless the sophist is an expert in some sort of craft (τέχνη), and the student is proposing to change into that sort of craftsman, then there is nothing that a sophist really teaches. Since sophists teach how to give good grounds – “clever speaking” is surely a poor translation of δεινὸν λέγειν since it conveys nothing of the sense of power involved – and these grounds do not pertain to a particular craft, they must be giving us general guidelines for producing effects without truly knowing what they teach. Here Socrates refers to sophists as confectioners, pretending to sell nourishment for the soul but only providing sweets. He uses a similar example in the Gorgias, but there denies sophistry even the status of τέχνη, saying it is only a kind of empirical guesswork. In the Protagoras, the lack of knowledge means that the sophist himself may not know whether the doctrines he peddles as nourishment will help or damage the soul.

The conclusion drawn, too quickly, in the secondary literature is that this metaphor embraces the idea that only single ideas, clearly possessed and disseminated as distinct pieces of information, can serve as true knowledge. The metaphor, however, is introduced in the Protagoras at a point where Socrates still maintains that virtue, as the orientation toward doing what one should do, is not teachable. It may be that Socrates wishes to warn us against uninformed teachers, without claiming that informed teachers actually succeed in teaching virtue. The role of the information one must have in order to teach, in fact, is considerably complicated by the demand that virtue be unified in a way that τέχνη, of itself, is not; even the τέχνη και ἐπιστήμη of measurement that grounds the specific judgements from which courage is determined at the end of the dialogue would be oriented toward the unity of the virtues, not the actual possession of virtue in a knowing (and thereby unified) subject.

In spite of his doubts, Socrates nevertheless takes his friend to speak with Protagoras. He asks the sophist the same questions he had asked the friend, but does not get the same answers. Instead, Protagoras says that in fact all practical intelligence is sophistry, although most sophists have been afraid to go by the name. He thus accepts explicitly the definition in terms of τέχνη that Socrates’ youthful friend had rejected. Socrates then presses Protagoras, at two decisive points separated by a long digression, on what it means for virtue to be unified. For his part, Protagoras suggests that we should look for the origin of virtue, and indeed of λόγος itself, within the human need to organize into societies for survival. Our true being, Protagoras suggests, is embodied in having powers or capacities that we use to manipulate the world to achieve our own ends. In the myth, the gods allowed humanity τέχνη so that they may survive as a species, and through this τέχνη we were able to invent λόγος, although Zeus had to intervene later and give everyone a share of justice and shame so that we could live together in cities. Those that understand the
power of manipulation that λόγος provides are able to give shape to the city, the virtuous being those who act in accord with what is best for that city and not solely for the self. The many, however, are manipulated, not liberated, by the rhetorical power of the few. There are long apparent digressions on the proper form for a discussion as such, against having flute girls at parties, and on the interpretation of a poem by Simonides, discussing the difference between being good and becoming good (although this is often seen to be merely a sarcastic parody of the sophists, there are perhaps pertinent arguments here, as well).

At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates argues that virtue cannot be taught, since no one recognizes any expert above themselves in matters of virtue (as they would if it were a τέχνη), and since the best people in Athens seem incapable or unwilling to teach virtue to their children. He goes so far as to say that at first he believed that no human intervention could account for good people becoming good. By the end, Socrates argues that virtue itself is a type of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), and would thus be accessible to teaching. He does not say that virtue is dependent on knowing, nor that you need knowledge in order to enact your virtue properly, however. He says that knowledge is virtue. The example that demonstrates the equivalence, used in similar fashion in a number of other Platonic dialogues, is courage; however, here the example of courage has a very specific weight because the question arises within the discussion of whether virtue is unified. One must have knowledge in order to be courageous and not merely foolhardy; however, the knowledge that grounds courage is unified and arises from the goodness of this unity, not from the control exercised over individually articulated (and therefore “unified”) bits of knowledge. The decisive sense lies in the virtue of the soul being knowledge, and not just being dependent on knowledge for its proper utilization.

The dialogue ends without any definitive conclusions, although there are several lessons one can draw fairly confidently, at a very general level, that are important to us. (1) The λόγος of humanity enables correct civic action to take form regardless of popular opinion and not as the manipulation of popular opinion for personal advantage. (2) Λόγος is shared (κοινός) and allows us to distinguish between just and unjust activity. (3) The unity of virtue and knowledge answers the question of what is shared, and of what constitutes political τέχνη. I have been careful to word these conclusions in such a way as to avoid the sense that a subject who precedes a situation frames propositions about that situation either falsely or truly. Nor can a subject be framed by these situations, given Plato’s insistence on knowledge as providing the grounds for every decision we actually take. With an eye toward Hegel, the question, again, is whether one can find in Plato a type of knowing that provides grounds without framing individual instances within determining judgements or in historically determined conceptual schemes.

My purpose for the rest of this paper is direct: I wish to find the sense of placement that Plato may assign to the subjects who know, or are virtuous, such that they are neither mute in their sensuous presence to the world
nor fulfilled through achieving an understanding of that affective presence. In other words, through understanding the place the subject occupies as oriented by learning virtue, we move against the frame that Hegel proposes (who was perhaps merely following Aristotle after all). I hope to indicate, if not prove, only one thing: the unity and goodness of virtue claims our subjectivity — our subjectivity does not possess that goodness, either as permanent characteristic or in the fleeting feeling of presence to the world, and then express meaning in accord with that possession. In order to be true to Plato’s own sense, we have to see how he transcends the body and the immediacy of its evidence. In order to avoid the Hegelian frame, a more difficult task, we must reconstruct the call to which Plato responds, and how he there avoids the frame of knowledge understood as a type of determination made by a subject within the world (either as the cause of that world or as a part of the unfolding causal relations that constitute the world as such).

AGAINST THE APPREHENSION OF THE GOOD IN INSIGHT

I had suggested earlier that Protagoras’ own words may be replicated in the long monologues he delivers when he first encounters Socrates. At the very least, they do afford a consistent account of man as the measure of all things. He begins with a myth about the acquisition of τέχνη by humanity, and then explains how the various virtues contribute to the survival of the species. When first asked whether the virtues are unified, Protagoras says that the virtues must be unified “like the parts of a face,” since he wants to defend their unity of function as all belonging to individual humans as tools for achieving something. From Hegel’s point of view, the refutation of Protagoras’ myth about the origin of humanity rests on the insistence that virtue must be known in its truth, and cannot be merely lived toward as a practical orientation. But Plato himself does not emphasize the completed side of knowledge, nor its being grasped as a delimited concept within interior insight.

In general, and extending back at least to the dismissive treatment of the idea that man is the measure of all things in the Theaetetus and Cratylus, the fact that an individual perspective cannot count as the truth for a multiplicity of subjects, that there must be some substance beyond what we individually cause to exist in creating mental images, has counted as enough of a rebuttal against Protagoras. In this dialogue, however, the sense in which the object must be beyond the self is less clear, given that the education of virtue is supposed to touch on situated individuals as directed toward their own development when beginning an education. The individual subjective nature of the call to pursue virtue is, after all, what Hegel himself identifies as Socrates’ contribution to philosophy. Our problem, most directly, may be the attempt to interpret the refutation in terms of true and false predication. The point about true and false λόγος may not indicate that a subject faces a decision about how to actualize a belief through predication, but rather that a truth claims us,
constitutes our subjectivity as unified in that claim, and then is betrayed by ignorance (which, in turn, may lead to false statements). Perhaps it is the possibility of betrayal, not the free choice between different modes of predication, which separates the Socratic subject from the Euthydemian subject, who is in constant possession of the truth (or of appearances), and from the Protagorean subject, who possesses λόγος as a tool for controlling the world. It is not that the wise man knows how best to survive, how best to utilize the power of λόγος; rather, wisdom consists in knowing that we are claimed by the unity of virtue and that this claim, because of the authority it bears on our orientation as the beginning (ἀρχή) of thought and action, is the same thing as virtue.

With this transformation of the meaning of subjectivity in mind we can make sense of Socrates’ refutation of Protagoras: he does not deny that λόγος, justice, and political τέχνη all help humanity, but rather he denies that their unity rests in providing that help. There is a tendency in the literature to say that their unity is found in a subject who possesses or controls knowledge, through the proper application of the craft of λόγος, but only because we have accepted the broad outlines of the subjective frame. To know that unity is required of you, for example (and in contrast with that framing), may not constitute a positive piece of information, but may still serve as the common “ground” (here no longer in the sense of λόγος, as Hegel suggests, but of ἀρχή) from which the sense of our place in the world gains its orientation. Socrates may have meant nothing more when he insisted that his wisdom was found in knowing that he did not know.16

In the Protagoras, Plato allows Socrates to frame the dialogue negatively. After the return to the question of the unity of virtue, Socrates leads Protagoras to see that courage – like all other human virtue – relies on knowledge. The further step, which collapses virtue into knowledge, depends on the claim of beginning (ἀρχεῖν) that knowledge puts on us to respond. He asks Protagoras how he understands the relation between knowledge and human will, but clearly expects assent.

. . . the uninformed (ἀτεχνῶς) think that mankind possesses knowledge, not that knowledge rules (ἀρχεῖν) mankind, but rather something else, like desire, or pleasure, or eros, or often fear. They imagine knowledge to be like a captive slave, pushed around by absolutely anything else. Now, is this your view, or do you think that knowledge is noble, and such as to rule (ἀρχεῖν) over man, and that he who knows the good and the bad will never do anything contrary to knowledge’s command, and that intelligence (τὴν φρόνησιν) is sufficient aid for humanity?37

It is only by an anachronism – like Hegel’s insistence that knowledge is only real when possessed by an individual in a moment of apprehension – that one could say that Socrates proposes that the individual’s knowledge or rationality exercises control over the individual’s passions. Rather, the nobility of knowledge
claims our obedience because it holds to the primary, to what begins; knowledge does not impose itself, like an efficient cause, but commands us by orienting us towards what commands our obedience within knowledge.

AGAINST DETERMINATIONS – INDIVIDUAL OR SOCIETAL

Plato’s Protagoras does not have the long examinations of place one finds in the Republic or the exhortation to take up the place assigned to you by the gods in the Apology. Recalling Hegel, we might say that it should have them, since we are situated by cultural and affective forces that determine the true meaning of virtue. Very briefly, Hegel’s dominant metaphor here is spatial and captures a sense of participation as owing one’s being to that which causes the determinations to take on a specific shape; this is what he understands by ἀρχή. Hegel thought that this framing metaphor was beyond question, and that Socrates had discovered its importance when he turned to λόγος as the “ground” of virtue. The German Grund can have the sense of reason, but only in the way we speak of having a reason for our actions. We do not say, as far as I’ve ever heard, that I have a ground for my virtue except when one has grounds for doubting the integrity of an act. In Plato’s dialogue virtue is supposed to be equivalent to the ground (as claim and ἀρχή) itself, and not in need of a reason for coming into existence. Rather, the virtuous subject assumes a position with regard to the unity of virtue, taking that orientation as the beginning of education. Only if we accept the claim that there is no unity outside of human apprehension, and its companion claim that unity of sense is produced through an act of subjectivity, would we say that λόγος is an insufficient ground for virtue, in need of both individual πάθος and ethical life.

Protagoras, in his monologue concerning the teaching of virtue, says that we all cause the learning of virtue when we correct our children, using “threats and blows” as if the children were twisted pieces of wood in need of straightening. He is claiming that Socrates has mistakenly drawn the conclusion that no one taught virtue because he failed to see that everyone was constantly teaching it. Socrates does not directly respond to Protagoras’ claim, but asks, instead, about the unity of virtue. Following a common reading, we would perhaps explain that the unity begins with the subject’s knowledge and not with the beliefs inherited from society. A true education would then be possible, and Socrates could begin teaching virtue on his own once they cleared the imposters out of the competition. But this assumes that knowledge aids virtue, or in Protagoras’ terms, that humans use knowledge, and all other virtues, as tools to further their own ends – yet we have seen that Socrates specifically excludes this sense of virtue.

Between the two direct examinations of the unity of virtue, Protagoras takes over the dialogue and purports to identify a contradiction in Simonides. Socrates’ response is tortured, but he saves Simonides by claiming that there is a difference between becoming good and being good. Simonides had said that
it is hard to become good, and yet criticized a saying of Pittacus that claimed it was hard to be good. At first, Socrates claims that there is no contradiction since Simonides might mean that the good is a hard path to follow, but easily maintained once achieved. Protagoras does not allow this to stand, and Socrates takes a more extreme – and more interesting – tack. It is, as a matter of fact, impossible to be good, not just hard to be good, since such an honor is reserved for god alone. Socrates turns to the example of a doctor. A doctor becomes a good doctor through study, and the good doctor may become a bad doctor through bad implementation of his knowledge. But a bad doctor cannot implement his knowledge in a good way, since what makes him bad is the lack of knowledge, and his action itself does not change his state of ignorance. This claim should have struck Protagoras as false. Surely a doctor may chance upon a cure, or grope toward a better and better practice of medicine, he might respond. If Socrates is convincing here, it is because knowledge precedes or begins the activity, and in fact gives orientation to the individual who knows. The sense of precedence, however, is not equivalent to the idea that a piece of information, separate from human existence, causes a human apprehension to take its particular form. There is no correct framing through the power of determination that causes the form to be unified and powerful. Rather, it is the claim on human knowing – the claim to find what rules, or begins, in order to become good – that breaks with this model of causality. The good, if it were possible, would exist outside of chance and circumstance, but no more mysteriously than the doctor who knows what to do before having to do it. The bad is always the result of ignorance, and thus of circumstances overwhelming our capacity to act in accord with knowledge.

One might be tempted to see this as a problem of predication: the doctor may only be called good or bad insofar as she acts in accord with knowledge or not. In that case, however, the entire digression on Simonides is frivolous, if not merely absurd, since there is no reason one would privilege possessing knowledge over acting well in the determination of what constitutes acting well (acting as a good doctor acts). More fundamentally, it would also fail to shed any light on the question of whether an education oriented by virtue changes one’s being as subject, and not just the predicates that would apply to that subject. Protagoras, although for slightly different reasons than Hegel, had assumed that education changes you, and Socrates counters that change only comes through ignorance of the eternal, which is why ignorance is evil. In the case of education, however, the orientation toward that atemporal unity beyond the subject’s capacity constitutes the demand – the beginning – of virtue itself. For one sees that the self is changed by acquiring knowledge, but since that knowledge is eternal, and the virtuous self begins its education in being oriented by knowledge, the student can remain faithful to the task of knowledge and still be under way toward learning.

Of greatest interest to a reading of Socrates against Hegel, here, is the fact that the subject is not grounded within a network of cultural and material causes. Nor is the subject merely turned toward the abstract universal, as if
the ground of the unity of knowledge existed without human apprehension, or Socrates were merely ignorant of that place where the ground takes shape. The subject neither frames appearances nor is framed by an encompassing and explanatory ground such as we find in Hegel’s sense of λόγος. Instead, by orienting oneself toward the task of providing a ground (as leading and ruling) for the unity of virtue, one sees the authority of beginning in terms of the orientation and not in its ability to produce effects, such as a true representation of the forces that cause or ground a particular. As the Protagoras teaches us, one does not ask knowledge to cause something else to happen; one responds to knowledge’s virtue when we begin our activity, as an orientation toward what could sustain the truth before we act, unified as a good action only insofar as we embrace the task and do not betray the intelligence of beginning.

Meandering with Plato’s Protagoras, we have not come to a new place for beginning – much less do we have new reasons to read Plato’s works. Rather, we see a gesture of beginning and of staying true to that gesture. The authority of this task begins in the never present unity of sharing a future, and not in the unified past of having all been present to the same culture, the same words, or the same context. I do not travel through determination to get there; we live only in the words we have not yet said; we are compelled to reach out toward words because of that future beyond our desires, otherwise than our embodiment, and only named in its absence; we do not posit a realm beyond ourselves where happiness awaits; we walk with our friends and explore the arguments, driven not to betray the reasons that we began.

NOTES

1. See Bernard Stiegler, La Technique et le Temps, 1: La Faute d’Epiméthée and La Technique et le Temps, 2: Désorientation.
2. See Catherine Malabou, L’Avenir de Hegel.
3. Hegel’s reading of these three foundational thinkers is found in the first two volumes of his Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie (G. W. F. Hegel, Werke, vols. 18 and 19 [Werke]). The treatment of Aristotle’s reliance on ἐντελεχεία draws from Aristotle’s Metaphysics Α, as in 1071a–1072a.
4. There is a variety of attempts to escape the frame of determinate judgments in the continental tradition, and a smaller number in Anglo-American circles. Hans Georg Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 7 (Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles [Die Idee des Guten]) defends the idea that questioning precedes the moment of Hegelian determination. Drew Hyland’s reading of Plato’s Charmides, The Virtue of Philosophy, does a nice job of interpreting Plato himself along these lines. John Sallis’ Being and Logos concentrates on the possibility of distinguishing sophists from philosophers. Mitchell Miller’s Plato’s Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul represents something of this current in the Anglo-American tradition. One finds a persistent eulogizing of the value of being open-minded in both traditions.
Richard Robinson’s *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* influentially emphasizes the idea that the ἔλεγχος does not serve to produce new correct opinions, but “to wake men out of their dogmatic slumbers into genuine intellectual curiosity” (p. 17). However, he continues to argue that the basis of knowledge is knowing what something is, and that knowing an essence as a predicate counts as the basis for the proper use of a word within a given context. He sees the ἔλεγχος as a method, or as a rhetorical tool, for achieving determinate knowledge, even if it does not begin there. One may also mention Charles L. Griswold, Jr, “Relying on Your Own Voice: An Unsettled Rivalry of Moral Ideals in Plato’s *Protagoras*.” Griswold claims that one gains one’s own voice in assuming responsibility for the self as soul, and thus in becoming the “true speaker” or “true author” of one’s views. The emphasis is not on predication, nor on the Hegelian sense of determination, but rather is on the practice of assuming moral responsibility for one’s voice. Throughout, my question is simply whether one sidesteps Hegel by avoiding the moment of determination, or whether instead one remains within Hegel’s interpretation to the extent that one keeps the subject in the place of framing (and thus staging, or encompassing) what is present. If it is true that one cannot so easily escape Hegel, it may be true that our sense of “being open” to the world, or to new interpretations, already closes us off from the moral claim that truth holds on us.

5. At least, this is the development of the early Derrida’s trajectory that I defend at length in Daniel Price, *Touching Difficulty*.

6. Ibid. part I.

7. It is impossible to provide an objective barometer of the mood in philosophy, but the allure of Speculative Realism and/or Object-Oriented Philosophy lies in its refusal to embrace the primacy of knowing as subjective activity. See Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, and Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

8. That this is Heidegger’s question, in, for example, “The Question Concerning Technology,” and the tortured and untranslatable plays on the earliest beginning as what is trusted in the search for truth. We will not be following Heidegger, but do note that much of the contemporary rethinking of technology is an echo of this question. See, for in-depth overviews, Thomas Brockelman, *Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism*, and Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben*.

9. *Werke*, vol. 18, p. 474. The translation is my own; square brackets are my insertions of the German word or the grammatical referent; rounded parentheses are Hegel’s own. The Aristotle passage comes from *Magna Moralia* I.1 1121a15–23.


11. I think of this as the traditional reading, although it is to some extent post-Kantian. Paul Natorp, *Platos Ideenlehre*, is very explicit about this reading, and is so specifically in relation to the *Protagoras* as Plato’s first great
dialogue (because it establishes the opposition between idea and experience, and thus allows for the function of the Kantian determinate negation to be performed, even though the determination of the meaning of the sensible world through the categories of the ideas is not an explicit claim in the dialogues (pp. 10–18, 214)). One might also see Gregory Vlastos, “The Unity of the Virtues,” for an elaborate defense of the unity of virtue being located in the knowing subject who controls the process of predication itself.

12. Joseph Margolis ties his larger project directly to Protagoras in “Metaphysique radicale.” On the side of rhetoric, one has Edward Schiappa, Protagoras and Logos, and Antonio Capizzi sees Protagoras as the great precursor to humanism in an interesting commentary in Protagora.

13. Gerold Prauss, Platon und der Logische Eleatismus, turns his reading of Plato around the problem of the possibility of false statements.

14. Charles Kahn, “A New Interpretation of Plato’s Socratic Dialogues,” labels it one of the proleptic dialogues; it is supposed to prepare the students for future teachings.


17. Pro. 313d–314b.

18. Ibid. 356c–d, 357a–b.

19. Ibid. 316d–e.

20. Ibid. 312b.

21. Ibid. 329d, 349b. Actually, Protagoras claims to teach the τέχνη of political life at 319a, but allows that this constitutes virtue as such by allowing Socrates to make the substitution at 320a–b.

22. Ibid. 320d–328d.

23. Ibid. 322a–d.

24. Ibid. 317a.

25. Ibid. 319b–320c.

26. Ibid. 328e.

27. Ibid. 361a–b.


29. Pro. 349d.

30. See Die Idee des Guten, chapter 2, where Gadamer suggests that a movement between τέχνη and virtue itself is implied in the Protagoras, and argues that virtue is not a τέχνη.

31. Pro. 320d–328d.

32. Ibid. 329e.

33. Ibid. 330b.

34. It may be important to note that one can go the other way, with Plato, and say that the creation of images is itself the process of moving toward (or within) the good, but to say so would be to accept the Hegelian frame...
and insist that Plato was not guilty as charged. My hope is to avoid that frame altogether. Jean-François Mattei’s *L’Etranger et la Simulacre* is the most sustained reading of that productivity, but one sees it, as well, in John Sallis, “Mimesis and the End of Art,” where Plato is presented as a precursor to Hegel’s understanding of productivity.

38. Ibid. 325d.
39. Ibid. 319b–320c.
40. Ibid. 339b–d.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid. 340c–d.
43. Ibid. 344b–c.
44. Ibid. 345a.
45. Ibid. 344e–345c.
46. Ibid. 313a–b.

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