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Protagoras

Plato · *c. 390–380 BC* · *Benjamin Jowett translation*

Before dawn, a young man named Hippocrates bangs on Socrates's door. The famous teacher Protagoras is in town, and he wants to become his pupil. Socrates takes him to the house of the rich Callias, where Protagoras, Hippias and Prodicus are holding court. There the question is whether virtue can be taught, and whether its parts are one. The talk grows heated and ends in a surprise.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can virtue be taught, and is it one thing or many?

Protagoras says virtue can be taught and that its parts are different, like the parts of a face. Socrates argues that virtue is one, and is a kind of knowledge, which would mean that no one does wrong willingly. At the end the two have nearly traded places: Socrates, who doubted that virtue could be taught, has argued that it is knowledge, and Protagoras, who said it could be taught, has resisted.

KEY CHARACTERS

Socrates
The narrator and questioner.

Hippocrates
An eager young man who wants to study with Protagoras.

Protagoras
The most famous teacher of his time.

Callias
The rich host of the sophists.

Hippias
A teacher of many subjects, from Elis.

Prodicus
A teacher of exact meanings of words.

Alcibiades
A young Athenian of promise, who speaks briefly.

Critias
A guest who speaks briefly.

Grades 10–12

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01

Before Dawn

OPENING

Socrates tells a friend of his morning. Hippocrates wakes him with the news that Protagoras has come, and begs to be introduced.

- Hippocrates is full of eagerness and a little ashamed.
- Socrates asks what Protagoras would make of him.
- A teacher of the soul, he says, is like a seller of food for it.
- They go to the house of Callias.

02

At the House of Callias

SETTING

Callias's house is full of visitors. Protagoras walks in the porch with his followers, and Hippias and Prodicus hold court in other rooms.

- Protagoras says he teaches men to run their households and cities well.
- He agrees to speak at length or briefly.
- Alcibiades and Critias are among the audience.
- Socrates asks whether virtue can be taught.

03

The Great Speech

PROTAGORAS'S MYTH

Protagoras tells a story to answer. Epimetheus gave the animals their gifts and left humans bare, so Prometheus stole fire and skill for them.

- Zeus sent Hermes to give justice and respect to all.
- Therefore all citizens have some share in virtue.
- Punishment aims to teach, not to avenge.
- Virtue is taught by parents, teachers and the laws.

04

Is Virtue One?

THE PARTS OF VIRTUE

Socrates presses Protagoras on whether justice, temperance, courage and holiness are parts of one thing. Protagoras becomes irritated at the questions.

- Protagoras says they are parts, like the parts of a face.
- Socrates draws out cases that seem to make them one.
- The argument over courage is the hardest.
- Protagoras threatens to stop, and Callias asks him to go on.

05

A Poem of Simonides

THE READING OF A POEM

Protagoras proposes to turn to poetry and chooses a poem by Simonides. Socrates answers with a long interpretation.

- Protagoras says the poem contradicts itself.
- Socrates replies that Simonides is correcting another poet.
- Prodicus is asked to settle a word.
- Socrates says that talking over poems is like drinking-party chatter.

06

The Reversal

THE CLOSE

Socrates returns to the question. He argues that virtue is knowledge and that people do wrong only from ignorance of what is truly good.

- Socrates says no one chooses what he knows to be worse.
- Courage, then, is knowing what is to be feared.
- Protagoras gives way grudgingly.
- Socrates says the result is the reverse of what each began with.

Virtue · Knowledge · Teaching · Courage · Justice · Poetry

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Notice how the dialogue opens with an eager young man who has not yet asked what he is buying.
2. Compare Protagoras's story of Prometheus with his argument.
3. Watch for the moment Protagoras loses patience and why.
4. In the Simonides section, ask whether the two men are reading the poem or using it.
5. Look at the end: each man now seems to hold the other's earlier view.
6. Ask what a teacher owes a student who is about to hand over his soul to him.

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