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# PERSUASION AND AGREEMENT IN PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*

Dr. Tonguç SEFEROĞLU\*

## ABSTRACT

*An investigation of the dialogue form is vital for understanding Plato's philosophical arguments. Recent studies related to the dialogical aspects of Plato's writings have underlined the significance of dramatis personae and their role in defining the philosophical content. This paper examines the roles played by Socrates and Protagoras in Plato's Protagoras to inspire a theory of disagreements. This study concludes that the way in which Socrates and Protagoras examine the nature of virtue offers some norms of the correct philosophical argument, such as careful checking and philosophical humility. These norms are necessary for dissolving disagreements and completing a philosophical investigation. The findings can contribute to a better grasp of Plato's metaphilosophical thoughts on agreement and epistemic development.*

**Keywords:** Plato, Protagoras, epistemic norms, philosophical humility.

## Platon'un *Protagoras*'ında İkna Etme ve Anlaşma Sağlama

## ÖZET

*Diyalog formunun incelenmesi Platon'un felsefi argümanlarını anlamak için son derece önemlidir. Yakın zamanda yapılmış çalışmalar dramatik karakterlerin ve bu karakterlerin felsefi içeriğini belirlemedeki rolünün önemini altını çizmektedir. Bu yazı Sokrates ve Protagoras'ın Platon'un Protagoras eserinde oynadıkları rolü irdeleyip bir anlaşmazlık teorisi ortaya koymayı hedeflemektedir. Bu çalışmada şu sonuca ulaşılmıştır: Sokrates ve Protagoras'ın erdemin doğasını araştırırken izledikleri yol doğru felsefi konuşma yapmak için gerekli bazı normları, örneğin dikkatli denetleme ve felsefi tevazu gibi, ortaya koymaktadır. Bu normlar anlaşmazlıkları çözmek ve felsefi araştırmayı tamamlamak için gereklidir. Elde edilen bulgular Platon'un anlaşma ve epistemik gelişme üzerine meta-felsefi düşüncelerinin daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkı sağlayabilir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Platon, Protagoras, epistemik normlar, felsefi tevazu.

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## Introduction

In his dialogues, not only does Plato aim to find answers for compelling philosophical issues, such as the cause of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, the nature of virtue and the features of the best political system, he also seeks to improve the epistemic norms of philosophical conversation. Plato's search for a better way of communication and philosophical investigation presumably motivates him to write dialogues where Socrates and some other characters, like Parmenides of his eponymous dialogue and the Stranger of the Sophist, talk with various individuals having particular personalities and characters.

Conversation, for Plato, seems to 'more resourceful' than any other sort of inquiry, although he does not advocate the extreme thought that the only way of inquiry is conversation.<sup>1</sup> The *Protagoras* is a specimen of Plato's more dialogical works in which one can recover some norms of the correct philosophical argument. Therefore, the choice of examining the *Protagoras* to find Plato's ideas on persuasion and agreement is not random. The conversation of Socrates and Protagoras might provide valuable insights into the method of philosophical argument and enlighten us about Plato's vision for the method of argument.

Accordingly, it seems convenient to stress the *Protagoras*' metaphilosophical component, since Socrates talks with a sophist in a dramatic setting where other sophists are present.<sup>2</sup> It should be observed that by Plato frequently criticizes the sophistic manner of speech and persuasion and tried to distinguish Socrates from sophists.<sup>3</sup> Socrates and Protagoras thus seem to represent competing manners (or methods) of speech, or to put it more properly to characterise the difference in aim more than in manner.<sup>4</sup>

In reviewing the *Protagoras*, this study does not aim to offer an interpretation of the content of Socrates' conversation with Protagoras, such as the question whether virtue is teachable. It instead examines the *Protagoras* with the aim of discovering some reflections on disagreement and

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<sup>1</sup> Long, A.G. *Conversation and Self-Sufficiency in Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfsdorf, David. "The Historical Reader of Plato's *Protagoras*." *The Classical Quarterly* 48.1 (1998): 126-133, pp.131-133.

<sup>3</sup> Warman, M.S. "Plato and Persuasion." *Greece & Rome* 30.1 (1983): 48-54, pp. 49-51), Morrow (1953: 235-236) & Morrow, Glenn R. "Plato's Conception of Persuasion." *The Philosophical Review* 62.2 (1953): 234-250, pp. 235-236.

<sup>4</sup> Nehamas, Alexander. "Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7.1 (1990): 3-16, pp. 10-11.

philosophical argument. With a view to this aim, I try to find answers to the following meta-dialogical aspects: [1] the meta-dialogical norms that would enable agreement, and [2] the correct norms governing philosophical argument.

### Agreement and the Goal of Conversation

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates narrated his conversation with Protagoras at the house of Callias to an unnamed friend. Socrates told his friend that he went to Callias' house because a friend of his, Hippocrates, asked for his company. Hippocrates wished to meet Protagoras and to ask whether Protagoras would accept his wish and make him wise.<sup>5</sup> Socrates and Hippocrates initially decided to wait until morning to go to Callias' house, though Hippocrates was raring to go.

In the meantime, Socrates questioned Hippocrates about Protagoras' profession and what Hippocrates expected to learn from Protagoras. For Socrates, they should know the answer to these questions if Hippocrates was going to entrust his soul to Protagoras.<sup>6</sup> They were nonetheless unable 'to decide on such an important subject (τοσοῦτον πρᾶγμα διελέσθαι)', most likely because, for Socrates, they were young; hence, they agreed to consult their elders.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Socrates and Hippocrates decided to go to Callias' house and talk to Protagoras and 'many other wise men (314c2 καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ καὶ σοφοί) who are at the house of Callias'.<sup>8</sup>

My first point about the *Protagoras*' metaphilosophy is the relationship between the goal of conversation and agreement emphasized in the passage below:

"When we got to the doorway [of Callias' house] we stood there discussing some point which had come up along the road and which we didn't want to leave unsettled before we went in. So we were standing there in the doorway discussing it until we reached an agreement (*trans.* Lombardo & Bell)."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Prot.* 310d4-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Prot.* 312c8-b4. The issue is that if they do not know what Protagoras' profession, provides they cannot determine whether it is harmful or not.

<sup>7</sup> *Prot.* 314b5-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Prot.* 310a8-314c2.

<sup>9</sup> *Prot.* 314c3-7.

Plato presumably does not describe an event in a certain way without purpose and this scene portrayed above is not an exception.<sup>10</sup> This passage hints at the role of agreement, which seems to be the goal of conversation. We, unfortunately, are neither told what Socrates and Hippocrates were discussing nor why they disagreed. Nor were we informed whether they disagreed [Socrates says P, Hippocrates Q about E] or whether they did not have an answer about a topic, which would make both happy [neither of them has a satisfactory view about E]. No matter whether they were just ignorant about E, had opposing views about E, or were expecting satisfactory justification of E, it is significant to observe that they preferred to reach an agreement.<sup>11</sup> Agreement is thus associated with completeness.<sup>12</sup>

### Communication and Epistemic Progress

This section investigates the relationship between communication and epistemic improvement by focusing on Socrates request from Protagoras to talk briefly. About the midpoint of their conversation, Socrates told Protagoras that he had a bad memory, and, as a result, if someone 'speaks at length'<sup>13</sup> to Socrates, he would 'fail to recall what the *logos* was about'.<sup>14</sup> Then Socrates asked Protagoras to speak to him 'as if...[he] happened to be hard of hearing'.<sup>15</sup>

Since Socrates' condition of having a bad memory is made analogous to being hard of hearing, there appears to be an association made between cognitive abilities and understanding, a link which is essential for successful philosophical argument. Imagine that we are speaking to a person who is hard of hearing: we should speak to her with the proper loudness and pace. Likewise, if Protagoras does not speak to Socrates in the proper manner, by

<sup>10</sup> Sidwell, Keith. "Some thoughts on the sophist in bed." *Hermathena* (2005): 67-76, p.68.

<sup>11</sup> Long (2013, 39) argues that 'the question-and-answer mode...allows Socrates to take his interlocutor through the argument step by step...So if Socrates can find the right argument for his current interlocutor, the exchange of questions and answers promises to deliver just what he needs to confirm his ideas, namely evidence of the interlocutor's agreement'. I agree with Long that a true agreement should result from the interlocutor's sincere approval of each step of the justification.

<sup>12</sup> See μή ἀτελής "not incomplete" at *Prot.* 314c5 with διαπερανάμενοι "finishing up" at c6.

<sup>13</sup> *Prot.* 335c9 μακρὰ λέγει.

<sup>14</sup> *Prot.* 334d1 ἐπιλανθάνομαι περὶ οὗ ἂν ᾗ ὁ λόγος.

<sup>15</sup> *Prot.* 334d1-2 ὥστερ...εἰ ἐτύχανον ὑπόκωφος ὢν.

changing his style of speech, Socrates would fail to understand Protagoras' argument or what the argument was about.<sup>16</sup>

However, Protagoras was not willing to fulfil Socrates' wish, which was 'brevity in speech',<sup>17</sup> since he thought that he would not surpass anyone if he accepted the manner 'his opponent (335a6 ὁ ἀντιλέγων)' requested. Socrates then offered a solution: he could ask the questions and Protagoras could answer. Socrates, nevertheless, observed 'that he [Protagoras] was uncomfortable with his previous answers and that he would no longer be willing to go on answering in a dialectical discussion'.<sup>18</sup> The conversation thus was on the verge of collapse.

Socrates once more tried to persuade Protagoras to speak briefly as he was willing to hear Protagoras' arguments. Socrates thus said the following, which has some meta-dialogical implications:

"But if you are ever willing to hold a discussion in such a way that I can follow, I will participate in it with you. People say of you—and you say yourself—that you are able to discuss things speaking either at length or briefly. You are a wise man, after all. But I don't have the ability to make those long speeches: I only wish I did. It was up to you, who have the ability to do both, to make this concession, so that the discussion could have had a chance. But since you're not willing, and I'm somewhat busy and unable to stay for your extended speeches—there's somewhere I have to go—I'll be leaving now. Although I'm sure it would be rather nice to hear them (*trans.* Lombardo & Bell)."<sup>19</sup>

Socrates was willing to carry on the discussion if Protagoras would speak briefly (as he is able to speak briefly) so that Socrates could understand him. Secondly, if Protagoras was unwilling to make this concession, they could not carry on the discussion. Now, as argued above, the goal of conversation is agreement. Here, too, we can think in terms of the idea of agreement. That is, if Socrates and Protagoras were unable to communicate, then an agreement was not even a prospective outcome for there would be

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<sup>16</sup> It is debatable whether Socrates really has a bad memory, or he is just ironic. If we are going to trust what Alcibiades says (*Prot.* 336d2-d5), Socrates does not have a bad memory, he is just joking. Even if Socrates is ironic, it would hardly be surprising that Socrates does not prefer to speak at length. That is, Socrates might be good at understanding lengthy speeches and at speaking at length, yet this, for him, does not need to be the correct method of philosophical argument. Rather, Socrates wishes to establish an agreement step-by-step as it is the right way to do so.

<sup>17</sup> *Prot.* 335a2-3 τῇ βραχυλογίᾳ.

<sup>18</sup> *Prot.* 335a9-b2.

<sup>19</sup> *Prot.* 335b3-c7.

no understanding. In philosophical conversation, we should listen to others to truly understand them, but not just to refute them like sophists<sup>20</sup>

Having said that, one can object to my claim above by maintaining that Socrates decided to leave, but not because he thought that it was impossible to agree. For instance, we can suppose that Socrates wanted to understand Protagoras' argument to refute him or to defend the opposite argument. That is, Socrates could defend the opposite argument and refute Protagoras, yet Protagoras might still disagree with Socrates. Here, we should not lose the sight of the fact that the aim or *telos* of the conversation is agreement. Socrates thus did not just wish to refute Protagoras, but instead wanted to understand Protagoras and hoped for reaching an agreement.<sup>21</sup>

### The Intervention of Listeners

Socrates' decision to leave the conversation initiated an important episode. Once their listeners, including some sophists, saw that the conversation would come to an end, they decided to intervene. This intervention provides significant insights for the *Protagoras*' meta-dialogical and metaphilosophical aspect in the sense that the intervention presents norms for productive communication and of manners of debate.

Productive communication is required, for if one cannot understand another because of the lack of communication, there is no reason for carrying on discussions. It therefore is not even *theoretically* possible to agree. I say theoretically because the *Protagoras*, as we shall see, did not end up with an agreement, but with a 'terrible confusion'.<sup>22</sup> That said, in the same section, it was also underlined that if Socrates and Protagoras were to keep on talking and examining, it would still be theoretically possible to agree in the future, although they could not find an agreement that made them happy at that moment.

The listeners were divided on the issue of the style of speech: whether Protagoras should compromise or should not accept the standards imposed

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<sup>20</sup> McCabe, Mary Margaret. *Platonic Conversation*. New York: Oxford, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Long (2013, 34) rightly emphasizes that those whom we debate should confirm our discoveries, especially if they are strong and experienced adversaries. A confirmation coming from such adversaries might provide additional warrant. In this respect, an agreement might provide strong support for Socrates' position, of course, if it is a *sincere* agreement in favour of Socrates. I say sincere because I do not think that Socrates is trying to deceive Protagoras.

<sup>22</sup> *Prot.* 361c2-3.

on him. Alcibiades supported Socrates' demand of brief speeches, Callias backed Protagoras' uncompromising position and Critias, Hippias and Prodicus remained somewhat neutral in this conflicting situation.<sup>23</sup> Plato seems to show approval for the last group's intervention as the proposal presented in the *Protagoras* came from them.

The "arbitrators",<sup>24</sup> as Hippias called those who are going to monitor the conversation, did not take part in the discussion apart from mediating between Socrates and Protagoras. As this was the only occasion that temporarily broke the core conversation off, it seems to mark a significant point, namely the method of successful and productive communication.<sup>25</sup> To look at the matter from a different point of view, Plato presumably stepped in to give some reflections on the correct norms of philosophical argument.

The arbitrators gave the following instruction how to converse properly:

[1] The listeners 'should not take sides (336e2 οὐδὲν δεῖ συμφιλονικεῖν)', rather they should encourage the discussants not 'to dissolve the conversation in the middle (336e3 μὴ μεταξὺ διαλύσαι τὴν συνουσίαν)'. The idea that there is a midpoint of the conversation seems to suggest that there is a goal of the conversation and this goal is presumably agreement.

[2] The listeners should listen 'impartially' (337a3 κοινούς),<sup>26</sup> but 'not without discrimination (337a4 ἴσους δὲ μὴ)'. Whilst 'distributing the value (337a5 νεῖμαι)', the listeners should not deem all sides as equals, since the wiser should have more value than the unlearned in the conversation.

[3] In conversations, friends should 'agree (συγχωρεῖν)' to 'argue (ἀμφισβητεῖν)' about 'logoi' rather than to 'dispute (ἐρίζειν)' about *logoi*. This is because eristic is for enemies.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Prot.* 336d7-e4.

<sup>24</sup> *Prot.* 337e4 διατητῶν.

<sup>25</sup> Consider also that Hippias wants to expound his own views on the poem that Socrates examines, yet Alcibiades asks him not to do so. See *Prot.* 347a6-b7.

<sup>26</sup> *LSJ* s.v. IV.3.

<sup>27</sup> *Prot.* 337a7-b3. I would like to note that ἐρίζειν is used to signify sophistical disputations, or eristic in general, and it is contrasted with dialectic. *E.g. Rep.* V 454a5 οὐκ ἐρίζειν ἀλλὰ διαλέγεσθαι.



[4] In a good conversation, the speakers would earn the good opinion of the listeners rather than their praise, as praise is 'merely a deceitful verbal expression'.<sup>28</sup>

[5] Regarding the style of conversation, the debaters should meet 'on some middle course' which is agreed by all sides.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the *Protagoras*, Socrates 'must not insist on that precise, excessively brief form of discussion', while Protagoras 'must not let out full sail in the wind and leave the land behind to disappear into the Sea of Rhetoric'.<sup>30</sup>

As it is claimed above, the goal of conversation is agreement; without understanding and communication, agreement is not even theoretically possible.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, the five points given above aim at providing the correct norms of argument with a view to supporting the constructive exchange of communication between Socrates and Protagoras.

### Case I: The Equal Weight View

So far, I have regarded the goal of agreement as the outcome of conversation and have suggested that the correct norms of conversation are presented in the intervention passage. In what follows, I will continue examining other passages of the *Protagoras* to describe some other norms of correct philosophical argument, namely the equal weight view, philosophical humility and careful checking.

The equal weight view suggests (a) our opponents might have legitimate ground for challenging our views, and that (b) we ought to assume that their cognitive abilities are as good and effective as our own.<sup>32</sup> It is suggested that 'EW [the equal weight view] says I should give my peer's

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<sup>28</sup> *Prot.* 337b4-7.

<sup>29</sup> *Prot.* 337e4-338a1 ὑπὸ διαιτητῶν ἡμῶν συμβιβάζοντων εἰς τὸ μέσον. See also *Prot.* 338a6 μέσον τι τέμνειν "to hold a middle course" regarding the length of speech.

<sup>30</sup> *Prot.* 338a1-9. Socrates says if Protagoras does not stick to the question by making long speeches which go off the subject, then he would 'ruin the conversation (*Prot.* 338d7-e1 διαφθεῖρειν τὴν συνουσίαν)'. This rule applies to Socrates too, as he (ἄπερ...ἐμοῦ) has already been asked not to do so. See also *Gorg.* 449b4-c8 for another example of Socrates' demand for precision from another sophist, Gorgias. Plato thinks that rhetoric is not a knack and rhetoricians only aim to persuade without caring for the truth.

<sup>31</sup> *Gorg.* 457c4-d5 for the role of respecting and listening to the other to 'bring reconciliation to their conversation (διαλύεσθαι τὰς συνουσίας)'.  
<sup>32</sup> Cohen, Stewart. "A Defense of the (Almost) Equal Weight View." *The Epistemology of Disagreement*. Ed. David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 98-120, p. 99.

opinion the same weight I give my own. EW can seem quite plausible when one considers that our status as peers entails a symmetry between our epistemic positions.'

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates believes that virtue cannot be taught while Protagoras thinks that it can be taught. Socrates' claim is that since the wisest and best citizens could not pass their virtue to their children, virtue is not teachable.<sup>33</sup> Socrates then asks Protagoras to show him how virtue can be taught. Notwithstanding his judgement on this matter, Socrates is willing to listen to Protagoras and states:

"But when I hear what you have to say, I waver (κάμπτομαι); I think there must be something in what you are talking about (οἶμαί τί σε λέγειν). I consider you to be a person of enormous experience who has learned much from others and thought through a great many things for himself. So if you can more manifestly (ἐναργέστερον) show to us how virtue is teachable, please don't begrudge us your explanation [*slightly modified*] (trans. Lombardo & Bell)."<sup>34</sup>

Not only is Socrates ready to accept the explanation, should Protagoras show it (having a legitimate ground), but Socrates also thinks Protagoras is a learned and experienced person (possesses on par cognitive abilities). This nevertheless might not mean that Socrates adopts the equal weight view. Imagine that I believe that London is the best city, yet you believe that Paris is the best city, on the assumption that both of us have seen Paris and London. It, then, is clear that our views about what makes a city best are incompatible. When we decide to talk about this issue, I may listen to you not because I believe you have some legitimate ground, but because I think you are wrong; hence you need to be corrected.

Socrates does not seem to presuppose that Protagoras is wrong in the *Protagoras*. Rather, as stated in the quote above, Socrates believes that Protagoras is a learned and experienced person.<sup>35</sup> Socrates thus appears to credit Protagoras with the cognitive capacity that would enable him to demonstrate his point and convince Socrates. Even if Socrates is not convinced by Protagoras' argument, he still seems to believe that Protagoras

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<sup>33</sup> *Prot.* 319e1-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Prot.* 320b5-c1.

<sup>35</sup> *Prot.* 320b6-7. I do not think that Socrates praises Protagoras ironically. As Gagarin (1969, 133-34) suggests, Socrates and Protagoras seem to share some views about the importance of 'aretē and paideia' and the purpose of the *Protagoras* is not to show that Socrates is superior to Protagoras although Socrates 'advances beyond Protagoras'.

can positively help him continue the inquiry.<sup>36</sup> In terms of the city analogy above, if you have seen enough cities to decide that Paris is the best one, and I am eager to see how you are going to prove this.

In this respect, trusting in his argument does not hinder Socrates from listening to Protagoras, and he keeps an open mind while listening to Protagoras. Socrates considers Protagoras as having a par cognitive ability; hence the argument is between epistemic peers.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, if Socrates persuades Protagoras, their agreement would indicate a solid and compelling position. If epistemic peers who hold opposite views would agree, the argument on which they agree is strongly confirmed.<sup>38</sup>

### Case II: Careful Checking

Now, with the aim of explaining careful checking and the perils of steadfastness and overconfidence, I examine the passage where Socrates and Protagoras analyse a poem of Simonides. The steadfast approach, on the contrary, asserts that notwithstanding our disagreement with our epistemic peers, who are as well possessing the relevant cognitive skills as ourselves, we should keep our conviction in our original opinion.<sup>39</sup> The steadfast approach is connected with to the stubborn epistemic view which holds that disagreement is never a reason for changing our position on a disputed subject.<sup>40</sup>

When Protagoras is concluding his analysis of Simonides' poem, he asks Socrates which qualities 'a fine and properly written poem (καλῶς...πεποιῆσθαι καὶ ὀρθῶς)' should have. Socrates, then, agrees with

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<sup>36</sup> Long (2013, 42) argues that 'Socrates' reason for continuing to talk with Protagoras must be that Protagoras can help the inquiry into virtue'. By referring to the *Protagoras* 333b-c and 352c-353b, Long notes that Socrates and Protagoras 'have the same opinion'. Next, Protagoras assumes the role of the Many and answers on behalf of them, whose views conflict with Socrates' view.

<sup>37</sup> Protagoras, too, seems to consider Socrates as his epistemic peer: 'I commend your enthusiasm and the way you find your way through an argument. I really don't think I am a bad man, certainly the last man to harbour ill will. Indeed, I have told many people that I admire you more than anyone I have met, certainly more than anyone in your generation. And I say that I would not be surprised if you gain among men high repute for wisdom (*Prot.* 361e1-7)'.  
<sup>38</sup> See Long 2013, 43-44.

<sup>39</sup> Christensen, David. "Epistemic Modesty Defended 1." *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*. Ed. David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 76-96, p. 78.

<sup>40</sup> Elga, Adam. "How to Disagree about How to Disagree." Ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 175-186, pp. 177-178.

Protagoras that to be considered to have composed a fine poem a poet should not 'contradict (έναντία λέγει)' himself. That is, a good poem should be consistent.

Before concluding the analysis of the poem, Protagoras asks Socrates, 'Do you know this lyric ode, or shall I recite it all for you?'<sup>41</sup> Socrates reports his reply: 'I told him there was no need, for I knew (έπίσταμαι) the poem, and it happened to be one to which I had given especially careful attention (πάνυ...μεμεληκός).'<sup>42</sup> Protagoras nonetheless tries to urge Socrates again by saying, 'take a better look ("Ορα...βέλτιον)', and Socrates replies, 'As I've said, I'm already familiar enough with it (έσκεμμαι ικανώς).'<sup>43</sup>

Protagoras proceeds by showing how Simonides contradicts himself. According to Protagoras, Simonides 'asserts (υπέθετο) himself that it is hard for a man truly to become good', but then Simonides also denies this. Protagoras then asks Socrates whether the lines mentioned are 'consistent (όμολογεῖσθαι)'. Socrates states that they seem consistent, although he adds, 'I was afraid he [Protagoras] had a point there (καὶ ἄμα μέντοι έφοβούμην μή τί λέγοι)'.<sup>44</sup> Protagoras concludes his analysis in the following way:

"He [Simonides] forgets (έπελάθετο) and criticizes (μέμφεται) Pittacus for saying the same thing as he did, that it is hard for a man to be good, and refuses to accept from him the same thing that he himself said (οὐ φησιν άποδέχεσθαι αύτοῦ τὰ αύτὰ έαυτῷ). And yet, when he criticizes (μέμφεται) him for saying the same thing as himself, he obviously criticizes himself (αὐτῷ μέμφεται) as well, so either the earlier or the later must not be right (*trans.* Lombardo & Bell)."<sup>45</sup>

Socrates describes the events and his feelings resulting from Protagoras' analysis as follows: 'Protagoras got a noisy round of applause for this speech. At first I felt as if I had been hit by a good boxer. Everything went black and I was reeling from his speech and the others' shouting [in token of approval] (*slightly modified*).'<sup>46</sup>

I submit that the cause of Socrates' cognitive dizziness, as it were, is his belief that he studied Simonides' poem carefully and knew it well. Because of

<sup>41</sup> *Prot.* 339b3-b5.

<sup>42</sup> *Prot.* 339b3-5.

<sup>43</sup> *Prot.* 339b9-c1.

<sup>44</sup> *Prot.* 339c4-8.

<sup>45</sup> *Prot.* 339d3-d9. The distinction between "to be" and "become" good will be the basis of Socrates's rebuttal of Protagoras. However, how Socrates contests Protagoras is not relevant for my purpose.

<sup>46</sup> *Prot.* 339d10-e3.

his confidence, Socrates turned down Protagoras' proposal to examine the poem closely. In this respect, Socrates shows a sort of epistemic resoluteness. This attitude 'seems to deprive epistemic agents of resources for correcting their mistakes' since resoluteness impede re-examining our own position, seeking further evidence, or advancing better methods of assessment.<sup>47</sup> If Socrates had looked at the poem once more, he might have noticed that Simonides appeared contradictory. Then Socrates would not have felt as if he was hit by a good boxer, since Socrates, as we shall see, was eventually able to show that Simonides' poem is not inconsistent.

At any rate, having fallen into a sort of cognitive dizziness, Socrates asks Prodicus to assist him in saving Simonides from contradiction, although Socrates admits that he was merely finding extra time to examine 'what the poet meant'.<sup>48</sup> After analysing the relevant lines at length, Socrates demonstrates that Simonides is not contradicting himself by stressing that Simonides distinguishes being good and becoming good. That is, for Simonides, becoming a good man is possible, though difficult, but it is impossible to stay in the state of goodness, i.e. "to be", forever.<sup>49</sup>

This scene stresses the risks of overconfidence and recognizes possible shortcomings of it in analysis and argument. The message of this passage, then, is compatible with the norms governed by philosophical humility, which demand the recognition [a] of the limits (and fallibility) of human understanding, and [b] of the possibility of making mistakes because of the limitations of our method of inquiry.<sup>50</sup>

In this respect, the metaphilosophical aspect of the passage is that we always benefit from reconsidering our arguments and beliefs; hence, we ought not to be so sure that our analysis is complete and that our arguments are correct before we listen to counterarguments. If we are not careful and

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<sup>47</sup> Elgin, Catherine. "Persistent Disagreement." *Disagreement*. Ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 53-68, p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> *Prot.* 339e4-6.

<sup>49</sup> *Prot.* 344b6-c3.

<sup>50</sup> Evnine, Simon J. Learning From One's Mistakes: Epistemic Modesty and the Nature of Belief. Vol. 82. 2001, pp. 173-174. Philosophical humility is also related to the conciliatory approach. According to this approach, '[1] we may make mistakes in assessing evidence; [2] the disagreement of others who have assessed the same evidence differently provides at least some reason to suspect that we have in fact made such a mistake; and [3] reason to suspect that we've made a mistake in assessing the evidence is often also reason to be less confident in the conclusion we initially came to' (Christensen 2013, 76).

willing to have a second look, we can experience a cognitive dizziness, such as Socrates has suffered.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, Plato's characterisation of Socrates in this section is not just negative.<sup>52</sup> By inviting Prodicus to assist him, Socrates buys time to consider the case and find out whether Simonides is contradicting himself. Socrates' re-examination and explanation, I submit, shows the reader why overconfidence hinders us from further inquiry and why critical reasoning and careful checking are necessary for effective investigation and successful demonstration.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

This article analyses some passages of the *Protagoras* to provide some norms for the correct manner of conversation and inquiry. It is suggested that (1) the goal of conversation is agreement and this goal is theoretically possible if the discussants are able to communicate and that (2) Socrates adopts the equal weight view, which renders Protagoras an epistemic peer and maintains the belief that Protagoras might have legitimate ground for holding the opposite view. It is also argued that careful checking and critical thinking have a key role in attaining deeper understanding.

However, the *Protagoras* was not concluded with an agreement on whether virtue can be taught, which was the main point of disagreement, although Socrates would have wished to reach an agreement.<sup>54</sup> More

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<sup>51</sup> In the *Gorgias*, there are, for Socrates, questions which he asks for "further inquiry (sc. ἐπανερωτῶ)" even though something seems "clear (δῆλον)". Such questions are not aimed at the opponent herself, but they allow 'the discussion to proceed in due order (τοῦ ἐξῆς ἕνεκα περαίνεσθαι τὸν λόγον)'. These questions also prevent us from being 'accustomed to guess the other person's meaning because of jumping to conclusions'. See *Gorg.* 453b9-c5. This remark neatly illustrates the necessity of critical reasoning although an argument seems to be clear and the advantage of understanding what the other's argument is in its entirety.

<sup>52</sup> *Prot.* 339e5ff.

<sup>53</sup> Note also that Socrates in the *Gorgias* stresses that an agreement should not result from having more than enough sense of shame (οὐτ' αἰσχύνῃς περισσίστα). Any agreement, for Socrates, should stem from "adequate testing" of an idea if the opponent does not lack wisdom and has the "appropriate" amount of shame. See *Gorg.* 487e1-e6. If this is so, giving credence to others' skill and ideas does not mean underestimating one's own skills. See also *Ap.* 34d9-35a5 for the fine line between arrogance (αὐθαδιζόμενος) and esteem (δόξαν), and the relationship between esteem and shame. Simply, losing one's esteem, i.e. under-estimating oneself, is shame, or disgrace.

<sup>54</sup> Burnyeat, Myles Fredric. "Dramatic Aspects of Plato's *Protagoras*." *The Classical Quarterly* 63.1 (2013): 419-422, p.422.

interestingly, Socrates and Protagoras came to believe the opposite of their original opinion in the end: the latter came to believe that virtue could be taught while the former believed it could not.

Surely though, the discussion was not totally in vain. On the one hand, each side has become aware of the fact that some cases or arguments did not support their original claim. On the other hand, Socrates, for instance, came to have a better understanding of Simonides' poem, of the distinction between being and becoming, and of the nature of virtue.<sup>55</sup>

Besides, from a metaphilosophical perspective, we see that although Socrates and Protagoras could not reach an agreement, both showed flexibility, as they came to hold the opposite view to their original position, but for all that the lack of agreement did not undermine Socrates' eagerness.<sup>56</sup> Socrates suggested Protagoras to re-examine the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught. Protagoras, too, agreed with Socrates that there was need to discuss these questions, but not at that moment.<sup>57</sup>

Agreement, as the goal of conversation, is a theme underpinning the basic qualities of the conversation of Socrates and Protagoras. By underlining the need for further inquiry, Protagoras and Socrates stressed that the conversation was not complete for there was no agreement yet. Agreement is still theoretically possible because [1] Socrates and Protagoras agreed on the style of speech, [2] they considered each other epistemic peers, and [3] they were not steadfast.

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<sup>55</sup> For the last issue see *Prot.* 328-334.

<sup>56</sup> *Prot.* 361a<sub>f</sub>.

<sup>57</sup> *Prot.* 361d7-362a4.

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