

Study Guide on Plato's *Protagoras*

What does Protagoras offer Hippocrates?

- Is Protagoras a good teacher? Does he have correct answers?
- Consider Protagoras' story. Why does he tell it, and what does it show?
 - What does it reveal about Protagoras' conception of justice?
 - In what way(s) is it appropriate to address this question with a story?

Why is Socrates opposed to Hippocrates' choosing Protagoras as a guide? Is it true that Hippocrates would be placing his soul in danger if he entrusted himself to Protagoras?

- Does Socrates think that storytelling and rhetoric obscure true knowledge, or are conducive to it?
- Does the story that Protagoras tells reveal any impiety towards the gods? Consider what it suggests in terms of the design of the world.
- Protagoras says that the most important part of education is poetry. How does Socrates react to this?

What is a sophist (312c¹)?

Consider the dilemma of the student in general by means of the following questions:

- If a student is going to learn from a teacher, by what means will he judge what he hears?
- Is the student subject to the whims of the teacher?
- Consider how this relation compares with that of patient to doctor. How is the patient to judge what the doctor says?

Consider Socrates' method of proceeding. Does he judge what Protagoras says according to what Protagoras already knows? (Consider especially 313d–314c.)

Compare Meno and Protagoras. How are they alike, and how different?

¹ John M. Cooper, editor. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997. (All references in parentheses are to the standard Stephanus pagination for Plato's dialogues.)



Is Protagoras portrayed as a bad man in this dialogue? Consider:

- Is there anything troubling about his story? How does he believe a person comes to have wisdom (321c–d)?
- Is there anything wrong with his account of justice (322c, 323b–c)?
- Recall the discussion of the justice of beasts vs. the justice of man.

At 353a, reference is made to teaching people “what is this experience which they call being overcome by pleasure.” What is this experience?

- How does Socrates explain this experience?
- Is this explanation right?

“Doesn’t our salvation seem, first of all, to be measurement, which is the study of relative excess and deficiency and equality?” (357b). How is this claim reached? Is it correct? (Retrace the argument from the “new beginning” at 349b through the claim at 357b.)

Consider the argument about being “overcome by pleasure” in 354c–355c. If pleasure is the same thing as the good, then measurement would seem to be crucial to the good life. Is Socrates saying that all pleasures are good and vice versa? Are we ever “overcome by pleasure”?

What is the distinction between knowledge that comes from sensation and intellectual knowledge? Consider the ramifications of this distinction, especially with respect to the discussion of pleasure in this dialogue:

- Is intellectual pleasure possible, in addition to the pleasure associated with sense knowledge?
- Does Socrates make this distinction?
- What implications does it have for the argument and conclusion?

Are actions pleasurable or painful only on account of their consequences?

Socrates claims that no one would choose the bad if he could avoid it (358d). What argument does he give in support of this statement? Does this seem true?



Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plato's *Protagoras*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

