

## How Many ἀρεταί in Plato's *Protagoras*?

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A large debate around Plato's *Protagoras* concerns the so-called 'unity of virtue', namely Socrates' ultimate position on the relation between ἀρετή and the five concepts (justice, piety, temperance, wisdom, and courage) connected with it. In this article, I will draw on the language and ideas of the dialogue to question the semantic presupposition which all the scholars involved in the debate, whatever their views, have been sharing, namely that the five concepts can be considered as ἀρεταί, and not just as 'good qualities' (τὰ καλά), or 'parts' (μέρια), or 'names' (ὀνόματα) of ἀρετή, as Plato terms them.

### *Introduction*

In this article, I will argue against scholars' habit of referring to the five good qualities associated with ἀρετή in Plato's *Protagoras* as 'virtues' (viz. 'excellences'), by means of a textual and philosophical analysis. First, I will summarize the dialogue and fetch out the theoretical framework and the conceptual tools with which Plato provides us (section 1). In the light of that I will then deal with the scholarly debate on Socrates' position on the unity of excellence and the problems connected with it (section 2). Discussion of one of these problems will lead me to tackle the translation of ἀρετή (section 3), an interpretive matter preliminary to the major one of the following section, where I will show why the five good qualities should not be regarded as excellences (section 4). Finally, before drawing my conclusions, I will illustrate what the relation between excellence and the five good qualities would be like, if, *per absurdum*, Plato had indeed thought of the latter as excellences (section 5).

### 1. *What the Protagoras says*

Plato's *Protagoras* has a characteristic development. Initially, Socrates casts doubt on the sophist Protagoras' claim to be able to teach ἀρετή to the young Hippocrates, since this subject cannot be taught at all (319a10-b1). However, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates finds himself with proofs that ἀρετή is indeed teachable. Protagoras, for his part, initially stands out for his confidence that ἀρετή can be taught (by so eminent an individual as himself, see 328a8-b5), whereas finally Socrates

describes him as having shifted his position to one maintaining its unteachability. As a result, Socrates concludes, until a discussion about the nature of ἀρετή is accomplished — that is elsewhere, in another dialogue — the problem of its teachability cannot be settled (361c2-d2).

But what has brought them to so paradoxical and aporetic a situation? The cause lies in another about-face, running through most of the dialogue (329d8-361c2) and concerning the way in which the two interlocutors understand the relation between ἀρετή and the set of the five concepts of justice (δικαιοσύνη), piety (ὀσιότης), temperance (σωφροσύνη), wisdom (σοφία), and courage (ἀνδρεία). They start with a whole/parts relation, supported by Protagoras, such as that between a face and its constituent parts, where ἀρετή corresponds to the former and the five concepts to the latter (329d4-e2). Then, through Socrates' *elenchus*, they gradually shift towards a different description, which was originally presented as incompatible with the previous one (329c6-d2) and according to which ἀρετή is one thing called with five names corresponding to the five concepts (329c8-d1, 361b1-3).<sup>1</sup> The consequences of this passage prove negative for both. In his attempt to withstand the gradual replacement of his chosen analogy with the emerging mutual identity of the five parts of ἀρετή,<sup>2</sup> Protagoras opposes the idea that such an identity involves knowledge too (360d4-6), with the result that Socrates accuses him of not wanting a teachable ἀρετή anymore (361b7-c2). At the same time, an ἀρετή that is knowledge, and therefore teachable, is what Socrates did not wish to find either, if his initial criticism of Protagoras' alleged ability to teach it is to stand (361a6-b3).

Bearing this in mind, the fact that in the *Protagoras* Socrates, by his own final admission,<sup>3</sup> cannot give a definite answer as to the teachability of ἀρετή implies his suspension of judgement also

<sup>1</sup> More precisely, at 361b1-3 Socrates says that he has ended up arguing to the effect that: (S) 'Justice, temperance, and courage are knowledge, which is the best way to prove the teachability of ἀρετή'. (S) is just the last link of a chain of inferences which Socrates leaves implicit and which are based on four identities between the five parts of ἀρετή which he has secured during the dialogue, namely: (1) 'Justice is piety' (330b7-332a4); (2) 'Temperance is wisdom' (332a4-333b5); (3) 'Temperance is justice' (333b7-338e5); (4) 'Courage is wisdom' (349a6-360e5). From (1)-(4), by the principle of transitivity of identity, Socrates has tacitly derived the following: (5) 'Wisdom is justice' (from (2) and (3)); (6) 'Temperance is piety' (from (1) and (3)); (7) 'Wisdom is piety' (from (1) and (5)); (8) 'Courage is temperance' (from (2) and (4)); (9) 'Courage is justice' (from (4) and (5)); (10) 'Courage is piety' (from (4) and (7)). Now, (1)-(10) are all the possible identities between justice, piety, temperance, wisdom, and courage and from them Socrates can conclude: (S') "'Wisdom", "justice", "temperance", "courage", and "piety" are different names denoting one and the same thing, which is ἀρετή'. (S') perfectly corresponds to the thing/names description of 329c8-d1 and it also entails (S), provided one assumes a synonymous use of 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' (legitimate because attested in the dialogue; see 349d2-351d2) and leaves out piety (variations in the list of concepts, too, are attested; see *infra*, 8). Interestingly enough, no scholar seems to have suggested this reconstruction before, although it seems to be the only one able to account for both (S) and the seemingly unrelated (1)-(4) to which a good 19 Stephanus pages are nonetheless devoted.

<sup>2</sup> See n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> And he can hardly be using irony here, since Hippocrates' education is at stake. On the contrary, considering his reservations for sophistic teaching which he has been showing since 313c4-314c2, he likely would rather conclude for the unteachability of ἀρετή.

about the kind of relation which holds between ἀρετή and the five concepts. In fact, the teachability of ἀρετή has been concluded from the above web of identities between the five concepts, which is peculiar to the thing/names description;<sup>4</sup> therefore, in putting into brackets the hypothesis of the teachability of ἀρετή for a moment, the new inquiry Socrates has announced is expected to do the same with the thing/names description, which entailed its teachability.<sup>5</sup> Both the teachability of ἀρετή and the thing/names description could be perfectly confirmed after such a new analysis has reached its conclusion; but until then it would be Epimetheic to speak (cf. 361d2-3).

## 2. *The debate on the unity of ἀρετή in the Protagoras*

If this account of the dialogue makes sense, and at the end of the dialogue Socrates cannot have an ultimate position on the relation between ἀρετή and the five concepts connected with it, it is striking that one of the most animated scholarly debate about Plato's *Protagoras* concerns precisely this topic, which sometimes goes under the shorter label of 'unity of ἀρετή'.<sup>6</sup> With the exception of Manuwald,<sup>7</sup> interpreters do not refrain from taking Socrates as committed to one of three conceptions of that relation that he proposes to Protagoras at 329c3-e2: these are the thing/names description, the

<sup>4</sup> See n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> If we go into details, it would be paradoxical for Socrates to suspend judgement whether ἀρετή is teachable, but at the same time to have an opinion whether ἀρετή is knowledge, because his words at 361b3-7 amount to saying that ἀρετή is knowledge if and only if ἀρετή is teachable. But since 'ἀρετή is knowledge' means that 'knowledge' is a name of the thing which is ἀρετή (see n. 1), Socrates is bound to suspend judgement about the thing/names description too.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the titles of the following: Manuwald, B. 2005. 'The unity of virtue in Plato's *Protagoras*'. *OSAPh* 29: 115-35; Penner, P. 1973. 'The Unity of Virtue'. *PhR* 82.1: 35-68; Devereux, D.T. 1992. 'The Unity of the Virtues in Plato's *Protagoras* and *Laches*'. *PhR* 101.4: 765-89; Ferrari, F. 2004. 'I Pragmata e il problema dell'Unità della Virtù'. In *Il Protagora di Platone: struttura e problematiche*, vol. 1, ed. G. Casertano, 292-300, Napoli; Di Pasquale Barbanti, M. 2004. 'Unità e insegnabilità della virtù. La coerenza di Protagora'. In *Il Protagora di Platone: struttura e problematiche*, vol. 1, ed. G. Casertano, 301-16, Napoli; Natali, C. 2004. 'Socrate, Aristotele e l'unità della virtù'. In *Il Protagora di Platone: struttura e problematiche*, vol. 1, ed. G. Casertano, 356-74, Napoli; Vlastos, G. 1973. 'The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*'. In *Platonic Studies*, ed. G. Vlastos, 221-69, Princeton; Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. 1997. 'Socrates and the Unity of the Virtues'. *The Journal of Ethics* 1.4: 311-24; Kremm, D. 2009. 'The Unity of virtue: Toward a Middle ground Between identity and inseparability in Socratic virtue'. *Arché* 3.1: 15-30; Centrone, B. 2004. 'Platonic Virtue as a Holon: from the *Laws* to the *Protagoras*'. In *Plato Ethicus: Philosophy is Life: Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Piacenza (Italy) 2003*, eds. M. Migliori, L.M. Napolitano Valditara and D. Del Forno, 93-106, Sankt Augustin; Kahn, C.H. 1976. 'Plato on the Unity of Virtues'. In *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*, ed. W.H. Werkmeister, 21-39, Assen; Ferejohn, M.T. 1982. 'The Unity of Virtue and the Objects of Socratic Inquiry'. *JHPH* 20.1: 1-21.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Manuwald 2005, 131. Migliori does likewise, although he does not accept this standstill, deeming it possible to overcome it by looking at other dialogues (Migliori, M. 2004. 'What is fair and good about Virtue'. In *Plato Ethicus: Philosophy is Life: Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Piacenza (Italy) 2003*, eds. M. Migliori, L.M. Napolitano Valditara and D. Del Forno, 177-226, Sankt Augustin).

analogy with gold and its parts, and the face/parts analogy. The thing/names side, started by Penner,<sup>8</sup> is the most numerous<sup>9</sup> and its view is also the most understandable, since, at least, it is grounded on 361b1-3, where Socrates indirectly admits having argued for it.<sup>10</sup> The first supporter of the gold/parts analogy was Vlastos, whose study launched the debate as such, in 1972.<sup>11</sup> However, this image vanishes from the text as soon as Protagoras opts for the face/parts one over it as early as at 329d4-e2. No hint of it can be traced later, and especially in the two characters' conclusion of 361b1-3, which presupposes a full mutual identity between the five concepts, which is impossible for the parts of gold, because the latter are said to differ the one from the other, and from the whole, in size.<sup>12</sup> Vlastos himself needs to stress scattered passages, without regard of their place and role in the dialectical development of the dialogue, in order to make the gold/parts analogy square with Socrates' appeal to 'biconditionality',<sup>13</sup> namely with the idea that by having the property which is expressed by any of the five concepts, one necessarily has those which are expressed by the other four too (329e2-4). However, this idea cannot apply to the parts of a mass concept and, unluckily enough, to those of gold in particular.<sup>14</sup> Finally, we have Centrone's preference for the face/parts analogy.<sup>15</sup> Trying to describe it as consistent with biconditionality, he makes this remark: 'that Protagoras, after having appropriated this image, grants the possibility of possessing a virtue independently of another one does not mean that such a connection is logically implied; this points rather to an inconsistent use of

<sup>8</sup> Penner 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Devereux 1992, Ferrari 2004, 300, Di Pasquale Barbanti 2004, 306-7, Natali 2004.

<sup>10</sup> See n. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Vlastos, G. 1972. 'The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*'. *RMeta* 25.3: 415-58, reprinted with substantial additions and corrections as Vlastos, G. 1973. 'The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*'. In *Platonic Studies*, ed. G. Vlastos, 221-69, Princeton.

<sup>12</sup> By contrast, one may agree with O'Brien in seeing gold, and hence ἀρετή, as 'the knowledge of good and evil' (but *contra* it, see *infra*, 5), and the parts of gold as 'the individual virtues', each of which corresponding to 'some specific range of action or behaviour', but also having 'all the qualities of every other piece and of the whole' (O'Brien, D. 2003. 'Socrates and Protagoras on Virtue'. *OSAPh* 24: 59-131, 95). However, the fact remains that this analogy requires numerically distinct parts, whereas mutual identity between the five concepts implies one single object called by many names.

<sup>13</sup> Vlastos 1973, 224 *et alibi*.

<sup>14</sup> Other upholders of this analogy, but less positive about it and sometimes open to the thing/names description too, are Brickhouse/Smith 1997; O'Brien 2003; Casertano, G. 2004. 'Virtues and Virtue: Names and Discourse'. In *Plato Ethicus: Philosophy is Life: Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Piacenza (Italy) 2003*, eds. M. Migliori, L.M. Napolitano Valditara and D. Del Forno, 77-91, Sankt Augustin, 84; Kremm, D. 2009. 'The Unity of virtue: Toward a Middle ground Between identity and inseparability in Socratic virtue'. *Arché* 3.1: 15-30.

<sup>15</sup> Centrone 2004.

the image, which Protagoras only is responsible for'.<sup>16</sup> Luckily enough, however, a person can be born without, or can lose, a part of his or her face, without for this very reason lacking the others.

Another group of interpreters, starting with Kahn, rightly acknowledge the uncertainty characterizing the end of the work,<sup>17</sup> but deem it necessary to solve it, by supplementing the *Protagoras* with external testimonies drawn from other dialogues. On the assumption that 'despite his supreme literary gifts Plato is a philosopher rather than a dramatist, and his dialogues do not have that intellectual independence from one another that we may find, for example, in the tragedies of Sophocles or Shakespeare, the comedies of Aristophanes or Shaw', Kahn concludes that 'we can no more hope to give a philosophical account of what he says about virtue in the *Protagoras*, without taking into account what the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Republic* have to say on the same theme'.<sup>18</sup> However, the sole fact that other Platonic dialogues help answer a question that ours poses does not necessarily mean that Plato wants us to transfer that answer from the former to the latter. On a more general level, the idea that one text's silence on a matter is necessarily a shortcoming to be amended with the supplement of a more eloquent source is something that it is no wonder Kahn fails to justify.

Nonetheless, other scholars too have undertaken such an exercise, mostly through the adoption of some specific pages of the *Laches*.<sup>19</sup> Penner himself, who, as seen above, concludes in favour of the thing/names description, writes this: 'I now respond to the challenge to say more about this single entity which makes men brave, wise, temperate, just, pious, virtuous, knowledgeable. It is the knowledge of good and evil. This becomes obvious, I think, from the chief argument of the *Laches* (I97E10-199E12)'.<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, that passage is indeed reminiscent of things which are said in our dialogue, but it is no surprise that Penner fails to justify its utility in reading the *Protagoras* and can appeal only to an imprecise 'challenge to say more'.

The interest of *Laches* 197e10-199e12 lies in its definition of ἀρετή as the knowledge of all the goods and evils of every time (ἡ περὶ πάντων ἀγαθῶν τε καὶ κακῶν καὶ πάντως ἔχόντων, 199c7-d1). To the scholars defending it, this has sounded as the definition for which the *Protagoras* calls. It fits, they say, with Socrates' final conclusion that ἀρετή — as well as justice, temperance, and courage — boils down to knowledge (361b1-2); and, to an even higher degree, it fits ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη ('the art of measurement', 356d4 et alibi), namely the 'science which measures the relative magnitudes of

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>17</sup> Kahn 1976, 25-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Penner 1973; Woodruff, P. 1976. 'Socrates on the Parts of Virtue'. *CJPh* Supplement 2: 101-16; Ferejohn, M.T. 1982. 'The Unity of Virtue and the Objects of Socratic Inquiry'. *JHPH* 20.1: 1-21.

<sup>20</sup> Penner 1973, 60.

present and future goods and evils, not being deceived by the effects of time perspective’, as Penner puts it in reference to 356c8-357a4.<sup>21</sup> ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη is also said to guide one towards good action (356d1) and the preservation of their life (356e6). It thus does possess some traits which make think of it as an alter ego of the *Laches*’ notion of ἀρετή. The problem, which scholars overlooked, is that the dialogue that features it is the *Protagoras*, which ends up with Socrates’ still unsatisfied curiosity about the nature of ἀρετή. And this crucial piece of knowledge is still missing because he and Protagoras have never sought it at any point in the dialogue, not even when they come across that still likely candidate for the title of ἀρετή, which is ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη. For ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη comes up solely as a corollary product of a digression based on a hedonistic premise (355b3-c1) that Penner himself might find difficult to see as genuinely Socratic. In fact, Socrates assumes it for purely dialectical purposes, in order to find a common ground with the multitude, from which to tackle their previous objection about being overwhelmed by pleasures and pains (352d3-e2).<sup>22</sup>

### 3. How to translate ἀρετή?

The fact that the *Protagoras*’ ἀρετή cannot equal what is called this in the *Laches* is of some importance for me to now determine my English translation of the term, left in Greek so far.

At a general level, in and outside Plato, this word is mostly rendered with ‘virtue’. However, as Kerferd observes, this choice tends to obscure the fact that ‘*arete* comprised all those qualities in a man which made for success in Greek society and which could confidently be expected to secure the admiration of a man’s fellow citizens, followed in many cases by substantial material rewards’.<sup>23</sup> This definition perfectly tallies with the political value given to excellence in our dialogue, which is so strong that ἀρετή and πολιτικὴ ἀρετή are used synonymously.<sup>24</sup> More particularly, it also corresponds to what Hippocrates expects to gain from the ἀρετή that Protagoras promised to teach him, namely private and political success (318e5-319a2) so as to become illustrious (ἐλλόγιμος) in the city (316b10-c1). Since Socrates means to ascertain the teachability of such an ἀρετή, we can see a first reason to translate the word accordingly, namely as something like ‘excellence’, rather than with ‘virtue’.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Kahn 1976, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Kerferd, G.B. 1981. *The sophistic movement*. Cambridge, 131.

<sup>24</sup> The synonymous use of ἀρετή, πολιτικὴ ἀρετή and ἀνδρὸς ἀρετή can be seen, for example, in the smooth transition from πολιτικὴ ἀρετή to ἀρετή at 324a1-5, or in 322e2-323a3 and 324e5-325a2, where the concepts usually associated with ἀρετή are said to belong to πολιτικὴ ἀρετή, and to ἀνδρὸς ἀρετή too.

Furthermore, as Guthrie brilliantly points out: ‘it was Socrates who enlarged the meaning of *arête* from talent or proficiency in a particular art or function to something like virtue in our sense, the prerequisite of a good human life’. The originality of Socrates’ *ἀρετή* — Guthrie says — essentially consists in ‘the emphasis which he laid on it as a moral quality, rather than simply the prerequisite of success’.<sup>25</sup> An *ἀρετή* thus described, then, squares with the *Laches*’ definition of it as the knowledge of all the goods and evils. Hence, a translation of moral kind, such as ‘virtue’, would be suitable in that context. However, as seen above, the *Laches*’ definition of *ἀρετή* does not apply to the *Protagoras*; therefore, the translation connected with it, too, although widespread, is not appropriate in our dialogue.

Having said this much about the grounds for preferring ‘excellence’ over ‘virtue’, I must also add that the translation of *ἀρετή* is a minor point compared to the interpretive issue next to be addressed, which more affects the comprehension of Plato’s *Protagoras*, in general, and of its conceptions of the unity of *ἀρετή*, in particular.

#### 4. *Why the five good qualities cannot be excellences*

Scholars concerned with Plato’s *Protagoras* share a tacit assumption that the five concepts connected with excellence are excellences themselves. However, this belief has no textual ground and it seems rather the projection of a later Platonic vocabulary onto the *Protagoras*; in other words, it is another case of inappropriate reading of this dialogue through the filter of other dialogues.

In order to see this, one may start by taking into account the occurrences of the lemma *ἀρετή* in this text, which, as a search in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* shows, number 57.<sup>26</sup> A first indication, although not decisive, of Plato’s reluctance to multiply excellence is the number of plural forms of the word which are returned: one. This form comes up at 323a8, in the dative *ἀρεταῖς*, joined to the adjective *ἄλλαις* (‘other’) and indicating a variety of excellences contrasted with the political one (323b2), as the next example of the aulete (323a9) immediately shows. Translators do not even render it by ‘excellences’, as in Taylor’s ‘the other skills’.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, this one plural occurrence of *ἀρετή*

<sup>25</sup> Guthrie, W.K.C. 1971. *The Sophists*. Cambridge, 253.

<sup>26</sup> *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*® Digital Library. Ed. Maria C. Pantelia. University of California, Irvine. <http://www.tlg.uci.edu> (accessed 5 February 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, C.C.W., ed. 1992. *Plato: Protagoras*. Oxford, 15. Such a use of *ἀρετή* is attested only on another occasion in the text, shortly earlier, at 322d7, in the singular *ἀρετή τεκτονική* (‘carpentry’). In all the other cases, *ἀρετή* denotes that sole excellence the teachability of which is at issue in the dialogue, and whose political connotation has been shown above (*supra*, 5-6).

confirms, rather than opposes, what distinctly emerges from the rest, namely the author's interest in only one excellence.

If that is the case, then one could wonder whether on at least one of the 56 occasions where ἀρετή features in the singular, the word is associated with any of the above five concepts, so as to say 'justice/piety/temperance/courage/wisdom is an ἀρετή' or something equivalent. The answer to this question is negative. Indeed, even the two cases potentially relevant in this regard prove not to be so on closer inspection. These are 323a7, where we read μετέχειν δικαιοσύνης τε καὶ τῆς ἄλλης πολιτικῆς ἀρετῆς, and 323b2 with ἐν δὲ δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἐν τῇ ἄλλῃ πολιτικῇ ἀρετῇ. Following Vlastos, one could read both of them as referring to 'justice and every/some other political virtue'.<sup>28</sup> However, what comes immediately before, namely Protagoras' narration of Prometheus' myth (320c8-323a4), is clear enough in presenting justice as something which, along with respect (322c4) and temperance (323a2), is required for a single thing called political excellence, and not as one out of many possible political excellences. Therefore, the two phrases must, rather, refer to something like Taylor's 'justice and the rest of the excellence of a citizen',<sup>29</sup> and they cannot be cited as evidence for a multiplicity of excellences.<sup>30</sup>

So, 'excellences' is not the heading under which Plato himself put the five concepts supposed to be either parts (μέρη) or names (ὀνόματα) of excellence (329c7-d1 et alibi).<sup>31</sup> What is more, Plato does not qualify this group in any other way, and when he needs to refer to them as a category, he comes up with no better solution than either to use general phrases such as πάντα ταῦτα ('all of these', 329c5, 349c2), ταῦτα [...] ἃ νυνδὴ ἐγὼ ἔλεγον ('these which I named just now', 329c8-d1), ταῦτα πάντα ('all of these', 349d2), and πάντα χρήματα ('all things', 361b1), or to list them, and not always in a consistent way. Initially, at 322c4 the concepts contributing to excellence are two, namely justice and respect; at 325a1 they become three, namely justice, temperance, and piety; between 329b7 and 330a2 they become the aforementioned five concepts the interrelation between which Socrates and

<sup>28</sup> Ostwald's translation in Vlastos, G., ed. 1956. *Plato: Protagoras*. New York, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor 1992, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Although less problematic, three other passages are worth mentioning, because potentially misleading in this respect. In reporting Protagoras' views, both 325a2 and 239c5-6 present justice, temperance, and piety as *collectively* (συνλήβδην) making up that one thing (ἐν αὐτό/τι) which is (ἄνδρὸς) ἀρετή. One must note how that is the opposite of saying that each of these good qualities is *an* ἀρετή, because this would be tantamount to saying that they collectively are three distinct ἀρεταί. Likewise, at 361b1-3, Socrates is said to have concluded that excellence is knowledge — and hence is teachable — from the fact that justice, temperance, and courage are knowledge — and hence teachable — on the implicit premise that these three good qualities are just names denoting the same one thing, which is ἀρετή (see n. 1). Again, this is at odds with saying that each of them is *an* ἀρετή, which would also be incompatible with the thing/names description (see *infra*, 9).

<sup>31</sup> Surprisingly, Taylor not only fails to see this translational point, but he also misleads the reader as to the original text, in calling these concepts by the Greek 'aretai' too (Taylor 1992, 107).

Protagoras discuss up to 360e5, and which hence constitute the preferable list, to which scholars have always referred; finally, at 361b1-3 piety is left out. Plato thus gives the impression of deliberately treating this issue with little precision and a theoretical carelessness that is characteristic of the dialogue, if only we recall, again, that eventually Socrates himself admits the mistake of having tried to assess the teachability of a concept before defining it (361c2-d6). After all, the agonistic context of the *Protagoras*, with Hippocrates' education at stake, is not the best one in which to embark on a well-pondered reflection.

The only specific attribute which Plato seems to apply, although implicitly, to our five concepts on one occasion is τὰ ἀγαθὰ (323d7), which can be translated, with Taylor, as 'the good qualities'.<sup>32</sup> This becomes particularly clear by noting how, soon after using this phrase, Socrates introduces also τὰναντία τούτων κακά (323e1), namely 'the opposite bad qualities',<sup>33</sup> among which he names injustice and impiety (323e3). It hence follows that the opposites of these bad qualities, namely justice and piety, can be considered good qualities, and, by analogy, so can the other three concepts of temperance, wisdom, and courage, usually recalled along with them. Although Plato does not use this label elsewhere, I, for convenience, will adopt it in the discussion to follow, because it is, at least, more grounded than the traditional 'excellences' of scholars, never corroborated by the text.

Plato's word choice, however, is just one of the reasons to revise the above traditional assumption and, if alone, it would not be sufficient for it. After all, from the absence of a word in a text it does not immediately follow that the object to which the word refers is absent too. The *Protagoras* may well speak of a group of excellences in one way or another, without having to refer to them with any particular term. What is more relevant and gives substance to these linguistic remarks is consideration of Plato's thought, more precisely, of the two conceptions of the unity of excellence that Socrates and Protagoras take into account. It is by looking at them that we become sure that Plato does not speak of excellences for the simple reason that he cannot be thinking of such objects in the first place.

Let us start from the thing/names description, which says that the five good qualities are different names that denote one and the same thing, which is excellence (πάντα ὀνόματα τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐνὸς ὄντος, at 329d1). According to this description, one can say 'justice is excellence', 'piety is excellence', 'temperance is excellence' etc., as well as 'justice, piety, temperance etc. are, individually, excellence'. But can he say 'justice, piety, temperance etc. are excellences' as well? The answer is 'no', as that would imply that there is more than one excellence, whereas Socrates unequivocally posits it as 'one and the same thing' (τὸ αὐτὸ ἐν ὄν) named in different ways (πάντα

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

ὀνόματα).<sup>34</sup> Problems occur with the face/parts analogy, too. If the good qualities were excellences, then the many parts composing a face would be faces themselves, which would make the fundamental distinction between the *relata* of the analogy disappear.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, in Plato's *Protagoras* two conceptions of the relation between excellence and the five good qualities come into play, and both of them rule out the possibility that those qualities are excellences, although, alas, all scholars call them thus.

##### 5. *A fruitful counterfactual*

Having completed the refutation that I intended to carry out, I may well conclude my inquiry here, but before this, it is still worth testing the feasibility of a plurality of excellences within the third conception of the relation between excellence and the five good qualities that the dialogue offers, and which is not disdained by scholars, namely the gold/parts analogy. As shown above, this analogy functions only as an option that is offered to Protagoras once and that is straightaway refused by him, without leaving any trace of itself later. Nonetheless, the results of this test will corroborate the conclusions to which I have already come through the paths I took in the previous section.

First of all, not only did the gold/parts analogy perfectly work with the *relata* excellence and excellences — unlike the other two conceptions — but it does so with them only. In fact, according to its formulation (329d6-8), each part is distinct from the others and from the whole (like the parts of a piece of gold, which differ in greatness and smallness), but it also shares the same material nature as the others and as the whole (the part is gold as much as the rest of the piece). From that it follows, first, that the ontological requirement of the analogy would not be satisfied, if the parts of excellence were, instead, something other than excellences, such as I showed the five good qualities to be. But, more importantly, we can also infer that the converse too is the case, namely that if Plato had thought

<sup>34</sup> A parallel worth drawing is with a famous example that Gottlob Frege makes when he, too, deals with 'the designation of a *single object*' (Geach, P. and Black, M. 1960. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford, 57. Translation of the German 'die Bezeichnung eines einzelnen Gegenstandes', in Frege, G. 1892. 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung'. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100: 25-50 at 27; italics are mine in both cases). One and the same object, namely the planet Venus, is the 'reference' ('Bedeutung') of two names, namely 'morning star' and 'evening star'. Again, one can say 'the morning star is Venus', 'the evening star is Venus', 'the morning star and the evening star are, individually, Venus', but not 'the morning star and the evening star are *Venuses*', because only one planet Venus exists and is denoted by those two names.

<sup>35</sup> One may argue that since a face does not have a nature beyond the natures of its parts, excellence is nothing above and beyond (the collection of) its parts. But this is a far cry from saying that each of those parts is a face, namely that each part of excellence is an excellence, which would make the use of the plural 'excellences' possible. Notably, Centrone himself points out the fact that 'each part of the face is not a kind of face' as a flaw in the analogy, under the unargued assumption that, by contrast, each part of excellence is a kind of excellence (Centrone 2004, 103-104).

of the relation excellence/excellences, and thus spoken of ἀρετή and ἀρεταί, he would have opted for an analogy such as the gold/parts one, and so expanded it further, rather than making his characters brush it aside, as they do.

Significantly, the biconditionality between talking of excellence and excellences, on the one hand, and the use of the gold/parts analogy, on the other, is supported by a comparison with other two passages from the Platonic corpus, the first of which is this:

Suppose you were molding gold into every shape there is, going on non-stop re-molding one shape into the next. If someone then were to point at one, and ask you ‘What *is* it?’, your safest answer by far, with respect to truth would be to say, ‘gold’, but never ‘triangle’ or any of the other shapes that come to be in the gold, as though it *is* these, because they change even while you are making the statement. However, that answer, too, should be satisfactory, as long as the shapes are willing to accept “what is such” as someone’s designation. This has a degree of safety.<sup>36</sup> (Pl. *Ti.* 50a-b)

Again, we have many objects sharing a single homogeneous substance that gives to all of them the qualification of gold as their proper nature. However, the different shapes in which they are moulded endow them with a specific spatial delimitation that, as far as their appearance is concerned, enables one to distinguish them. Depending on whether one is interested in their nature or in their appearance, the answer to the question ‘what is it?’ returns, thus, two different, yet both valid, answers.

This corresponds exactly to what has just been said about the working of the *Protagoras*’ gold/parts analogy if only it had been expounded, and, thus, if only the dialogue had talked of excellence and excellences. One can appreciate the same here, where Plato does make use of the plural ἀρεταί:

And likewise also with the virtues, however many and various they may be, they all have one common character whereby they are virtues, and on which one would of course be wise to keep an eye when one is giving a definitive answer to the question of what virtue really is.<sup>37</sup> (Pl. *Meno* 72c)

Although not bringing in any analogy, this passage pinpoints the same idea underlying the gold analogies in the *Protagoras* and in the *Timaeus*: just like different parts of the same piece of gold, the true nature of the many excellences here mentioned lies not in what distinguishes them the one from the other, but in their all being instances of that same character that is excellence.

## Conclusion

<sup>36</sup> Zeyl, D.J., transl. 1997. *Timaeus*. In *Plato. Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper, 1224-91, Indianapolis, 1253.

<sup>37</sup> Lamb, W.R.M., transl. 1924. *Plato: Laches. Protagoras. Meno. Euthydemus*. Cambridge (MA), 271.

In conclusion, the common use of the word ‘excellences’ to indicate the five good qualities associated with excellence in Plato’s *Protagoras* should be rejected both on linguistic and philosophical grounds. As far as the latter are concerned, scholars have failed to realize that, in reflecting on the way excellence stands with these qualities, Socrates and Protagoras have appealed to only the face/parts analogy and the thing/names description. This, in turn, has contributed to the scholars’ failure to see also the logical impossibility of a plurality of excellences in this dialogue. Further confirmation of this lies in that scholars’ choice of terminology, if adopted, would entail a reading of the relation between excellence and the five good qualities in conformity with the gold/parts analogy, whose philosophical meaning is expounded, and which is espoused, in other dialogues, but not in the *Protagoras*.

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