

Plato  
*The Protagoras*  
Penguin Books, 2005, pages 15-30

In this extract, Plato presents the sophist (i.e., professional philosopher) Protagoras talking with Socrates about how people become good.

The extract contains a theory of moral education, and a theory of punishment. But most importantly, it is a discussion of the principles of *democracy*. The view that Socrates puts forward, and that Protagoras endorses and explains — that ethical competence is a *non-technical* matter, and a universal human quality — is understood by both him and Socrates to be one of the basic ideas behind democracy. Think about why this is so.

Do not assume that the ‘story’ that Protagoras tells shows that he thinks our ethical abilities have a divine origin. The story is certainly *allegorical*. Protagoras was a known agnostic, who famously declared that he had no view at all on whether or not the gods exist. In which case, you need to consider what its allegorical meaning might be.

Anyway, after we'd come in and spent a little time taking in the scene, we went up to Protagoras, and I said, 'Protagoras, I'd  
 b like you to meet Hippocrates; he and I have come especially to see you.'

'And did you want to talk with me in private,' he said, 'or in front of the others as well?'

'We don't mind either way,' I said. 'Why don't we tell you why we've come, and then you can decide for yourself?'

'All right then,' he said. 'So why have you come?'

'Well, Hippocrates here is a local boy, Apollodorus' son – from a powerful and wealthy family; and in terms of his natural abilities, I'd say he's on a par with any of the young men his age. And his ambition, as far as I can tell, is to make a name  
 c for himself in the city; and he thinks the best way to make that happen would be to spend some time as your pupil. That's it. So now you decide whether you think you should talk this over with us in private or in front of the others as well.'

'That's very thoughtful of you, Socrates – and quite right too. After all, if a man is an outsider, and comes into large and powerful cities, and persuades the very best of the young men in those cities to give up spending their time with anyone else, family or friends, young or old, and to spend their time with him alone, so as to better themselves under his influence . . .  
 d well, a man who does that for a living has to watch his back. It can cause a lot of resentment, and hostility, and ill-will.<sup>24</sup>

'My own view is that the sophist's profession has been around for a very long time; it's just that people who practised it in the

past devised covers for their profession and disguised it, because they were worried about offending people. Some of them used poetry as their cover: Homer, for example, and Hesiod, and Simonides.<sup>25</sup> Others used religious cults and oracular songs: Orpheus and Musaeus.<sup>26</sup> And I've noticed some people even use athletics-training, like Iccus from Taras, and another who's still alive and as good a sophist as any: Herodicus from Selumbria (although he's from Megara originally). And music; that was used as a cover by your own Agathocles – a great sophist – and by Pythoclides from Ceos,<sup>27</sup> and plenty of others.

'All these people, I'm saying, hid behind the screens of these various professions, because they were scared of people's resentment. But in my case, that's exactly where I do things differently from all of them. And that's because I believe that they completely failed to achieve what they intended: they never fooled the *powerful* people in their cities; and they're the only ones the disguises were aimed at (because, let's face it, ordinary people never notice anything anyway; they just repeat whatever's dictated to them by the powerful). Now if you try to get away with something, and don't succeed, and instead get found out, that shows it was a pretty dumb idea even to make the attempt, and it's bound to make everyone even more hostile, because people look on someone who tries that sort of thing as being dishonest on top of everything else. That's why in my case I've followed the exact opposite path: I freely admit that I'm a sophist and that educating people is my job; and I believe that method of protecting myself – admitting what I do rather than denying it – is far better than theirs. And I've taken a number of other measures besides that, the result of which is that nothing terrible ever happens to me – touch wood – through my admitting that I'm a sophist. And I've been practising my profession now for many years.<sup>28</sup> I've been around for quite a few in total. I'm old enough to be the father of any one of you.

'So what I'd very much prefer, Socrates, if it's all right with you, is if we talked this over quite openly, in front of all the people here.'

So I said – because I had the suspicion that he wanted to

show off a bit in front of Hippias and Prodicus, make a big fuss over the fact that a pair of his adoring fans had arrived – ‘Why don’t we invite Hippias and Prodicus over as well, and their pupils, so they can all listen in.’

‘By all means!’ said Protagoras.

‘In that case, would you like us to set up some chairs in a circle,’ said Callias, ‘so you can hold the talk sitting down?’

That’s what we decided we should do, and at the prospect of listening to these great minds we all gladly took hold of the chairs and benches ourselves,<sup>29</sup> and arranged them beside Hippias (since that’s where most of the benches already were); and at the same time, Callias and Alcibiades brought Prodicus over, after getting him out of bed, along with Prodicus’ pupils.

Once we were all sitting in a group, Protagoras began: ‘Now then Socrates, would you be so kind as to explain for the benefit of those who’ve just joined us the question you raised a few minutes ago when you spoke to me on the young man’s behalf?’

So I said, ‘I’ll start from the same point as I did just a moment ago, Protagoras – our reason for coming to see you. The situation is this: Hippocrates here is keen to become your pupil; and he says he’d like to find out exactly how being your pupil will affect him. What’s he going to get out of it? That’s really all we wanted to say.’

Here’s how Protagoras replied: ‘Quite simply, my young friend, if you become my pupil, what will happen is, the very day you start your tuition, you’ll go home better than you were before; and the day after that the same thing will happen; and with every single day that passes you’ll constantly improve.’

When I’d heard that, I said, ‘Well, no surprises there, Protagoras. I could have figured that much out. I mean, after all, even you, in spite of your long experience and great knowledge, even you would get “better” if somebody taught you something you happened not to know anything about. That’s not the answer I’m looking for. Look, imagine Hippocrates here had a sudden change of heart and wanted to become the apprentice of that young painter who’s settled in Athens just recently – Zeuxippus from Heraclea – and suppose he went to him, the same way he’s come to you, and heard the same thing he’s just

heard from you, that with each passing day he'd "get better" and "improve", and followed that up by asking, "Yes, but better at what? What am I going to improve *at*?" Zeuxippus would be able to tell him he'd get better at painting. And suppose he signed up with Protagoras from Thebes, and heard the same thing from him, and again asked what exactly he'd be getting better at, with each passing day, by being his pupil. He'd say, "better at playing the flute".<sup>30</sup> That's the kind of answer I want you to give my young friend, and me too, since I'm the one asking the question for him: "Hippocrates here, if he becomes Protagoras' pupil, will, the very first day he starts his tuition, return home better, and will improve like that with every passing day" – but better at what, Protagoras? Improve in what way?

When Protagoras had heard what I had to say, he said, 'You put your question really well, Socrates. And I like giving answers to people who ask good questions. So – if Hippocrates comes to me, his experience will be quite unlike what would have happened to him had he enrolled with any of the other sophists. The fact is, other sophists abuse the young. They take young men who have specifically avoided skilled professions and thrust them, against their will, right back into mere skills – by teaching them mathematics, and astronomy, and geometry, and music' – and as he spoke he shot a glance at Hippias – 'but if he comes to me, he'll only be taught the thing he's come to me to learn. The course I teach is in good decision-making, whether it's in his personal life, where the question is how he can best manage his own household, or in public matters, where the aim is to make him as effective as he can be at handling and debating the affairs of his city.'

'Let me see if I follow what you're saying,' I said. 'It looks to me as if you're talking about civic and ethical know-how.<sup>31</sup> You're saying you actually undertake to turn people into good citizens.'

'That's exactly right, Socrates. That's precisely the service I offer.'

'Wow!' I said. 'In that case that's quite an impressive little skill you've got there – if what you're saying is true. Because

I'm going to be perfectly frank with you, Protagoras; the fact is, I always thought this was something people couldn't be taught – of course, seeing as it's you saying otherwise, I don't see how I can possibly have any doubts. But I suppose I should explain my reasons for thinking this is something that can't be taught or . . . supplied from one person to another.

'The thing is, I look upon Athenians – as does everyone else in Greece – as being pretty smart people.<sup>32</sup> And I notice that when we come together for our public meetings, sometimes, if the city has to do something that involves, say, a building project, then it's the builders who are called in to give advice on the construction work; and if it involves making ships, then it's the shipbuilders – and it's the same with everything else; everything, that is, that they think of as being teachable and learnable. And if anyone else tries to give them any advice, someone they don't recognize as a professional, then it doesn't matter how beautiful he is, or how wealthy, or how important his family is – they won't pay any more attention to what he has to say; they'll just laugh at him and heckle him, until the man trying to speak gets shouted down and backs off of his own accord, or the archers drag him away, or haul him out, on the orders of the presiding officers.

'So that's the way they do things when they're discussing something they think of as a matter of technical know-how. But when they've got to come to some general decision on how our city should be run,<sup>33</sup> then anyone at all can get up and give an opinion – he could be a carpenter or a smith; a shoemaker, a shopkeeper or a shipowner; he could be rich or poor; an aristocrat or a nobody. And this time no one gets angry – the way they do in those other cases – no one complains that "he hasn't learned these things anywhere; he hasn't had a teacher; and now he's trying to tell us what to do!" – obviously because they don't think of this as something people can be taught.

'But don't think this only applies in the public domain. It's the same with individuals: our best and smartest citizens are incapable of passing on to others what it is that makes them good.<sup>34</sup> Take Pericles, the father of these boys here: in areas

that called for teachers, he had the two of them very well educated; but as for his own kind of knowledge<sup>35</sup> – he isn't teaching them himself, and he hasn't handed them over to anyone to do it for him. Instead here they are, left to their own devices, roaming around like holy cows,<sup>36</sup> in the hope that they'll stumble their way into being good men, all on their own. Or how about what happened with Clinias, the younger brother of Alcibiades here? It involved Pericles again: he was Clinias' guardian<sup>37</sup> and became worried that Alcibiades might be a bad influence on him, so he snatched him away and set him down at Ariphron's, and started educating him there; but in less than six months he found the boy was just a hopeless case and sent him back to Alcibiades. And I could give you a number of other examples of people who, even though they're good people themselves, have never made any member of their own family a better man, or anyone else.

'So those are my reasons, Protagoras; reflecting on all of that, I take the view that you can't make someone good by teaching them.<sup>38</sup> Of course, now that I've heard you saying otherwise, I'm beginning to waver, and I find myself thinking there must be something in what you say, seeing as I look on you as someone of wide experience and great learning, and as an original thinker as well. So if you've got any way of making things a bit clearer for me and showing that being good is in fact something people can be taught, please don't keep it to yourself; show me why it's so.'

'Don't worry, Socrates,' he said. 'I'm not going to keep it to myself. But listen, would you all rather I explained things by plain argument, or shall I tell you a story, seeing as I'm the old man and you're the youngsters?'

A number of the people who were sitting around us said he should give his explanation whichever way he preferred.

'Well, in that case I think it would be more agreeable if I told you a story . . .'

'A long, long time ago,<sup>39</sup> there were only gods; there weren't yet any mortal kinds. And when the fated time arrived for them

to come into being as well, the gods, working within the earth, began to mould them into shape from a blend of earth and fire (along with all the things that are a mix of fire and earth). And when they were on the point of bringing them into the light of day, they assigned to Thinxahead and Thinxtoolate<sup>40</sup> the task of embellishing the animals and handing out appropriate abilities to each. But Thinxtoolate asked his brother Thinxahead to let him do the handing out of things by himself. "Let me do it, and when it's done, come and check on what needs doing." He talked him into it and this is what he did:

e 'To some creatures he attributed strength without swiftness, the weaker ones he endowed with speed. To some he gave weaponry, while for the ones he'd given a weaponless physique, he devised some other ability for their survival: to those he'd wrapped in littleness, he gave the power to escape on wings or live below the ground; while for those he'd expanded to a great  
321 a bulk, he made that bulkiness the very thing that saved them. And he handed out everything else with the same sort of checks and balances, the aim of these devices being, so far, to ensure that no species should vanish from the earth. But once he'd provided the animals with sufficient means of avoiding a glut of mutual destruction, he also contrived ways of making their lives comfortable in the face of Zeus' seasons, by clothing them in thick coats of fur or toughened hides, which as well as being able to ward off winter's chill, and sufficient against the scorching summer heat, would also serve each and every creature, when it laid itself down to sleep, as its very own self-grown bedding. And when it came to footwear, some he  
b gave hooves, and some a covering of thick and bloodless skin. After that, he set about giving the animals various ways of feeding themselves. For some, it was the plants that sprang from the ground, for others the fruits or the roots of trees; and there were some that he allowed to devour other animals for their food, being careful, in those cases, to make the predators rare and with few offspring, but their prey abundant, so that their sheer numbers would be the means of their survival.

'Now Thinxtoolate wasn't all that smart, and before he knew



it he'd used up all the available abilities on the non-reasoning c  
 animals. That meant he still had human beings on his hands,  
 with no embellishments at all. And he simply didn't know what  
 to do with them. And while he sat there with no idea what to  
 do, along came Thinxahead to check the handing out of things,  
 and he saw that while the other animals were all very carefully  
 provided for, humankind was naked, shoeless, without bedding  
 and defenceless. What's more, the day on which human beings  
 had to come out of the earth and into the light was now at  
 hand.

'Now it was Thinxahead who didn't know what to do: he  
 couldn't come up with any way for human beings to survive,  
 so he stole: he stole the technical ingenuity that belonged to d  
 Hephaestus and Athena, along with fire (because there was no  
 way anyone could possess it, or make any use of it, without  
 fire) and he bestowed those gifts on humankind. By that means  
 human beings at least acquired the kind of intelligence they  
 needed to remain alive; but what they didn't have was civic and  
 ethical intelligence. That was in the hands of Zeus, you see, and  
 Thinxahead was no longer permitted to enter the citadel that  
 was Zeus' residence – what's more, Zeus' palace guards were  
 terrifying. But he was able to sneak into the house that was  
 shared by Athena and Hephaestus, where the two of them spent  
 their time happily plying their crafts, and he stole Hephaestus' e  
 fire-based skills and various other arts that belonged to Athena,  
 and gave them to humankind. And from that day forth the  
 human race had what it needed to provide for itself and stay  
 alive – though later Thinxahead was punished for his theft, so 322 a  
 the story goes; all thanks to Thinxtoolate.

'So now that people had their little share of what is given to  
 the gods, in the first place, on account of their connections in  
 high places, they alone among living things had any notion of  
 the divine, and they set about building altars and making statues  
 of the gods. And as well as that, by using their ingenuity, they  
 soon came up with words for things and formed articulate  
 speech and invented shelters, clothes, shoes and bedding, and  
 worked out how to grow their own food.

‘Now, supplied with these advantages, in earliest times  
 b people lived scattered here and there.<sup>41</sup> There were no societies.  
 So they started being killed by the wild animals, since they  
 were weaker than them in every way, and their technical skills,  
 although up to the task of providing them with food, just  
 weren’t good enough for the battle against the beasts (they  
 didn’t yet have any civic and ethical know-how, remember; and  
 knowing how to fight a war is part of that). So they kept on  
 trying to find a way to gather into groups and defend themselves  
 by founding communities, but every time they came together,  
 they would do one another wrong, since they didn’t have any  
 ethical know-how, and so they would scatter again and go back  
 to being slaughtered.

c ‘At this point Zeus became worried that our species might  
 perish altogether from the earth, so he asked Hermes to take  
 down to people a sense of right and wrong.<sup>42</sup> This was to bring  
 order to societies, and to serve as the bonds for friendship and  
 love, and bring us together. So Hermes says to Zeus, “But how?  
 How am I supposed to give people this sense of right and  
 wrong? Should I hand it out in the same way we handed out  
 the technical skills? You remember how they were handed out.  
 One person with, say, knowledge of medicine is enough for a  
 large number of people who don’t know anything about it; and  
 it’s the same with the other skilled professions. So shall I put a  
 sense of right and wrong in human kind like that, or should  
 d I hand it out to all of them?” “Give it out to all of them,”  
 said Zeus.<sup>43</sup> “Every single one must have a share. The fact is,  
 there’s no way societies could exist at all if only a few people  
 possessed a sense of right and wrong, the way it is with those  
 other skills. In fact, make it a rule, on my authority, that anyone  
 who proves incapable of acquiring some sense of right and  
 wrong must be thought of as a sickness to society and put to  
 death!”

‘So there you go, Socrates, that’s why it is that the Athenians  
 do things the way you say (along with everyone else): if they’re  
 discussing how to be good *at carpentry*, say, or some other  
 technical field, then, yes, they take the view that only a few  
 people have the right to give them any advice, and if anyone

outside that small group tries to tell them what to do, they don't put up with it (just like you say) – and that makes perfect sense, if you ask me. But when it comes to discussing how to be good *citizens*, which is entirely a matter of being ethical and being sensible, it makes sense for them to accept advice from any man at all, because they assume it's everyone's business to be good in *that* way – or societies couldn't exist at all. There's your explanation for that, Socrates.

'But I don't want you to think you're being duped; so let me give you another reason for thinking that it is, definitely, a universal assumption that everybody has some degree of respect for what's right, along with the other parts of being a good citizen.

'With all other forms of being good, as you pointed out yourself, if you claim to be good at playing the flute, say, or good at anything else technical when you're not good at it, people will laugh at you or get angry; your family will take you to one side and tell you to stop being crazy. But when it comes to doing what's right and the other aspects of being a good *citizen*, even if everybody knows you're a criminal, if you go round telling the truth about yourself in public, then what counts as sensible behaviour in the other cases – being honest about yourself – in this case just looks like a kind of madness. People feel that everyone has to claim they care about what's right, regardless of whether they really do or not; if you don't even make a *pretence* of being ethical\*, you must be crazy, because it's a basic requirement, on absolutely everyone, that they should have some degree of respect for what's right – or they have no place in civilized society.

'So, what I've been claiming so far is that it's quite understandable that they take advice from anyone about how to be a good citizen, because they believe that's something everyone has their share of. What I'll try to show next is that they don't believe it comes naturally, and they don't believe it develops all by itself; they think that it's taught and that it comes about in people, when it does, by care and effort.

'It's like this: there are defects that we think people have because they're born that way or through bad luck. In those

cases, nobody gets angry or criticizes anybody; there's no question of teaching people, or punishing them, to stop them being the way they are; we just feel sorry for them. Nobody thinks of treating ugly people in any of those ways, for example, or people who are short or weak. What kind of thoughtless idiot would do that? Everyone knows that it's just an accident of birth whether we end up with those defects\* or their opposites. But when it comes to things that we think are acquired through effort, and practice, and teaching, this time, if someone is found lacking and has the corresponding faults, we do respond with anger, and criticism, and punishment. And among those kinds of faults are disregard for what's right, and disrespect for religion, and, basically, everything that's the opposite of being a good citizen. That's an area of life where everyone gets angry with everyone, and everyone criticizes everyone else, obviously because the attitude is that this is something you get people to acquire by taking trouble over them and teaching them.

'I mean, all you have to do is look at punishment, Socrates, and ask yourself: What's the point of punishing people who do wrong? That'll be enough on its own to show you that humane societies, at least, believe that people can be "supplied with" what it takes to make them good. The fact is, you don't punish wrongdoers with the single-minded aim of paying them back for the wrong they've done – not unless you're behaving like an animal and taking some kind of pointless revenge. No, if your aim in punishing someone is rational, then it's not about the wrong that's been done – because after all, what's done is done. It's for the future. The idea is to stop the person who did wrong from doing wrong again, and to make other people think twice when they see a wrongdoer punished. But that way of thinking amounts to believing that you can make people good through education – at any rate, you're punishing people as a deterrent. So it follows that that must be the attitude of all those who've ever punished anyone, whether in private or as an institution. And, of course, as a rule, societies do punish wrongdoers, and Athenian society is no exception. So by that line of reasoning the Athenians must in fact be among those

who believe that people can be taught and “supplied with” what it is that makes them good.

‘So now I’ve shown two things: first, that it’s perfectly reasonable of your fellow citizens to listen to the opinions of a smith, or a shoemaker, on civic and ethical matters, and second, that they believe that being good is something people can be taught and “supplied with”. I think I’ve demonstrated both those claims well enough.

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‘So let’s see; that leaves you with just one more puzzle: you’re puzzled about why on earth it is that, in all other areas, good people have their children taught everything that calls for teachers, and turn them into experts, but then *don’t* make them any better than anyone else at being good the way they are themselves. All right; for this one I’m not going to tell a story; I’ll just set out another argument.

‘This is what you’ve got to think about: Is there, or is there not, one thing that every citizen has to have if society is to exist at all? That’s the crucial question: the only one that’s going to clear away your puzzlement. – Yes, there is one thing that everyone’s got to have, and it isn’t skill as a carpenter, smith or potter. It’s respect for what’s right, and moderation, and religiousness, and, in short, what I refer to as the quality of being a good man. That’s what we’ve all got to have. That’s the thing that every man has got to be exercising all the time, so that whatever he chooses to learn or do, doing it has to include being good (or else he shouldn’t be doing it). And anyone who doesn’t have it – man, woman or child – has to be taught and punished, until punishment turns them into a better person; and if they don’t respond to being taught and punished, they have to be treated as incurable, and thrown out of society, or put to death. So if that’s the way things are, if that’s its nature, and yet good people have their children taught everything else but *not* how to be good – think about how bizarre that makes good people. After all, we’ve just shown that they think of this as something that can be taught, in both the public and the private spheres. But if it can be taught and developed in a person, is it likely that they’d have their children taught all those other things (where there’s no death penalty for not

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knowing anything) and then not bother teaching them something where the penalty if they don't learn – if they don't develop into good people – is death, or banishment; and as well as death the confiscation of their property and basically, all in all, the complete and utter ruin of their families? Do you think they don't devote the utmost care and attention to it? Of course they do, Socrates!

'In fact, right from when they're small children, and through the whole of their lives, they teach them and set them straight. From the first moment children can understand what people are saying, their nurses, their mothers, their minders and even their fathers – they all battle constantly to make sure the children turn out as good as possible, teaching them with every single thing they do, with every single thing they say, showing them: "That's right; that's wrong! That's well done! Shame on you for that! The gods like this; the gods don't like that! Do this! Don't do that!" And if the children do what they're told, fine; but if not, then they treat them like timber that's crooked and warped, and straighten them out – with threats and spankings.

'And then at the next stage, when they send them off to school, they instruct the teachers to be far more concerned with encouraging good behaviour in the children than with teaching them to read and write or play guitar. So the teachers take care of all of that, and once the boys learn the alphabet and are just starting to understand written texts, just like when they started to understand spoken language, the teachers set out beside them, on their desks, the works of great poets for them to read, which they force them to learn by heart; poems that are packed with ethical guidance and full of stories which praise and celebrate good men of the past, for the children to look up to and imitate, to make them strive to be like that themselves.

'And then there's the guitar teachers – it's the same story. They take care to foster sensible behaviour and make sure the boys don't do anything naughty. But as well as that, once the children have learned to play the guitar, they teach them the compositions of another set of great poets – songwriters – setting their lyrics to music and forcing the boys' souls to

become familiar with rhythm and tuning, to make them more gentle, and with the idea that by having a better internal rhythm, and by being better tuned, they'll be useful to society in their speech and in their actions – because every area of life calls on us to have a good internal rhythm and to be in tune within ourselves.

'And then, of course, on top of all that, the parents even send them off to trainers, so that they'll have healthier bodies to be the servants of their healthy souls, and so they won't be forced by poor physical condition into losing their nerve, not just on the battlefield but in their other actions too. c

'Now the people who do these things more than anyone else are just the people who *can* do them more than anyone else – and the people who can do them the most are simply the people with the most money. So it's their sons who start going off to school at the earliest age and who are the last to finish with teachers. But even when they do finish with teachers, society takes over; society makes them learn its laws and live their lives according to the standards set by those laws, so that they aren't left to work things out for themselves and act just any old how. d  
It's exactly like the way that teachers who are teaching boys to write will trace out lines with the stylus (nice and light) for the ones who've not yet got the knack, then hand the writing tablet back and make them write by following the guides; society's the same: it draws up its "guidelines" – its laws, devised for us by good people in the past – and it forces people both to govern, and to accept government, according to those laws; and anyone who strays outside the law, it punishes. And the name used for that kind of punishment here in Athens, and in lots of other places, is "straightenings",<sup>44</sup> because the idea is that the penalty e  
straightens you out.

'So, Socrates; with all this trouble being taken, both privately and publicly, to make people good, do you really find it so surprising, are you really so baffled about whether being good is something that can be taught? The fact is, it would be far more surprising if it *weren't* something that could be taught.

'So in that case why is it that fathers who are good men so

often have sons who turn out not to be much good? Let me explain that one. There's really nothing in the least bit surprising about this if what I was saying earlier on is right – that when it comes to this particular field, the field of being good people, everyone has to be an expert<sup>45</sup> if society is going to exist at all. Look, assuming that what I'm saying is right – and it definitely is right – just do this thought experiment. Put some other form of behaviour in its place, or something else that people learn: imagine, say, that it was impossible for society to exist at all unless we were all flute players, every one of us as good a flute player as they could possibly be; imagine that everyone, in public and in private, was always teaching everyone else how to play the flute and getting angry with anyone who didn't play it well; imagine that this was something everybody freely gave advice on, just as in the real world everybody freely gives out their opinions about what's right and what's lawful (no one keeps what they know a secret, the way they do in the skilled professions – presumably that's because we benefit from each other's respect for what's right, and from people being good *to one another*; that's why everyone's so keen to tell everyone else, and teach everyone else, what's right and what's lawful). Imagine that was the situation with flute-playing; suppose we were all highly motivated to teach one another, and entirely free with our advice; do you think the sons of good players would be any more likely to become good players than the sons of bad players, Socrates? No, I don't think so. What you'd actually find is that where a man happened to have a son with a natural talent for playing the flute, that boy would grow up to be a famous player; whereas if a man's son lacked the natural talent, he'd grow up an ordinary player. And plenty of times the son of a good player would turn out to be nothing special, and plenty of times the opposite would happen. But of course, they'd all at least be flute-players; they'd all be reasonably good, compared with non-players, compared with people with no knowledge of playing the flute at all. That's how it is in the real world too; what you've got to realize is that the person who strikes you as the most completely unethical out of those who've been brought up in a law-abiding, humane



society is actually ethical – an expert in that field – if he’s to be judged alongside people with no education, no judicial system, no laws, no constraint of any kind constantly forcing them to care about being good – some gang of savages, like the ones Pherecrates<sup>46</sup> had in the play he put on at the Lenaea festival last year. You can be quite sure that if you found yourself surrounded by people like that, people like those monsters in that chorus, you’d be more than happy to run into a Eurybatus or a Phrynonidas;<sup>47</sup> you’d find yourself longing for the kind of immorality you find in people here! Crying out for it!

‘But as it is, Socrates, you’re spoiled – spoiled by the fact that everybody teaches us how to be good, every single person teaches it as much as they possibly can; and you can’t see anyone doing it. It’s just the same as if you tried to find out who teaches us to speak Greek. You wouldn’t find a single teacher. Or if you tried to find out who could teach our craftsmen’s sons – teach them that same craft they’ve learned from their fathers, as far as their fathers could teach it, and their fathers’ friends who practise the same craft. If you said, “But who could we find to teach them besides them?” I think it would be hard to come up with anyone – for those boys; but it would be perfectly easy to find teachers for people who don’t practise the craft. That’s just how it is with being good, and other things as well. The fact is, if you can find a man who’s even just a little bit better at advancing someone towards being good, that’s really the most we can ask for. And that’s exactly what I think of myself as being – one of those people: I believe that when it comes to helping someone become a good and decent man, I can offer something out of the ordinary and worth the fee that I charge, or even more – so that people who’ve been taught by me will feel it’s been a bargain. That’s why I’ve set up my own special method of charging my fee, which works like this: when someone’s taught by me, if they want to, they pay the sum of money that I charge; but if they don’t want to do that, they can go to a temple, state under oath how much they think the teaching was worth and leave an offering of that amount.

‘So there you are, Socrates. That’s it. I’ve told my story, and

I've set out my argument – I've shown that being good is something people can be taught, and that the Athenians believe it's something that can be taught, and that there's nothing at all surprising about the fact that the sons of good people can turn out bad, and the sons of bad people can turn out good – after all, even Polyclitus' sons, who are the same age as Paralus and Xanthippus here, aren't a patch on their father,<sup>48</sup> and the same goes for various sons of artists and craftsmen – although it really isn't fair to lay the same charge against these boys here. In their case we still have great expectations;<sup>49</sup> they're only young, after all.'