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# Erasing Simonides

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What are we to make of the long discussion of Simonides' song (PMG 542) that occupies the central section of Plato's *Protagoras*? There is a wide consensus that Socrates' interpretation of the song is at least largely ironic,<sup>1</sup> and everyone agrees that there are bits of it that are blatantly silly.<sup>2</sup> That suggests that we cannot take it seriously as a philosophical discussion, which in turn makes it hard to explain what it is doing in the dialogue. Is it just a comic interlude with a purely dramatic purpose?<sup>3</sup> Or is Plato making fun of sophists and the way they read poetry, and thereby making a serious point about literary criticism (or sophists)? Is there philosophical depth in any part of what Socrates says about the song? If so, we are stuck with the fact that whatever Plato might be saying his ideas are very oddly presented. Why would he make philosophical claims in the form of a comical misreading of a text, when that invites us to assume that no serious point is being made?

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1 This is a fairly recent consensus, as it seems. In 1928 Verdam (299) was still able to write: 'It is the common view that the interpretation of the Simonides song in the *Protagoras* is serious.' Earlier commentators, with a few exceptions, were much more deferential to Plato, and hence to Socrates, and blind to his irony.

2 E.g., his claim that Spartans and Cretans are secretly the world's greatest philosophers (342a-3c); that Simonides thinks *χαλεπτόν* means 'bad' (341a-e) — which Socrates admits is a joke; his claim that Simonides agrees with his own highly unusual view that 'nobody does wrong wilfully' (345d) and his ridiculous explanation of that theory (345e6-346c1); his displacement of *ἀλαθῆως* (343d6). These obvious jokes take up about four-fifths of the interpretation, and all that can be said of the remainder is that we are not *certain* that it is equally silly. It looks the same in tone and style and is equally pedantic.

3 See Frede (1986), 736-7 (though this is not her own view).

Perhaps we can come up with a better explanation of why Simonides' song is in the dialogue, and why the discussion takes its entertaining, comedic form. My proposal, in brief, is that Plato turns his attention to Simonides' song because it makes philosophical claims that he strongly disagrees with, and that his repudiation of its message, although deliberately obscured in the discussion itself, meshes very closely with the philosophical arguments of the other parts of the *Protagoras*. Once we have grasped those connections, we can reconsider the interesting question of why he expresses his disagreement in the unusual way that he does.

This explanation is going to depend, in part, on a revised text and new interpretation of the song, which makes a substantial difference to our understanding of what Plato thinks Simonides is saying. So this is a new approach to the problems, and it will be useful to begin by reviewing the range of exegetical options, to locate this attempt at an explanation among various others that have been made.

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(1) Some people think that the passage does principally aim to say something about poetry in general, or to make fun of sophistic exegesis of poetry, or both.<sup>4</sup> Plato gives some encouragement to that reading. Socrates' interpretation looks as if it might be a parody, and right after the discussion (347b-8a) he says that talking about poetry — any poetry at all — is a waste of time, since poems are open to too many contradictory interpretations. Perhaps he thinks he has argued for that claim by his own bizarre reading of the song, in which he proves that with enough imagination you can make it mean just about anything.

But on this view Plato might just as well have picked any poet at all. He need have no interest in Simonides, or this song, in particular. And if his main aim is to say something general about poetry or literary criticism then there is no clear philosophical connection between that aim and the rest of the dialogue, and the dialogue seems patchy and disjointed. The other parts of the *Protagoras* are not about poetry or the way we read it. They raise *ethical* questions, like these: What makes

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4 This reading is often also taken to account for why the passage is so jocular. See A. E. Taylor (1926), 253-7; Adam & Adam (1893), xxv; Verdam (1928), 306; Clapp (1950), 494; Woodbury (1953), 149-50; Parry (1965), 299; Gagarin (1969), 151; Halliwell (2000), 105.

someone a good citizen or a good man? Can goodness of that kind be taught? (319a-28c) Is it rare or common? Is it common enough to justify democracy? (319b-24d) Is it a single quality or a set of distinct qualities? How do the different parts of being good relate to one another? (329c-35a) Is goodness a kind of knowledge? (349d-60e) Is it true that sometimes we can't help doing the wrong thing even when we *know* it is wrong? Can even knowledge of what is right be overwhelmed, or is knowledge all you need? (352a-7e) Now Simonides' song is itself a song about being good — as Protagoras says when he introduces it (339a5) — and on what seems a natural and intuitive reading of the song, it is also about *acrasia*, which is the topic of the entire last section of the dialogue (352-9). Elsewhere Plato's criticisms of poetry are often directed at the philosophical content of poems, especially when he disagrees with them.<sup>5</sup> So it seems far more likely that Plato has a specific philosophical interest in this song than a general desire to discuss literary criticism. Nor can we wave away this issue by treating the discussion as part of the wider critique of sophistic education — as if sophists in general, and their varied interests, are the subject of the dialogue. That way of seeing things gets the order of explanation backwards. Plato does not take on Protagoras and his ideas because he is a sophist. Rather, he opposes this sophist *because of his ideas* — in particular, because of his humanism (that is, his god-free ethical theory) and his spirited ideological defense of democracy. The bulk of the dialogue is not a critique of 'sophistic' methods (there is no such thing)<sup>6</sup> but of those ideas in particular, and either the treatment of the song fits in with that critique,

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5 In *Republic* I (331d-5e) he discusses a line of Simonides (through jocular misinterpretation) that in his view gives an inadequate definition of justice. In *Republic* II and III (377-92) he criticises poetic excerpts when they imply theological views that he finds unacceptable. In the *Meno* he very respectfully quotes Pindar because he approves of his claims about immortality (81b) and Theognis because he expresses a muddled view about goodness (95d).

6 The idea that there is some important distinction between 'sophists' and 'philosophers' is unhelpful here (and generally). Plato's dislike for 'sophists' covers a wide variety of disparate criticisms. He objects to humanists (like Protagoras) because of his own theism, and to teachers of public speaking out of dislike for democracy, and to moral educators out of professional rivalry, and to intellectuals who earn wages (see *Prt* 313c) out of aristocratic social prejudice. Only the latter, completely trivial characteristic unites all 'sophists'. Protagoras is a (wage-earning) *philosopher*, by any fair sense of the term, and a very good one. Only *his* views shed any light on Plato's reasons for making him the subject of a dialogue.

or it is out of step with the rest of the dialogue (which, of course, it may be). Besides, Socrates' interpretation of the song, if we are being charitable, does not even come close to showing that sophistic literary criticism (whatever that might have been) is valueless. It merely demonstrates, if anything of the kind, that Socratic literary criticism is valueless. Plato surely has no interest in proving that *his own* silly interpretations of poetry are silly, and he is far too astute a critic to think he could be saying anything interesting about anyone else's. Nor can we take at all seriously Socrates' final claim that poetry is hopelessly vague and open to too many interpretations. This is the author who, in the *Republic*, expends enormous effort on singling out and censoring a long catalogue of famous passages of poetry that he feels would instill the wrong ethical views in the young. His assumption there is that poetry often conveys its meaning all too clearly. So Socrates' final claim is not something Plato really believes, and Socrates has given us no reason to accept it. All in all, then, it seems unlikely that it points to the purpose of the episode.

(2) If Plato *is* interested in the philosophical ideas of this very song, we have to decide whether we think he understands it, or misunderstands it. Surprisingly, most modern interpreters of the song say that Plato himself does not know what it means. That is because he clearly takes it for granted that the song is about being a good man in the *ethical* sense: Protagoras assumes, and Socrates agrees, that its subject is the same as that of their own previous discussion, ethical *aretê* (339a5). No character ever questions, or even so much as mentions, that background assumption, even though the discussion considers a wide range of interpretations, to say the least. But recent scholarship generally assumes that the song uses some (hypothetical) older, pre-ethical concept of the 'good' man. When Simonides says that 'it's hard to be truly good (*agathos*)' and 'a man can't help being bad (*kakos*) when misfortune takes him down,' a standard view in the modern literature is that he means that it is hard to maintain aristocratic excellence, or to remain *successful* in the face of misfortune. That view, whatever else we might say about it, carries the clear implication that Plato himself (not just his characters) has basically no idea what the song is saying.

This modern, non-ethical or 'aristocratic' reading of (parts of) the song goes back at least to Wilamowitz.<sup>7</sup> He argued that Simonides was

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<sup>7</sup> See Wilamowitz (1913), 159-91, esp. 165-80.

comparing two concepts of *aretê* within the same poem, and trying to replace an older notion of 'aristocratic' *aretê* with this brand new, ethical conception of the good man. Almost all subsequent interpreters of the song repeat that basic idea, in various forms.<sup>8</sup> Wilamowitz's assumptions are themselves connected with a much wider philosophical theory about the genealogy of morality and the differences between early Greek values and our own. According to the most influential version of this theory, our ethical interests (such as our admiration for fairness, honesty, and generosity) first arose around the fifth century BC in what was a dramatic transformation of the human character. The 'cooperative' moral qualities and 'quiet' virtues that we now admire and praise were previously held in much lower regard; Homeric Greeks were amoralists by later standards; they admired and valued only 'excellence' (which is to say, a kind of Nietzschean preeminence in wealth, power and social status) rather than ethical goodness as we conceive it. That is supposed to be why the common evaluative terms of classical times (*aretê*, *agathos*, *esthlos*, *kakos*, *aischron*, *kalon*, etc.) had a non-ethical or only semi-ethical sense in Homeric Greek, and retained a non-ethical sense in many contexts into later Greek.<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes even claimed that earlier Greeks lacked the barest notions of agency and responsibil-

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8 But they disagree with one another sharply about what exactly Simonides is saying. Bowra (1934) and (1961), 326-36 and Dickie (1978), 23-6, follow Wilamowitz; Donlan (1969), 75-87 (uniquely) thinks that the opening lines (*PMG* 542 1-3) refer to the newer, ethical ideal of goodness, not aristocratic *aretê*; Woodbury (1953), 155-165 thinks that the song contains only slight references to ethical *aretê*; Adkins (1960), 166-7, 196-7, 355-9 insists that the song contains no ethical terms or thoughts *at all* and on that point disagrees with everyone else; see also C. C. W. Taylor (1991), 143; Thayer (1975), 21-5; Parry (1965), 315; Frede (1986), 741. Of scholars writing after Wilamowitz only A. E. Taylor (to my knowledge) rejects his approach (1926, 253), perhaps because he was immune to what he calls 'servile deference to the name of Wilamowitz' (1926, 16).

9 Key elements of this theory can be found in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, e.g., the idea that lexical shifts reveal the development of ethical concepts, and that our interest in fairness arose recently from something much more selfish (see 2007, 10-15, 19-21, 124-5). But the version most relevant to the Simonides' literature is set out in Adkins' *Merit and Responsibility*, from which it has been widely taken up by classicists and ancient philosophers. Adkins is followed fully by, e.g., Bluck (1964), Taylor (1991), Canto-Sperber (1991), and largely by Sharples (1985) in their commentaries. He is responsible for the widespread but very implausible idea that *aretê* even in classical Greek typically means 'excellence'.

ity that frame and enable all later attitudes to moral qualities.<sup>10</sup> On this view, Simonides' song falls into a critical period in which our ethical concepts were first developing, and Simonides is commenting on this seismic shift in human thought.<sup>11</sup>

But what if this wider theory that has shaped so many recent readings of the song is wrong? There seem to be several good reasons for doubting it. First, it has been very persuasively criticized on philosophical and philological grounds (notably by Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity*, and Naoko Yamagata in *Homeric Morality*).<sup>12</sup> Second, it is not taken seriously by anyone engaged in the scientific investigation of the origins of morality, about which it makes some very extravagant claims. A widespread and respected view (in those scientific quarters)<sup>13</sup> is that human ethical dispositions are substantially based on complex instincts, deeply embedded in human nature and therefore immensely ancient.<sup>14</sup> Exactly when and how these moral instincts evolved is a

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10 See especially Snell (1948) and Adkins (1960), 10-60; discussed by Williams (1993), 21-74.

11 Donlan (1969, 71) proposes that Simonides himself was *responsible* for this development! 'Simonides was making a conscious attempt to redefine, in moral terms, the common notions of the "good" and "bad" man, and consequently ... *he was an important innovator in the formulation of higher ethical thought*' (my italics). Other commentators do not go so far, but Donlan's view was only possible within a broad consensus that 'higher ethical thought' was in the process of being 'formulated' at this point in history, for the first time.

12 Williams (1993) 1-103 offers a convincing philosophical critique of these 'progressivist' theories. Yamagata (1993) sets out an exhaustive and convincing philological refutation of Adkins (1960) in particular. See especially pp. 61-88, 145-82, 185-200. It is enough for my purposes that this gives us *some* grounds for considering a different view, and seeing where that leads us with the song. See also Long (1970)

13 My point here only depends on our noticing these findings. We do not have to agree with them. Even if we are sceptical about evolutionary psychology (as most classicists and many philosophers are) we have to recognise that Adkins' theory faces a substantial new opposition, and that its status has changed, just as the status of biblical creationism has irrevocably changed since Darwin, even for those who still advocate it.

14 That is, *hundreds of thousands* of years old. On this view we would assume that the Greeks, and their remotest ancestors, had the same tendencies to praise and blame pretty much the same kinds of qualities in others as we do now. This is not to say that Homeric Greeks did not also value wealth, power, conquest, honor, and status. It is one of the major weaknesses of Adkins' theory that we are supposed to treat those selfish interests as *excluding* moral interests, when there is no rea-

very interesting question, but a standard view today is that if we want to uncover their genealogy we should be studying *homo*, not Homer. Third, the theory unaccountably brushes aside the view held by ancient ethical theorists themselves. Plato and Aristotle, for example, and Protagoras in this very dialogue, all propose (each in their own way) that the basic set of human ethical interests are as ancient as humanity itself.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, the arguments that derive from the observed changes in Greek vocabulary were never strong enough to bear the weight of their conclusions. The changes in the Greek lexicon are real, but have much less significance than was supposed. A shift in the meaning of a word from a non-ethical sense to an ethical sense does *not* typically signal the moment at which that ethical concept first sprang into existence; it does not in itself indicate any corresponding shift in values, and cannot support ambitious genealogical theories. The fact is that lexical shifts are, on the contrary, totally unremarkable: they arise in *all* languages (including English) and *all periods of history* (including the present). They

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son at all to think that they could not have coexisted with moral interests, just as they do now. Also, while there has to be room in any sensible meta-ethical theory for cultural variation, there is certainly no room in the Darwinian consensus for Nietzsche's and Adkins' idea that earlier Greeks had no interest in fairness (*per se*) *at all*, and no admiration *at all* for the 'quiet' moral virtues and no concept *at all* of the morally good man. The stark progressivist view, the one that was applied to Simonides' poem, was never about variation around ethical themes, but about *origin* of morality *in toto*. As such it is a rival to the Darwinian explanation of that origin, and wholly incompatible with it. Dennett (1995, 461-7) critiques Nietzsche's view in particular (the forerunner of Adkins' theory) from a Darwinian perspective; and for an overview of the idea of innate morality, see Pinker (1997), Hauser (2006), De Waal (2006), Joyce (2006). For studies of our *innate per se* interest in fairness — an interest that Adkins (see 1972, 58-75) thinks originated around 450 BC, or later — see Trivers (1971), Axelrod (1984), Kitcher (1993), Cosmides and Tooby (1992), Dawkins (1989), 202-33, Singer (1995), 129-53, Ridley (1997), 53-84, Pinker (1997), 402-6, 502-6, Hauser (2006), 59-110, 251-63, 383-92; also, see Cosmides and Tooby's online resource for evolutionary psychology: [www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep](http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep). Again, *all* these people could be wrong. But so could Adkins.

- 15 Protagoras, in fact, has a theory very similar to the Darwinian one: he believes that fairness came into being as a mechanism of survival: it arose because it enabled us to live in social groups (in pre-historic times) which made for much better defence against predators (*Prt* 320-3). Aristotle thinks that moral virtues partly depend on human nature (which he assumes is unchanging and infinitely old): see *EN* 1103a, 1139a-b, 1144a-b, 1151a. Plato, in the *Meno*, proposes that intuitions about moral goodness have been deeply embedded in the (immortal) human soul 'for the whole of time.' (See *Meno* 81a-86c, with 81c8, 98a4.)

indicate stable and predictable associations between different areas of human thought, not unique moments in our cognitive development or revolutions in human character. English is full of ethical terms derived from non-ethical ones (from words connected with social status, cleanliness, or aesthetics, for example): courteous, gentle, generous, kind, noble, nice, clean, fair, fine, villain, cad, low, cheap, mean, foul, disgusting, shabby, dirty, shitty, rotten, nasty, rude — and on and on. All these terms acquired an ethical sense only in the last four or five centuries. They closely parallel the Greek examples, but no one would claim that the corresponding ethical ideas have themselves originated over the same period — we know otherwise. The real explanation is that these various interests are, and always have been, concurrent. That is, people have been at all times very interested in social status *and* cleanliness *and* morality *and* physical beauty, and it is easy for terms to skip or slide from one domain to the other. Words are frequently put to new uses in the service of existing needs, and in the ethical case that is the norm. The fact that ‘generous’ previously meant ‘of high birth’ and that ‘nasty’ previously meant ‘dirty’ tells us nothing whatsoever about when thoughts about being generous or nasty first arose, or about their importance. Similarly, the fact that *agathos* meant ‘brave’ or ‘of high rank’ in Homeric times and then ‘morally good’ in the fifth century tells us absolutely nothing in itself about when the idea of the morally good man first arose, or about the importance that Greeks attached to it at different periods.

This is just a sketch of a few of the reasons for rejecting the dominant approach to the Simonides song, but it will do for our present purposes. I shall be assuming here that the modern interpreters of Simonides were mistaken, and that Wilamowitz’s and Adkins’ theory was a red herring, and that in fact there *was no* seismic shift in the concept of the good man — so that it is quite impossible that it was the subject of Simonides’ song. In putting that claim so strongly, I fully distinguish their genealogical theory from the far more modest idea that there were *some* differences between, say, the honor culture of Homeric chieftains in time of war and the more peaceful *mores* of classical Athenians, or between aristocratic and democratic attitudes. Someone might, of course, discuss those differences, even on my assumptions. But there is no reason at all to think Simonides is doing so here. The fact is that people only ever read *PMG* 542 in that way in the first place on the basis of the much bolder theory: ‘the song applauds moral goodness; *earlier Greeks set no value on moral goodness*; therefore this song must be about the difference between earlier and later attitudes to goodness.’ If we remove

that middle premise, the conclusion seems wholly unjustified, and nothing else in the song ever suggested that Simonides was discussing any values either unique to Homeric warriors or unique to later Greeks. On the contrary, the claims he does make, about the tendency of mortal men to behave badly under pressure, and about how we should judge those kinds of failings, apply just as well to Agamemnon as to Pericles. So I shall pursue that alternative hypothesis here: that Plato was right all along in thinking (a) that the subject of the song is just one kind of *aretê*, and (b) that it is about being good in the ethical sense. (Apart from anything else, it also seems far more modest and charitable to assume that Plato has some sense of what the song is about.) That will be our starting point. But the main arguments for this reading will emerge below, from the detailed examination of the song, and our explanation of Plato's reaction to it.

(3) In accepting Plato's basic (i.e., ethical) approach to the song, I do not mean to imply that we should accept any of the details of Socrates' interpretation. In amongst some really outlandish jokes, Socrates claims that the song is all about the difference between *becoming* good and *being* good, and some interpreters have taken at least that idea seriously as a reading of the poem, or looked around in it for Plato's reasons for discussing the song, or both.<sup>16</sup> But it has always seemed more likely that the song does not, in fact, make any such distinction, and the revised text confirms that impression. Socrates' convoluted claims about Simonides' use of *emmenai* and *genesthai* appear to be mischievous and misleading — just like the rest of his exposition. And though his musings may contain, here and there, echoes of serious philosophical thinking, if they do not address what Simonides is saying, or what Greek readers in general took from the song, then I doubt that they can tell us much about what Plato is up to. Plato's interest in the song probably doesn't

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16 It is treated as sound by Woodbury (1953), 155; Parry (1965), 315; Donlan (1969), 75; Babut (1975), 44; D. Frede (1986), 737, 741; Carson (1992), 121. Many more agree with Wilamowitz (1913, 165) that Socrates' claim is silly; Verdam (1926) seems to prove this beyond reasonable doubt. D. Frede makes a plausible attempt to connect the interpretation with Plato's philosophical interests. Her theory is based around the idea that Plato fundamentally *agrees* with the song — approximately the exact opposite of my view. (But she is working with the old text; she does not think that Plato agrees that it is pretty easy to be good.) See also Clapp (1950), 496-8. Mann (2000), 91-8 discusses the distinction independently of the question of whether it is an accurate reading of Simonides; M. Frede (1988) and Code (1988) discuss it independently of the *Protagoras*.

come from an idiosyncratic reading that projects philosophical subtleties into it that he thinks are worth discussing, but rather from the fact that he is annoyed by its influence. That would put his treatment of it into line with his critique of Homer and the tragedians in the *Republic*, and his entire approach, there, to literary criticism, which he connects very closely with censorship and moral education. The song, on this theory, is saying something that Plato does not like, and saying it loud and clear to Greek readers in general, and that is why he attacks it. If this is right, then whatever it was that stirred his interest (and his ire), we can be sure it had nothing to do with the difference between *being* and *becoming* good, which is a product of Socrates' fertile imagination and as such formed no part of the public understanding of the song.

It follows on this view that even if we dismiss Socrates' reading of the song we should not infer (as if it were the same thing) that Plato himself misunderstands Simonides. Nor should we infer from his characters' floundering that there was any real difficulty over the meaning of the song. Another obvious feature of the episode supports that approach. The Socratic reading is not just wrong but, as seems clear, ironic, and comical — and you cannot give ironic misinterpretations of a text unless you have a very good sense of what the text is really saying.<sup>17</sup> Also, if the irony was funny for Plato's readers then it seems likely that there was a standard, public understanding of the song. You cannot play around with an obscure text and expect people to get the jokes. How funny is an erudite parody of Jane Austen for people that haven't read her novels? If Plato's humor was effective then his readers knew their Simonides, and probably had some sense of where he was messing around with the meaning of the song; and as far as we know the *Protagoras* targeted a broad, non-specialist audience. That strongly suggests that Plato is dealing with a well-known text that had a reasonably clear message.

So, to recap, our starting points are these: first, that Plato is not just making a general point about poetry or sophists, but is provoked by

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17 My claim is not that the meaning of the song, in every nuance, is perfectly simple. I just mean that, for example, when Socrates says that the term 'hard' in the song means 'bad', Plato knows that 'hard' actually means *hard*. Likewise (if the cases are analogous, which they probably are) when Socrates claims that Simonides is obsessing over the difference between *being* and *becoming*, or between 'hard' and 'impossible', Plato knows that Simonides is not really interested in those distinctions at all.

*this* song, and its particular content, and includes it here for philosophical reasons related to the rest of this dialogue; second, that the song does not use, or refer to, two different concepts of *aretê*, but is, just as Plato reports, about moral goodness plain and simple; third, that the idea that the song revolves around the difference between *being* and *becoming* good is one of several Socratic jokes; fourth, that Plato nevertheless knows perfectly well what the song means, or at any rate how it was understood by the public at the time.<sup>18</sup> These are so far just a set of reasonable guesses; but they are also maximally charitable. They presuppose that Plato is an intelligent reader of Greek poetry, and that his dialogue has an underlying philosophical unity, and that his treatment of the song is explicable through his known philosophical interests, and that he is a very competent dramatist (so that we should assume that when his characters seem to be joking, they are, and that the jokes were funny).

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Let's turn to the text of the song. Reconstructing the text is the first step towards grasping what it is in the song that Plato is reacting to. I have argued elsewhere that the standard reconstruction of the text was wrong, and set out the following alternative reconstruction.<sup>19</sup> Rather than repeat my arguments here, I shall take it for granted that this new version is the right text:<sup>20</sup>

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18 I concede that these might not be the same thing. It remains possible — if unlikely — that the general Greek public and Plato were mistaken about its meaning.

19 See Beresford (2008). The arguments for the new reconstruction are mostly internal, but also based on a re-examination of the evidence from the dialogue. For the standard text, see Page (1962) or Hutchinson (2001). Not all earlier versions of the text are the same as Page's, but all other texts have the same second strophe, which the new version dismantles, and none of them have the new first strophe or new second strophe.

20 It might be objected that this ties my interpretation of the *Protagoras* to a controversial theory. And it is true that not all my claims will depend on this text. But part of the point of this exercise is to see how the new text can open up a new understanding of what Plato is doing. Also, too many previous accounts of this part of the dialogue searched for broad explanations that treated the detailed meaning of the original song as irrelevant, only for the inadequate reason that *we didn't know what it was* — like a man looking for his keys under a lamp-post because there isn't any light where he dropped them.

<p>ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι  χαλεπτὸν χερσίν τε καὶ ποσὶ καὶ νόωι  τετράγωνον, ἄνευ ψόγου τετυγμένον·  θεὸς ἂν μόνος τοῦτ' ἔχοι γέρας· ἄνδρα δ' οὐκ  ἔστι μὴ οὐ κακὸν ἔμμεναι,  ὄν ἀμήχανος συμφορὰ καθέληι·  πράξας γὰρ εὖ πᾶς ἀνὴρ ἀγαθός,  κακὸς δ' εἰ κακῶς, &lt;οὐς  δ' οἱ θεοὶ φιλέωσιν  πλεῖστον, ἰσ' ἄριστοι.&gt;</p>	<p>στρ. α          5          10</p>
<p>οὐδ' ἐμοὶ ἐμμελέως τὸ Πιπτάκειον  νέμεται, καίτοι σοφοῦ παρὰ φωτὸς εἰ-  ρημένον· χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσλὸν ἔμμεναι.  &lt;ἐμοὶ ἀρκέει&gt; μτ' &lt;ἐὼν&gt; ἀπτάλαμνος εἰ-  δώς τ' ὄνησίπολιν δίκαν,  ὑγιῆς ἀνὴρ· οὐ&lt;δὲ μὴ νιν&gt; ἐγὼ  μωμήσομαι· τῶν γὰρ ἠλιθίων  ἀπειρώων γενέθλα.  πάντα τοι καλά, τοῖσιν  τ' αἰσχρὰ μὴ μέμεικται.</p>	<p>στρ. β          15          20</p>
<p>τοῦνεκεν οὐ ποτ' ἐγὼ τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι  δυνατὸν διζήμενος κενεᾶν ἐς ἄ-  πρακτον ἐλπίδα μοῖραν αἰῶνος βαλέω,  πανάμωμον ἄνθρωπον, εὐρυεδέος ὅσοι  καρπὸν αἰνύμεθα χθονός·  ἐπὶ δ' ἕμμιν εὐρῶν ἀπαγγελέω.  πάντας δ' ἐπαίνημι καὶ φιλέω,  ἐκῶν ὅστις ἔρδηι  μηδὲν αἰσχρόν· ἀνάγκαι  δ' οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται.</p>	<p>στρ. γ          25          30</p>

(1) For a man it's certainly hard to be truly good<sup>21</sup> — *perfect* in hands, feet, and mind, built *without a flaw*; only a god could have that prize;

21 This line really means 'It's hard for *there* to be a truly good man' (see Henry 1999)

but a man, there's no way he can help being bad when some crisis that he cannot deal with takes him down. Any man's good when life treats him well, bad if it treats him badly, and the best are those the gods love most.

(2) But for me that Pittacus saying doesn't ring true (even if he was a smart man): he says "being good is hard." For me, a man's good enough if he's not lawless, and if he has the sense of right that does cities good — a decent guy; I certainly won't find fault with him. After all, there's an endless supply of fools. The way I see it, if there's no shame in it, all's fair.

(3) So I'm not going to throw away my short span of life on a vain and empty hope, searching for something there cannot be, a completely blameless man — not among us mortals who win our bread from the broad earth. (If I do come across one, mind you, I'll let you know.) So long as he does no wrong *willfully*, I give my praise and love to anyone. Not even the gods can fight necessity.

This new text of the song is much easier to follow, and if it is right it settles some of the old controversies. For one thing, it is now clear that there is no contrast between *genesthai* and *emmenai*. The contrast (and the alleged contradiction) between the first and second strophes can be cleared up without any recourse to that pedantic and awkward sophism. Simonides is saying that human beings cannot be *perfectly* good (with a very clear emphasis on perfection) — only a god could manage that (i.e., you would need to have superhuman strength, or be completely free of all mortal cares and fears). Mere mortals are all bound to make mistakes under pressure. But he does *not* think that Pittacus was quite right to say that it is hard to be good, because he thinks that being good within our limitations, basically decent, is *not all that hard*. (The standard version of the text, by contrast, had him insisting that being

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but that misses the emphatic position of 'man'. *Genesthai* here does not mean 'to become'. It means 'to come into being' or 'to occur'. (So opening line means something as simple as this: 'Don't expect *there to be* a perfectly good man any time soon.') Plato himself shows us that he knows the verb has this sense, when he apparently alludes to the song again at *Laws* 711d2: ἀλλὰ τόδ' ἐστὶ τὸ χαλεπὸν γενέσθαι, καὶ ὀλίγον δὴ τὸ γεγονὸς ἐν τῷ πολλῷ χρόνῳ. 'This [i.e., an ethically perfect man in power] is the thing that *there can hardly ever be*, and of which there have been *so few occurrences* in a long, long time...' See also below, n. 40.

good, at all, in any sense, is absolutely and strictly impossible. This major difference will be important in what follows.) The contrast, which is a very reasonable one, is between absolute perfection on the one hand and plain, everyday goodness on the other, not between *becoming* good and *being* good.

The song so reconstructed contains these four mutually supporting claims that we should take note of: (1) that there is no such thing as moral perfection here on earth and it is not worth looking for, and (2) that even good people, who know what's right, sometimes just cannot help doing wrong, and (3) that being good (in that ordinary, imperfect way) is not very hard or rare and (4) that common goodness is all we need aspire to or ever expect of anyone else. These are all bound to strike Plato as philosophical claims (they are claims about his absolute favorite topic, the nature of human goodness) and it seems overwhelmingly likely that his interest in this song comes from the fact that *he disagrees with all four claims very strongly*. But he does not express that disagreement in the actual discussion of the song, with its ironies and frivolous false trails. So it will be useful to start from Aristotle's response to the same song (EN 1100b18ff).

According to the interpretation of the song just sketched, Simonides is claiming that external forces have the power to make even good people act badly, which implies that being good takes luck. That is what he means when he says that 'there's just no way a man can help being bad when some overwhelming crisis (*amêchanos sumphora*) knocks him down. Any man's good when he's doing well in life, bad when he's doing badly.' It is also what he means by saying that he praises and loves anyone who is not willful in his wrongdoing. He takes it for granted that sometimes even decent people are *not* willful in their wrongdoings, i.e., sometimes they *can't help* doing wrong — in the face of some irresistible force (*anagkê*). In fact it is the central idea of the whole song: that misfortune can make us do shameful things. When Simonides speaks of 'an overwhelming crisis' he has in mind both difficult circumstances, the kind that subject our frail humanity to overwhelming pressures, and the emotions that we feel in the face of those pressures (grief, despair, love, pain, desire, anger, fear). *Sumphora* typically refers to very *stressful* situations ('misfortune,' 'disaster,' 'catastrophe,' 'crisis') that naturally give rise to our strongest emotions.<sup>22</sup> Such situations, and the

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22 Of special interest here are instances where the word is closely tied to consequent moral breakdown. See Donlan (1969), 84-5. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra calls

emotions themselves, can be felt to act as powerful external forces that push and pull us around against our will. So Simonides, on this view, is talking about misfortune, but more precisely about the power of our passions to overwhelm our normal character and drag us into extraordinary lapses. In which case, to use the later, technical term, he is talking about a form of *acrasia*. He means there are situations in which even a good person, who as he puts it ‘knows what’s right’ (εἰδώς ... δίκαν) cannot help doing something shameful or undignified or below their own standards. He sees such failures as unavoidable, not just in the weaker sense that they are unavoidable for those who lack self-control, but in the much stronger and more provocative sense that *everyone* is bound, at some point, to do something shameful. You are bound to act badly if you are starving and desperate, or terrified of death, or being tortured, or if you are in a jealous rage, or grief-stricken, or humiliated and furiously angry, or madly in love or subject to some really irresistible temptation — or faced with whatever happens to be your personal *amêchanos sumphora*. And it is just a matter of luck when, or how often, you will find yourself in those situations. You would have to be impossibly lucky to be good *all the time*, for the whole of your life. In that important sense, your goodness depends on circumstances. ‘The best people are the ones the gods love most’ — that is to say, the luckiest. So, on this reading, Simonides is sketching the idea of moral luck.

At any rate this seems a pretty plausible first reading, and there is another poem attributed to Simonides (PMG 541)<sup>23</sup> that expresses a very similar view — namely, that it is hard to be good ‘right to the end’

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her awful situation — the fact that she is in love with her stepson — a *sumphora* (433, 596, 691, 716, 769). She seems at times to be referring to her desire itself. (This is a familiar way of thinking, as when we say, e.g., ‘He had the *misfortune* to fall in love with his best friend’s wife.’) The nurse uses the term as part of an *excuse* (493): she suggests that in her desperate circumstances (Phaedra is dying from her love) nobody would begrudge her (κοῦκ ἐπίφθονον τόδε) pursuing an admittedly shameful course of action. (Cf. line 16 of the song: οὐδὲ μὴ νιν ἐγὼ μοιμήσομαι.) In *Medea* (in what is a clear echo of Simonides’ phrase) Jason *excuses* his betrayal of Medea by pleading that he faces many συμφορὰς ἀμυγάνους (522) ‘impossible difficulties’. Euripides’ allusion to the song here implies that he too reads the phrase as an excuse (in this case rather feeble) for bad behavior, and hence that he interprets the song the same way as Plato and Aristotle.

23 The attribution is widely accepted (see Lobel & Turner 1959, 91, Treu 1960, Gentili 1961). Bowra (1963) and Lloyd-Jones (1961) thought the poem might be by Bacchylides. Everyone seems to agree it is one or the other.

and ‘for the whole of your life’ — and which describes for us more fully the things that cause us to buckle under pressure. The reason it is hard to be good, Simonides says there, is that ‘irresistible gain’ can ‘force a man against his will,’ and likewise ‘the powerful sting of sneaky Aphrodite, and reckless feuding.’<sup>24</sup> Here it is obvious that the author has ethical failure in mind, and in particular the tendency of our ‘irresistible,’ ‘powerful’ and ‘reckless’ emotions — greed, romantic love, and anger — to overwhelm us ‘against our will.’ This other poem (even if it is not by Simonides, but by another poet of the same period writing on the same theme) thus provides impeccable support for the ethical reading of the *Protagoras* song. At any rate it makes nonsense of the worry that it might be anachronistic to read *PMG* 542 as discussing specifically moral failings.

To turn to Aristotle, then: he too interprets *PMG* 542 as making precisely this claim — that nobody can be ethically perfect, because your goodness, whoever you are, is bound to be overwhelmed at some point. He is considering the role that luck plays in life, and he objects to Simonides’ idea of moral luck very firmly. Against Plato, who holds that how well your life goes depends entirely on virtue, Aristotle has claimed that an ideal human life (that is, *eudaimonia*) also requires certain ‘external’ goods that by definition depend to some degree on luck — no one could possibly say that king Priam lived an ideal life, he says, given all the catastrophes that he suffered (*EN* 1100a8). But unlike Simonides he thinks that *how good we are*, at least, is fully within our power: virtue itself, for Aristotle, is not in any sense an external good — no external pressure or emotional force coming from outside our wisdom can ever truly *force* us to behave dishonorably, and thereby rob us of our goodness. Aristotle does, of course, accept the fact of *acrasia* as a fairly commonplace moral failing; but he believes that it is something that truly good people can be completely immune to.<sup>25</sup> So he argues very carefully against Simonides as follows:

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24 Lines 7-11: ...οὐ γὰρ ἑλαφρὸν ἐσθλ[ὸν] ἔμμεναι· ἢ γὰρ ἀέκοντά νιν βιάται | κέρ[ε]δος ἀμάχητον ἢ δολοπλ[όκου] | με[γα]σθενῆς οἴστρος Ἀφροδί[τ]ας ἀτά[σθα]λοί τε φιλονικίαι. I take φιλονικίαι to mean ‘feuding’ or ‘strife’ (as commonly) and assume the reference is basically to anger and violence. Notice that ἀμάχητον recalls both ἀμύχανος and οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται. Also, ἀέκοντά νιν βιάται is a clear reference to *acrasia*. Simonides is not saying that these are the motives of bad people, but that they can overwhelm *good* people.

25 He even goes so far as to claim that truly good people (people who possess

So [according to my definition of *eudaimonia*] anyone living the ideal life will enjoy the stability that we were looking for: he'll be that way for through the whole of his life,<sup>26</sup> because he'll always or almost always be exercising his goodness and contemplating virtuous activity. As for misfortunes, he'll handle those very honorably, and fittingly in every possible respect, at any rate if he is [as Simonides says] 'truly good, perfect, without a flaw' ... Even in the midst of [misfortunes] honorable behavior shows through — if you handle your misfortunes coolly and calmly, not because you don't feel any pain at all, but with nobility and dignity. And if the exercising [of our virtues] is the key to a good life, as we said, then nobody who is blessed can ever become wretched, because he'll *never* do things that are morally despicable. If a man is [to borrow Simonides' phrase] 'truly good', with wisdom, then we think of him as handling *all* his misfortunes in a seemly manner and *always* doing the most honorable thing that his circumstances permit... (EN 1100b18-1a2)

The disagreement with Simonides in this passage is nicely stated, and it will help us to understand Plato's more complex treatment of the song. Aristotle rejects the idea that misfortune can turn good people bad. He opposes that with his rather hopeful suggestion that catastrophes bring out the best in us (at least if we are 'truly' good) and thus enhance our goodness rather than overwhelming it. Disasters give us unique opportunities for being noble and dignified. He thinks that Simonides is wrong, and you can after all avoid ever being bad, and so be ethically flawless (τετράγωνος, ἄνευ ψόγου). And we also know exactly why he disagrees with Simonides about this. If how good you are were dependent on luck, then in Aristotle's view *eudaimonia* would also largely depend on luck, seeing as goodness is (as he says in this passage) the most important component of *eudaimonia*. And it strikes him as intuitively unlikely that *eudaimonia* would depend on luck. Nature

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*phronêsis*) do not even need self-control — they simply never have any morally inappropriate desires or emotions (see EN VII 11). This is fundamentally similar to Plato's so-called 'denial' of *acrasia*, which is really a denial of its inevitability, and a rejection of the common view of it.

26 He means that you can be (more or less) *eudaimon* for the whole of your life (διὰ βίου) because you can be *good* for the whole of your life. By contrast, in PMG 541 (in the final, fragmentary lines) Simonides says that it is impossible to live righteously δι' αἰῶνος.

always arranges things in the best and finest way possible, he says, and it would be a sort of ‘mistake’, a bug in nature’s design, if the highest of all human goods were to be ‘overly dependent on luck.’<sup>27</sup>

Simonides, of course, does not see things this way. For him, that sort of quirk is just what we should expect. The idea that goodness is fragile is a natural extension of the tragic view of life that he is committed to. For Simonides life in general is fragile, not stable; of course *eudaimonia* depends on luck. The world is cruel and capricious, and certainly not arranged fairly from the human perspective, or with human happiness in mind; it is mostly things outside our power that make our brief, vulnerable lives go well or badly, and those things can be transformed or taken from us at any moment. ‘If you are human,’ he says ‘never say what will happen next; and if you see a man who is blessed, never say how long he’ll stay that way. His life can change quicker than the flick of a tiny little fly.’<sup>28</sup> ‘Mortals are feeble, their cares futile; in their brief lives they face toil upon toil, yet there’s no escape from looming death: whether you’re good or bad, you get the same dose.’<sup>29</sup> In the context of that sort of view it is no surprise at all that he thinks that even how good we are might be at the mercy of fortune, and that even a thoroughly decent man can’t help being bad when something overwhelms him. Goodness, in his view, is just another one of those many things

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27 EN 1099b20ff: εἰ δ’ ἐστὶν οὕτω βέλτιον ἢ τὸ διὰ τύχην εὐδαιμονεῖν, εὐλογον ἔχειν οὕτως [‘then it probably is that way’] εἴπερ τὰ κατὰ φύσιν, ὡς σίόν τε κάλλιστα ἔχειν, οὕτω πέφυκεν... τὸ δὲ μέγιστον καὶ κάλλιστον ἐπιτρέψαι τύχη λίαν, πλημμελὲς ἂν εἴη. For another clear statement of this view, cf. *Pol* 1323b21-8: ‘We take it for granted that blessedness (*eudaimonia*) befalls each person in exact proportion to their having goodness and wisdom, and acting on them...which by the way also shows that being blessed cannot possibly be the same thing as being *fortunate*; because chance and accident are only responsible for goods outside the soul; nobody is ever a *righteous* person or a *moderate* person just by good fortune, or from luck.’ Nussbaum (1986), 318-42, discusses Aristotle’s treatment of luck and its effects on goodness at length. I disagree with her view that Aristotle accommodates the insights of the tragedians, but do not need to argue that issue here. Simonides holds a position on moral luck that Aristotle firmly rejects on *any* reading of his views.

28 Fragment 355; cf. Page (1968), 172: ἄνθρωπος ἐὼν μὴ ποτε φάσις ὃ τι γίνεται αὖριον, | μηδ’ ἄνδρα ἰδὼν ὄλβιον ὅσον χρόνον ἔσσειται | ὡκεία γὰρ οὐδὲ τανυπερέγου μίας | οὕτως ἅ μετὰστασις.

29 Fragment 354; cf. Page (1968), 172: ἄνθρωπος ἐὼν μὴ ποτε φάσις ὃ τι γίνεται αὖριον, | μηδ’ ἄνδρα ἰδὼν ὄλβιον ὅσον χρόνον ἔσσειται | ὡκεία γὰρ οὐδὲ τανυπερέγου μίας | οὕτως ἅ μετὰστασις.

that a tough break can take away from you. The best people are the ones who have had the fewest really tough breaks.

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It seems very likely that Plato read the song the same way as Aristotle (and for that matter that Aristotle's was also the standard reading). We can now easily see, then, why Plato must have objected to this song very strongly, both considered in itself, and in his capacity as an aspiring public educator if it was popular and influential. He has Aristotle's reasons for disagreeing with it — only much more so. He regards the tragic view of life as not merely wrong, but blasphemous,<sup>30</sup> and has powerful reasons for rejecting the idea of moral luck in particular. In the Platonic view, *life is fair*. Good people are rewarded for their goodness (rewarded by the cosmos that is) and bad people are, somehow, necessarily, pathetic losers in the grander scheme, even if they are powerful and superficially prosperous and contented.<sup>31</sup> But where Aristotle bases his objection to moral luck on vague and secular intuitions about 'nature' doing things for the best, Plato has a theist's deeper faith in the benevolence and the justice of the universe, and predictably goes much further in his opposition to tragedy. A central message of his ethical dia-

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30 See *R* 379-88. He makes this claim clearly at 380b6: 'As for the claim that God, who is good, could be the cause of anything bad to anyone, we must absolutely insist that nobody is to make any such a claim in our city (if it is to be well governed) and that nobody, young or old, is ever to hear any such claim made, either in poetry or in any myth in prose, since *such a claim would be impious*, and harmful to us, as well as self-contradictory.' It is the idea that divine forces are *not* always good, but cruel, and often do us harm, that here represents the tragic and Homeric view that Plato labels as 'impious'.

31 *Ap* 41c: 'This is one thing that we must consider true: that *nothing bad ever happens to a good man* either while he lives, or after he dies, *and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods*.' For the view that bad people, even if they are wealthy and powerful, are wretched, see *Gr* 466-81. The same faith in a just universe underlies Plato's criticisms of Homer and the tragedians in the *Republic* (379b-80c); it is implicit in the idea that the Form of the Good is the first principle of the universe (508e-9b). It is stated succinctly at *Phd* 98-9 (where Plato says that we can only explain features of the world by showing how they are *for the best*) and *Ti* 29a (where the creator is 'the best of all possible causes,' and the world is 'the finest of all possible worlds.') In the *Laws* (909a) Plato says that anyone who claims that the universe is *not* just, and that no gods (or indifferent ones) watch over us should be put to death. This faith runs through his entire philosophical career essentially unchanged.

logues is that external goods (power, wealth, sex, health, status, even physical survival) have basically no value — or at any rate no intrinsic value — and that to regard them in the way that ordinary people do is to suffer from a delusion; a delusion that can be cured by Philosophy.<sup>32</sup> That famous Platonic asceticism is, among other things, a response to the idea of tragedy, and to its philosophical partner the problem of evil, the central problem facing anyone who believes, as Socrates so confidently proclaims in the *Apology* (41c), that benevolent divine forces watch over human affairs, protecting good men from any form of harm. Since external goods are haphazardly distributed and easily taken away from us, the assertion that they do not have any value anyway makes it much easier to believe that human life is not fragile. Conversely, the Socratic view that the only good thing in life is virtue, or the inner goodness of your soul, has the convenient and pleasing consequence that life is infallibly better for good people than for bad people, and that *eudaimonia* is entirely in our own hands — as required by Socrates' (and Plato's) unshakeable faith in a just universe. At any rate, our happiness is in our own hands as long as our virtue is in our own hands.

It is in the context of these views that the idea of moral luck is so utterly unacceptable to Plato. It is bad enough that tragedians encourage people to think that life is cruel and unfair; to be guided by their emotions, and to care about those trivial little things that are at the mercy of fortune, when all that really matters is wisdom and virtue. Simonides goes further: he says that even virtue itself is at the mercy of fortune! That idea threatens the fairness of life far more radically. If people are not responsible for how good they are, then even a cosmos that consistently rewards the good and punishes the bad still turns out to be unjust. If good people sometimes 'just can't help being bad,' and if 'the best people are just the luckiest ones,' then even happiness that depends only on virtue turns out to be distributed unfairly, because virtue itself is, as it seems, rather unfairly doled out. Plato has to object to this shocking suggestion as strongly as to any idea that he ever opposes.

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32 For the idea that ordinary emotional attachments (corresponding to common sense ideas about what is good and bad) are misleading or delusional, see, e.g., *R* 386-88, 438-43, 603-6; *Phd* 69; *Smp* 210-12; for the idea that nothing in life has much value compared to virtue (or ethical knowledge) see, e.g., *Ap* 28, 30, 40; *Meno* 87-9; *Euthd* 278-82; *R* 386-88; *Smp* 210-12.

Simonides' ideas, and Plato's objections to them, are not articulated in the discussion of the song. Instead, Socrates obscures its philosophical content, and repeatedly denies that Simonides is even making the claims that Plato disagrees with. The objective effect of his wild misreadings is to erase the offending ideas from the song. That, I propose, is also their purpose. Plato does not want to refute the song's claims in an open and philosophical engagement, if that means treating a poet as a serious thinker and sympathetically expounding views that he finds so deeply objectionable; instead, he deals with the song by mangling it beyond recognition, and *airbrushing* the unacceptable content.

He also undermines the song with mockery. That is the function of the frivolous tone of the discussion. Commentators have always known that the interpretation is full of broad irony and slapstick humor, but they have missed what seems to me the simplest inference from that fact. This Aristophanic mauling is not directed at sophists in general, or at poets in general, and least of all at Protagoras, who is a virtually silent spectator. Rather, Plato is making fun of this song, and ridiculing this poet, Simonides. Think of the song as a kind of public performance. By a treatment of this kind, it is as if Plato is hurling rotten tomatoes at the poet as he performs; laughing at him, jeering, interrupting him, belittling him and shouting him down. Then he rounds things off by booting him from the stage altogether with the withering (and disingenuous) final remark that discussions about poetry are in any case vulgar and boring and have no place in intelligent conversation.

The deletion of Simonides' ideas from his own song always made it very hard to notice how seriously Plato was objecting to Simonides, especially when we had the wrong idea about what Simonides was saying in the first place. The new text makes it easy to see that the Socratic misinterpretation specifically distorts those parts of the song that discuss moral luck. For example, in interpreting the key assertion that a good man will 'turn bad when he's doing badly' Socrates says:

[Simonides means that] a good man could become bad, at some point, either with the passing of time or as a result of strain or illness or through some other accident — remember, the only thing that counts as “doing badly” is losing your knowledge...(345b2-5)

So he takes 'doing badly' (which in reality refers to misfortune) as referring to the loss of one's knowledge, and suggests that such a thing might come about through old age or injury. This facetious twisting of the lines hints at the serious disagreement. When Plato says that *the only*

*way to 'do badly' in life is to lose your knowledge* he means, first, that the only way to 'do badly' in life is to lose your goodness, and, second, that real goodness is a kind of knowledge. Those claims exactly contradict Simonides. The first rejects Simonides' general view that doing badly in life is typically the result of misfortune. Simonides thinks you are doing badly if, say, your children are slaughtered and your city sacked, or if you are starving, or miserably poor, or sold into slavery. Plato is saying here, in his misinterpretation, that those things (those conventional, common sense misfortunes) categorically do *not* matter: you're only doing badly, he says bluntly, if you lose your knowledge. And the equation of knowledge with virtue negates Simonides' other idea, that virtue can be overwhelmed. The ethical knowledge that Socrates is alluding to is, in Plato's conception of it, immune to the external forces that Simonides thinks can make us act badly. That is the whole point of it.

Later in the song Simonides says that he praises people as long as they are not willful in their wrongdoing; he accepts that sometimes we cannot help doing wrong (lines 27-30). Socrates carefully erases this unacceptable thought from the text by insisting (ironically) that Simonides cannot really mean that people are ever willful in their wrongdoing (345d-6a). Surely he must believe that all wrongdoings are involuntary or unwitting.<sup>33</sup> The line 'So long as he does not do wrong willfully, I give my praise to anyone' must actually mean 'So long as he does not do wrong, *willfully* I give my praise to anyone' (345d9ff). There follows an absurd explanation, to the effect that Simonides sometimes praised people under duress, as opposed to praising them of his own free will, into which Socrates also manages to incorporate the final line that 'not

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33 What Socrates means by his paradox is not that all failures are forced on us ('involuntary'), but that all moral failures are *unwitting*, i.e., result from some form of ignorance (as he later argues, at 357e). That really means, unexpectedly, that in fact *no* moral failures are forced on us or unavoidable. This is an issue beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems likely on the basis of the line of thought in the *Protagoras* that the historical Socratic paradox was precisely a reaction to the unfairness implied by the idea that even good people can't help doing wrong. Socrates, like Plato, believed in fair and benevolent divine forces; he also believed that moral goodness was central to human happiness — these are among the few claims that we can attribute to the real Socrates with total confidence. But that combination of beliefs leads directly to the view that moral goodness must be distributed fairly — and hence to deep unease about (universal) *acrasia*.

even the gods can resist necessity.’ Thus, two other clear references to moral luck are rather laboriously deleted from the song.

Plato spends most of his time on the first strophe (the same one that Aristotle comments on) because it states the idea of externally induced moral failure most fully and clearly. The long introductory stages of the discussion largely concern the opening lines, and once Socrates begins his main interpretation (at 343c) he spends over half his exegesis (to 345c3) on just the first eight lines of the song. Within that concentration, the longest and zaniest misreadings by far (344c-5c) are reserved for the crucial lines, 5-8. It is virtually impossible not to read those four lines as stating that misfortune can make good people act badly; but by an extended *tour de force* of exegetical contortion, Socrates finds a way. The same goal is discernible again in his treatment of the third strophe. He quotes the first six lines (345c3), which contain no explicit reference to moral luck, and gives an inconsequential, two-line comment; he then quotes the last four (which take for granted the idea of involuntary wrongdoing) and produces forty lines of entertaining absurdity (345d-6b) that contrive to miss their perfectly obvious sense.

One way or another, Socrates systematically removes all the suggestions of moral luck. According to the Socratic reading, Simonides never even mentions what is in fact (on this theory) the subject of the song. But the fact that the discussion does not engage openly with the ideas of the song does not mean that Plato does not address them elsewhere in the dialogue. He is evidently unwilling to acknowledge the song as a source of philosophical ideas, even though he finds those very ideas engaging and provocative. But he is keen to address those ideas in a more fully philosophical context — on his own turf, so to speak. The rest of the *Protagoras* discusses precisely the issues raised by the song. Very soon after the discussion of the song is finished and the philosophy resumes, we find Plato expressing with perfect clarity his objections to Simonides’ claim that strong emotions (implied by *amêchanos sumphora*) have the power to make good people act badly. The whole matter is neatly laid out in this question of Socrates to Protagoras:

[Most people] think that often, even though the knowledge is there in a person, it isn’t knowledge that controls them, but something else — sometimes anger, or pleasure, or pain; sometimes love, and often fear — as if knowledge were a *slave* being pushed and shoved around by everything else... So do you think something like that as well? Or do you think knowledge is something noble, and that it’s in its nature to govern us; that if someone really *knows* what’s good and what’s

bad, nothing can ever overpower them and force them into doing something other than what their knowledge is telling them to do...?' (352b2-c7)

The view that Socrates attributes here to 'most people' is the one that we found in the song: that in some situations love or pain or anger or fear might overwhelm even good people (even 'decent' people who 'have a sense of what's right' as Simonides says). Simonides thinks that at some point our self-control is bound to fail, and that is what the imaginary 'most people' claim in the final section of the dialogue. Simonides thinks that since such failures are inevitable, we should not expect more of people. That too is implicit in what 'most people' say: they claim that sometimes we cannot help doing the wrong thing; we all do things we know we should not do (352d) when we are 'overwhelmed.'<sup>34</sup> It follows on that popular view that ethical perfection is impossible and ordinary goodness is all there is — exactly the thesis of the song.

So there is a direct connection between the song and the subsequent discussion of *akrasia*. The song asserts that no one is immune to *akrasia* and that is precisely the claim that Plato tries to overthrow, by asserting, in effect, that philosophical wisdom *can* make us immune to moral failures caused by unruly emotions. Leave aside the dialectical complication created by the context of hedonism. On any reading at all, in the final section Plato outlines a form of ethical expertise (*technê*) or wisdom (*sophia*) or knowledge (*epistêmê*) — 'knowledge of what is good and bad' — that guarantees that whoever has it will always do what is right. If there is such knowledge, then any failure of self-control, any instance of failing to be good (e.g., of failing to be brave) must be, Socrates says, a result not of our overwhelming emotions, but of ignorance (357d-e, 360). So the argument concludes that such failings are not inevitable after all, and that some kind of knowledge will bestow

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34 The claim takes the form that most people do things they know are bad for them 'because they can't resist pleasures' (or are overwhelmed by pain). But the passage just quoted makes it clear that Plato and Simonides have the same things in mind. 'Pleasures' for Plato, include the pleasures associated with attaining wealth, health, and power (354b) and the pleasures of romantic love (352b8) as well as sexual desire (353c6). So he must have in mind romantic love, greed, lust, and ambition as emotions competing with ethical knowledge. And by 'pains' he means at least to include the emotions of anger and fear (352b8). (Cf. Aristotle *EN* 1105b21, which shows that, for him at least, 'pleasures and pains' implies the full range of emotions.)

exactly the ethical infallibility that Simonides thinks is impossible.<sup>35</sup> This is a very important idea for Plato. For him this is really the whole point of philosophy. Philosophy in the elevated Platonic sense just *is* the pursuit of ethical self-perfection through wisdom, and it is supposed to make us far better than ‘most people,’ who approach ethical questions in their emotional, haphazard, inconstant, unreflective way. So Simonides’ claim that searching for ethical perfection is a waste of our short lives is to Plato precisely the equivalent of saying that philosophy itself is a big waste of time.

Note also that the same final argument overthrows Simonides’ other claim, that ordinary decency is ‘good enough’ and that common failures deserve our sympathy. If philosophy can make us immune to such failures, then it follows that people are wrong to think that they cannot do any better — that turns out to be just a feeble excuse — and we are justified in seeing ordinary morality as unsatisfactory, against Simonides.<sup>36</sup> That too is an important idea for Plato: that ordinary virtue, unrefined by philosophy, is inadequate.<sup>37</sup> These last two ideas go closely together.

35 This is the point of the so-called ‘denial of *acrasia*’. What is being denied, by both Socrates here, and by Aristotle, as we saw above, is not that *acrasia* is a real phenomenon, but only the more troubling claim that it happens to all of us. To that end Plato and Aristotle both insist, each in his own way, that a person *whose goodness is fully developed* could never lose control. For Plato that means a person with philosophical knowledge; for Aristotle, a person with full *phronêsis*.

36 Note that at 357d-e Socrates berates ordinary people for not accepting that their failings can be cured by knowledge. This looks like a genuine Platonic rebuke. Socrates criticizes people for not bothering to go to Protagoras or Hippias or Prodicus to be given the appropriate wisdom. That is ironic; but Plato does think that ordinary people urgently need to go to people who, in his view, provide the *correct* philosophical training — himself, for instance — and he implies here that a popular excuse *for not turning to philosophy* is this widespread (Simonidean) view that common moral failures are unavoidable.

37 See, e.g., *Cri* 48; *Phd* 68, R 475-80, 488-9 (ship), 515-19 (cave); *Men* 96-100; *Grg* 515-19. His harshest denouncement of ordinary ethical understanding is the simile of the cave. In the *Protagoras*, besides the discussion of ordinary people’s ‘ignorance,’ the attribution to them of a willingness to accept that they are hedonists is part of the same low regard. This seems clear at 355a, where Socrates implies, with some derision, that ‘most people’ *cannot think of anything at all that is good besides their own pleasure*. He repeats this analysis at *Phd* 68c-69c, and R 358-68, which in effect accuses ‘most people’ of having no moral interests whatsoever. (Cf. also Aristotle’s view, at *EN* 1095b, that ‘most people’ are only interested in pleasure and ‘prefer to live like cows’.) It is hard to separate these philosophical claims from mere social prejudices.

The hopeful image of the philosopher escaping from the darkness of commonplace ethical confusion requires a corresponding bleak image of the pathetic majority stuck forever inside the cave. The ethical superiority of the few logically requires the ethical inferiority of the many. Of course, Simonides himself agrees that some people are better than others — some are ‘decent,’ some are ‘lawless.’ In that plainer sense he too believes in ‘ethical superiority.’ But that is not at all what the image of the cave is saying; it is not what Plato means by the superiority offered by philosophy. Plato means that *some good people are far better than other good people*. Ordinary goodness is unrefined, muddled, and second-rate; it buckles under pressure; but philosophical goodness is on a higher plain, and raises us above supposedly universal weaknesses. It is that idea, the idea of a higher level of goodness, different in kind, not just in degree, that Simonides firmly rejects in the song. He hasn’t the slightest doubt that moral weakness *is* universal.

So the philosophical connections between the song and the final section of the dialogue could hardly be any stronger. The final section is a direct critique of the central claim made by Simonides; a refutation of the idea that some moral failings are simply beyond our control, even for the best of us. And with a little effort we can bring out the connections between the song and what comes before it in the dialogue as well. To do that we just need to consider the political implications of the song.

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The story of Gyges’ ring that Glaucon tells in the *Republic* (358e-60d) ties in closely with these interests of Plato’s. Glaucon imagines a magic ring that makes you invisible and allows you to do whatever you want. He asks us to imagine what an ordinary person would do if offered the powers of the ring and subjected to its immense temptations. For Plato the answer is that the ordinary man would fail dismally under that kind of pressure. He would succumb to his emotions and his wildest passions, and lapse into a kind of monstrous selfishness. He would steal and murder, and rape, and strive to enrich and empower himself by any means (360a-c). In the real world, Glaucon says, those passions (greed, love, anger, jealousy, lust, ambition) are kept under control only by societal norms and by threats and punishments. People obey these laws because it is in their own selfish interest to do so (358e-9b). They treat other people fairly only to avoid being punished, or to avoid being exploited themselves. Glaucon’s thought experiment is designed

to show us that if you have only those reasons for behaving ethically, then you are not really moral at all (360c); the ring reveals your true character, which is immoral to the point of savagery. And since Plato evidently believes that this applies to ordinary people,<sup>38</sup> it is also supposed to show that ordinary, non-philosophical goodness is feeble and inadequate, and that we have to find some better and more absolute foundation for our commitment to justice.

What would Simonides say about the Gyges challenge? He would surely have to agree that all of us would act shamefully under the immense pressures generated by the magic ring, which would unleash our emotions and desires so completely.<sup>39</sup> Only a god could pass such a test! But whereas the challenge launches Plato, in the *Republic*, on his quest for ethical perfection through philosophical enlightenment, Simonides thinks that searching for that perfection is a fool's mission, and that it is a fact of human nature — one that we should not grumble about — that nobody could ever pass such a test. The Gyges test, he would say, does not show that ordinary people have no goodness at all, or that they are no better than monsters; it just shows that they are not gods. Plenty of fully decent people would fail the test.

This debate has important political implications. Suppose it is true that ordinary civic virtue is superficial, muddled, and inadequate, as Plato implies with his Gyges story, and that there needs to be, and is, something better and stronger, some kind of ethical knowledge offered by Philosophy (or dialectic, or ethical *technê*, or knowledge of the Form of the Good, or whatever); something that would give a person an invincible inner commitment to righteousness, and enable them to pass even the Gyges' test — to be Plato's 'man of steel' (360b5) or Simonides' flawless *tetragônos*. Such a man would be an example of *real* goodness among mere shadows (cf. *Meno* 100a) — he would be vastly more qualified to rule, and should obviously be put in charge of society. It would make no sense to let the common, inferior sort of people, the non-philosophers, exert power over him. The superior man must rule

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38 R 358a4: Οὐ τὸνν δοκεῖ, ἔφη, τοῖς πολλοῖς [sc. that morality is an intrinsically valuable good] ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐπιπόνου εἶδους, ὃ μισθῶν θ' ἕνεκα καὶ εὐδοκμησέων διὰ δόξαν ἐπιτηδευτέον, αὐτὸ δὲ δι' αὐτὸ φευκτέον ὡς ὄν χαλεπόν. There is no reason not to read this as Plato's own view of 'most people'.

39 The test seems perfectly designed to generate the exact forces that Simonides says (in *PMG* 541) we typically succumb to: greed, lust and anger — leading, Plato predicts (360b), to a wild spree of theft, rape, and murder.

the inferior, as surely as the soul should rule the body, and reason the passions.

So these two ideas — that philosophy leads us towards ethical perfection, or at least to a far superior form of goodness, and that ordinary ethical thinking is defective — combine to motivate Plato's political vision. These are his strongest and most familiar arguments against the rival, egalitarian and democratic notion that access to power should remain broad and open. The idea that some kind of knowledge, derived from philosophy, can raise a few people way above ordinary moral failings (especially those caused by the emotions) leads Plato straight to the philosophically trained guardians of the *Republic*, and to the division of humanity that he spells out there.

Simonides' song speaks directly to this issue. He pours cold water on the idea of the morally flawless man. By implication, to Plato's mind, he rejects the idea of ethical expertise and the promise of philosophically perfected rulers. He thinks that looking for such a man is a waste of our short lives — a daydream. This very simple sentiment, that 'nobody's perfect,' is powerfully democratic in its implications (whether or not Simonides is aware of this). It implies that any ruler, in any system of government, is liable to fail in the familiar human ways. If we are *all* bound to make mistakes, then all rulers are bound to make mistakes. In which case it is essential to place checks on the powers they are granted, and above all to have some way of getting rid of them. For Plato, these democratic implications are a direct affront to his political instincts. To his mind, allowing ordinary people to exercise power over society leads to chaos and disaster. The only salvation for humanity lies in the creation of a class of ethically superior rulers, who shall avoid the pitfalls of ordinary human character, with its unruly passions, and who shall as a matter of principle answer only to other people possessed of the same superior wisdom. He cannot accept Simonides' idea that that kind of ethical perfection is in fact unachievable,<sup>40</sup> and that we are stuck

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40 There is direct evidence that Plato reads the song exactly this way, i.e., as implying the impossibility of perfect rulers. In the *Laws* he alludes to the phrasing of the song (711c8) in saying that it is hard for there ever to be 'people who have a divine love of moderation and righteousness [ἔρωσ θεῖος τῶν σωφρόνων τε καὶ δικαίων ἐπιτηδευσμάτων] who also have great political power' (711d6-8), i.e., ethically perfect rulers. In the context he is agreeing that ethical perfection is a rare thing; but it is a basic premise of the *Laws* (as of the *Republic*) that so far from being impossible it is the goal of politics.

with our unruly passions, and must accept them and work around them — appreciate them even — rather than strive to eliminate them.

Nor can he stomach Simonides' other idea, that ordinary morality (with its failings) is *good enough*, and worthy of admiration and respect — another idea strongly democratic in its implication. Elsewhere Plato attributes this exact view to characters with openly democratic views: to Meletus in the *Apology* (24-25), to Anytus in the *Meno* (92e), and above all to Protagoras earlier in this very dialogue. So both these implications explain how the song connects in Plato's mind with the first section of the dialogue, which is a discussion about the merits of democracy. In that opening section Socrates (319b-e) and Protagoras (322-328) agree that democracy makes sense if and only if ordinary goodness is 'good enough,' and if there are no ethical *technicians*. Protagoras' 'great speech' is an eloquent exposition of the democratic view, and just like the song, it defends ordinary, non-technical goodness:

So...if [the Athenians] are 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... 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 it's *everyone's* business to be good in *that* way — or societies couldn't exist at all. (322d-3a) ... ... [W]hen it comes to this particular field — the field of being good people — *everyone* has to be an expert, if society is going to exist at all. (327a)

Protagoras asserts that there are no ethical experts, or, a better way of making the same point, that we are *all* experts. He has explained that goodness is universal because without it societies could not exist at all (322c-d); moral goodness is essential to our very survival, and for that reason it is a standard feature even of plain, pre-philosophical humanity, and is cultivated even by the most ordinary upbringing. So he agrees exactly with Simonides that being good is not really all that hard, and good people are not all that rare, and plenty of people are worthy of our praise, and that ordinary decency is just fine. (As we have noted above, this more egalitarian view is not asserting that everyone is equally good, but rather that *ordinary* goodness, including the goodness of the decent farmer, shoemaker, or day laborer, is *as good as it gets*; and the political implications of this view are obvious.) Conversely, the song seems almost to hint at Protagoras' humanistic and naturalist ethical theory. When Simonides likewise says that the ordinary, 'decent guy'

(the *hugiês anêr*) is good enough, he describes him as *eidôs onêsipolin dikan*; 'having a sense of right that is the benefit of cities.' This looks uncannily like a poetic version of Protagoras' view that ordinary people have an adequate sense of right and wrong because it is essential to the existence of cities (322c, 324d, 327a) and benefits us as citizens (327b).

So the connection between Protagoras' democratic theory and the political implications of the song are strong, and we can be very confident that Plato has these connections in view.<sup>41</sup> When that is combined with the clear disagreement between the song and what follows it (a disagreement over whether or not emotion can overwhelm even good people) it seems that we can place the song in the dialogue in a way that makes very good overall sense. In fact, the song not only fits in, it actually helps us to see the philosophical unity of the dialogue, because it nicely explains the connection between the opening debate about democracy, and the closing discussion about *acrasia*. Simonides, in just a few lines, defends ordinary goodness (and by implication advocates an egalitarian and democratic view) and does so by arguing that acratia failures are inevitable, and that no kind of goodness can ever be invincible. The song thus sweeps over all the various topics of the dialogue and ties the two ends together like the laces of a boot, revealing Plato's whole train of thought.

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41 An objection might be raised: why, if it expresses something very like his own view, does Protagoras apparently *criticize* the song? (He suggests it is self-contradictory.) There are several things to say about this: (1) It would indeed be a problem for my theory if the *real* Protagoras disliked the song's ethical view; but the fact that the *character* Protagoras (vaguely) criticizes it matters much less: this is a dramatic puzzle, not a philosophical one. (2) Protagoras (the character) in any case says nothing that contradicts any of the ethical or political views that we have found to be implied by the song. He poses a question, but is cut short by Socrates before his solution. He never gives his own reading of the song. (3) I have argued that the entire discussion of the song is a web of misdirection. Plato conceals the content of the song. Having Protagoras appear to criticize it fits with that misdirection — it is misleading, just like the rest of the episode. (4) This is, as Socrates says, a 'topsy-turvy' dialogue (361c). He and Protagoras seem to keep switching places — well beyond the one instance that Socrates comments on. Protagoras, the famous agnostic, claims that morality comes from Zeus; Socrates, the famous theist, advocates a godless hedonism; each is saying something else, under the surface. In the discussion of the song, Socrates *defends* Simonides, even though it is clear that he disagrees with the song. Protagoras *criticizes* Simonides, even though in reality he agrees with him.

Simonides has what we may call a humanistic attitude to life. He takes for granted the ordinary view of suffering (namely, that it is to be taken seriously) and he accepts human beings *as they are*, with their ordinary passions and aspirations, and their flaws and weaknesses. Those attitudes in turn imply that other strand of humanist thinking: the idea that human happiness is fragile, life is often harsh and unfair, and that there are no benevolent gods taking a kindly interest in our lives. To Plato's mind, as this dialogue helps us to see, humanism in these senses was also closely connected with democracy — and I think he was fundamentally right to see that connection. To respect and admire and love the human character *as it is*, the way Simonides and Protagoras do, is also thereby to respect the ethical judgments of ordinary people, and hence, by only a slight extension of that respect, to believe that ordinary people are competent to make their own laws and manage their society by themselves, without the help of any higher and wiser powers, human or divine.

Plato rejects this view of things at every step. He believes, first, that this is a benevolently governed universe and that human suffering (allegedly tragic and unfair) must in fact be an illusion; that our enthusiasms and aspirations are often vain and silly, our desires and emotions petty; that there is a superior but exceedingly rare level of wisdom and goodness that we should strive to attain, one that most people, stuck in a dark cave of ignorance, fall far short of. For those reasons he also believes that ordinary people are certainly *not* fit to govern themselves, and that democracy is madness. This little song of Simonides manages to pack into just a few plain but well-crafted lines the three or four ideas, in areas cosmological, ethical and political, that Plato most passionately and viscerally opposed. That is why he takes such a keen and extraordinarily hostile interest in the song, and it makes perfect sense that he should deal with it here, in the *Protagoras*, which is otherwise such an illuminating and imaginative engagement with these various humanistic ideas.

There still remains the question of the mode of attack. I said earlier that we can explain why Socrates misinterprets the song if we suppose that Plato's actual aim (in that section) is to distort and *erase* the ideas he disapproves of, not to expound them; also, that we should see the comical mistreatment of the song as a form of mockery and humiliation. We might wonder why Plato would express his disagreement with Simonides in that way. But we do not have to go far to find good parallels. Surely this is very like the way he treats Homer and the tragedians in the *Republic*. Just like Simonides, those poets advocate the tragic view

of life: they say that life is cruel and unfair, and that terrible things often happen to good people. Plato tells us in clear terms that he regards these claims as blasphemous. He does not treat the tragic outlook as a philosophical view that deserves a place in the public forum as much as his own. He does not expound, charitably discuss, or engage with the tragedians' ideas. Instead, he just proposes to expunge the lines that he finds philosophically unacceptable. So if my reading of the *Protagoras* is right, and Plato is erasing offensive claims from Simonides' song, not physically, but by way of a corrective misinterpretation, then strange though this seems, we certainly cannot say that it is uncharacteristic.

The *Protagoras* elsewhere provides another clear glimpse into this part of Plato's thinking. There is a passage in which he describes the treatment of those people who stand up in the assembly and claim to have some form of expertise that they do not in fact possess. He describes how such people are 'laughed at, and shouted down, and hauled away by the archers' (319c4-6) if they persist in offering their ignorant opinions. It seems extremely unlikely that this could refer to any real incidents in the assembly. Who, after all, would actually get up in the Pnyx and falsely claim to be an expert doctor or master builder? The image is totally absurd — but there is a clue here about Plato's real line of thought. This shows us how he feels about people who lay claim to *ethical* expertise that they do not possess, something that, in his view at least, happens in the assembly all the time. He wants to see such people — the non-philosophers, the upstart democratic politicians, the smooth lawyers and angry 'demagogues' — forcibly removed from the public stage. And this is also exactly how he feels about Simonides (and tragic poets in general). He thinks that Simonides is claiming to be an expert, daring to stand up and offer his silly homilies on the most important matters of all, the nature of life and human goodness, when his views on these matters are ignorant and morally dangerous. 'You are *extremely* wrong about things of the *utmost* importance — but people think that you're right!' (says Simonides to Pittacus, but really this is Plato speaking to Simonides) 'that's why I'm criticizing you!' (347a).<sup>42</sup> Plato treats

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42 Through the episode Plato often seems to disclose his own thoughts. We can piece together his feelings about the song from the way Socrates describes Simonides' (imaginary) attack on Pittacus, which shadows Plato's own attack on Simonides. Socrates tells us that A is annoyed by the fact that B's ideas are 'widely circulated and highly regarded' (343b5) and so A, who 'takes pride in his philosophical abilities' (343c1) aims to 'knock down B's idea, like someone knocking down a

him consistently with his clearly stated view of how pseudo-experts should be treated: he laughs at him, drowns out his voice, and then hauls him out of the discussion altogether.

One might then ask why Plato mentions Simonides' song at all if he does not want its ideas to be discussed. But that objection is easy to answer. Plato is provoked, and he wants to respond to the song, which was presumably a popular and effective piece of poetry. He cannot merely ignore the song; he must counteract it. But at the same time he does not want its subversive ideas to be treated with respect, and he does not want to give the impression that poets can make philosophical claims that are worth discussing on anything like equal terms. What we have is a product of all those aims. The great philosopher brings the full weight of all his dramatic and comic talents against the song, like a trireme ramming a tiny rowboat with all its might, in his eagerness to wreck the authority and dignity of Simonides; he contemptuously dismisses poets in general; and all the while he brilliantly distracts us from the song's actual, rather attractive ideas. In that last respect the episode was a success beyond Plato's wildest hopes. His mistreatment of the song eventually became far better known than the song itself, and by accident became the only source of our text of the song, so that in the end no one had even the faintest idea what Simonides had actually said.

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champion wrestler' and 'get the better of it' (343c2) and 'knock it off its perch' (343c4); so he 'quarrels with him' and 'disputes his claims' (343d3-5) and strives, 'from start to finish, to refute B's idea' (344b4) and he 'utterly and continuously attacks it' (345d1). The language repeatedly suggests a violent assault. It perfectly describes Plato's treatment of Simonides' song. The quoted remark — 'you are extremely wrong about things of the utmost importance (περὶ τῶν μεγίστων)!' — is an explicit reference to being wrong on *morally weighty* matters, and more than that it is a reference to moral corruption of others; hence the detail that '*people think that you are right!*' (δοκεῖς ἀληθῆ λέγειν). If my reading of these clues is correct, this is good evidence that it is the fact that people generally admired this (as he saw it) morally corrupting song that motivated Plato to attack it. For other similar uses of περὶ τῶν μεγίστων in reference to questions of great moral importance, cf. *R* 377e7, 450d10, *La* 187d4, *Grg* 487b5, 527e1.

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