

NOBODY'S PERFECT:
A NEW TEXT AND INTERPRETATION OF SIMONIDES *PMG* 542

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THE DISCUSSION OF SIMONIDES' song (*PMG* 542) in Plato's *Protagoras* raises three questions: (1) How should the song be reconstructed? (2) What is Simonides saying? (3) Why does Plato discuss it in the dialogue? The questions depend on one another. To know why Plato is interested in the song we first have to understand it, and for that we have to figure out how to reconstruct it. The first question, however, has not stirred much interest recently. There are now only minor variations in the text of the song and none that affects the other problems, and a standard version of the second strophe in particular (*PMG* 542.11–20) has been accepted for over two hundred years.¹ Meanwhile the song's baffling incoherence has led to numerous incompatible readings, and scholars cannot agree even at the most basic level on what Simonides is saying. There is also wide disagreement over why the song is in the dialogue.

I shall try to solve the problem of the song's meaning by way of a new reconstruction. That will address the first and second questions (leaving the third for a separate treatment). The new version of the song (NV) is not offered with certainty, but I do aim to show that it is more likely than the standard text. There are two kinds of evidence for the new version. First, there is internal evidence: we can show that the new reconstruction makes far more sense, considered in itself (if we take the fragments but otherwise leave the *Protagoras* to one side). Second, there are the clues in the *Protagoras*. These carry much less weight as evidence, since we cannot place much trust in Socrates' erratic and comically misleading exposition. I shall argue that the dialogue's evidence is weaker and more ambiguous than we thought and does not rule out the new text. The fact is, the dialogue does not clearly lead us to any reconstruction, so the internal considerations should be decisive. Also, my theory is not just that the song has baffled us because we have the wrong text (an

My interest in *PMG* 542 arose out of translating the *Protagoras* (Beresford 2005). There I refer to some of these findings (pp. 150–52) but do not set out my arguments in any detail. I am very grateful to David Wray and to the anonymous reader of *CP*; also to Nelson Lande, Jennifer Thompson, Bruno Currie, and Jasper Griffin for their comments on an earlier draft, and especially to Michael Szkolka for his corrections and contributions at every stage.

1. Gentili (1964, 278) gives a bibliography of the debates over the text from 1795 to 1962. It shows that nobody has ever questioned the second strophe.

unintelligible text), but also that we have the wrong text because the dialogue has misled us. The second part of this is an important component of a full explanation of our long and mysterious failure to understand Simonides.

The song as presently reconstructed does not make sense, and the various interpretations of it contradict each other flatly² and are often too convoluted to be probable. Some interpreters accept Socrates' idea that the song hangs on the contrast between *becoming* good and *being* good. Others claim that there is no such distinction in the song at all (plausibly, since nothing in the text points at the contrast). Many interpreters have thought that the song might contrast two different conceptions of the good man: an aristocratic ideal and some later, more ethical concept of goodness. Others (Plato and Aristotle, for example) treat the song's subject as ethical throughout and are unaware that there could be any other way of taking it. Among those who assign non-ethical readings to the song, there is no agreement about where Simonides is using the supposed older concept of the good man and where he is using the supposed newer concept.³

Here is the opening of the song and the first part of the usual second strophe (*PMG* 542.1–18). I call this arrangement the standard text (ST).⁴ Asterisks mark the start of a separately quoted section, the placing of which is open to question (the gaps between strophes are also breaks between quoted sections):⁵

ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι
χαλεπὸν, χερσὶν τε καὶ ποσὶ καὶ νόῳ
τετράγωνον, ἄνευ ψόγου τετυγμένον·
... [seven lines missing?]

οὐδέ μοι ἐμμελέως τὸ Πιττάκειον	11
νέμεται, καίτοι σοφοῦ παρὰ φωτὸς εἰ-	
ρημένον· χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι. ***	
θεὸς ἂν μόνος τοῦτ' ἔχοι γέρας, ἄνδρα δ' οὐκ	
ἔστι μὴ οὐ κακὸν ἔμμεναι,	15
ὃν ἀμήχανος συμφορὰ καθέλη.	
πράξας γὰρ εὖ πᾶς ἀνὴρ ἀγαθός,	
κακὸς δ' εἰ κακῶς . . .	

2. Bowra 1934, 230: "[S]o great a divergence of opinion is disturbing in a poem whose words and syntax are far from difficult"; Gentili 1964, 278: "[N]on sono molti i testi che abbiano subito tanti laceramenti e torture, tante diverse e contrastanti interpretazioni. . . ."

3. Wilamowitz (1913, 175–76) and Bowra (1934; 1961, 326–36) think that Simonides is describing an older aristocratic ideal in the opening lines and replacing it with a new, more ethical one in the rest of the song. Dickie (1978, 23–26) thinks that he endorses the older standard (again, referred to in the opening) but considers it too difficult to attain. Donlan (1969, 75–87) thinks the opposite: that the opening in fact refers to the newer, ethical ideal of goodness; but he agrees that Simonides is attacking the older ideal. Adkins (1960, 166–67, 355–59) thinks that the song contains no truly ethical concepts and no attack on the older ideal. Woodbury (1953, 155–65) allows that only one line has a moral sense.

4. All other versions have this opening and this second strophe. So all other texts are versions of ST, and my arguments apply to all previous versions.

5. For a full text of ST, see Page *PMG* 542 (1962, 282). I print lines 1–18 of his text precisely. For a recent discussion of the text, see Gentili 1964 and Giuliano 1991. All translations are my own.

It's hard for there to be a truly good man⁶—perfect in hands, feet, and mind, constructed flawlessly.

...

But that saying of Pittacus doesn't ring true to me (even if he was a smart man): he says "being good is hard." *** Only a god can have that prize; with a man, there's no way he can help being bad when some crisis that he cannot deal with knocks him down. Any man's good when he's doing well in life, bad when he's doing badly . . .

Here are some of the many problems with this text as it stands:

1. Simonides says in ST 11–13 that he doesn't agree that being good is hard. On the most natural reading, he seems to be saying that being good is not hard (i.e., it is fairly easy). But ST disqualifies that sense of his words by what it places after them. Simonides can't be saying "being good is easy; only a god can do it." What then does he mean? The text forces us to accept one of Socrates' suggestions, namely, that "I don't think being good is hard" means "it isn't (strictly speaking) hard—because in fact it's impossible." This is extraordinarily pedantic, if it is even intelligible. It looks like one of Socrates' joke readings of the song, but the reconstruction compels us to adopt it.

2. This awkward sense depends on our seeing that the words "only a god can have that prize" contradict the claim that "being good is hard." But they simply do not. They would work just fine as an extension of the saying: "Pittacus says that being good is hard: [he says] only a god can have that prize." "Hard" in the saying can easily be taken to mean "too hard" (i.e., impossible) or, conversely, "something only god can do" can easily be taken to mean "something very hard."⁷ So the supposed contradiction is not just pedantic—it is invisible. We have accepted it only on Socrates' very dubious authority.

3. With ST, whatever Simonides is talking about in the first strophe is in his view merely hard, whereas whatever he is talking about in the second strophe is much harder than that—absolutely impossible (for mortals). On some interpretations he is talking about something equally difficult in both strophes. But the details in lines 1–3 clearly suggest that whatever he is talking about there is the harder of the two, and by far. The qualifications point clearly to the idea of absolute perfection. Pittacus' saying has no such

6. The words are taken in the *Protagoras* as meaning "it's hard to become a truly good man." They may also mean "it's hard to be [at a particular time] a good man." (The possible philosophical significance of the latter sense of *γενέσθαι* is investigated by Frede [1986]). But here the phrase *ἀνευ ψόγου τετυγμένον* seems to make both readings extremely awkward. A house cannot become flawlessly built, and still less be flawlessly built for just a moment. But one might naturally say that *it is hard for there to be* a flawlessly built house, or a flawlessly built man; see Henry 1999, for this point.

7. Cf. Hom. *Od.* 23.184: *χαλεπὸν δὲ κεν εἶη / καὶ μάλ' ἐπισταμένῳ, ὅτε μὴ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν / ῥηϊδίως ἐθέλων θείῃ ἄλλῃ ἐνὶ χώρῃ*; 10.305: *χαλεπὸν δέ τ' ὀρύσσειν / ἀνδράσι γε θνητοῖσι / θεοὶ δέ τε πάντα δύνανται*; i.e., only gods can do these things, because they are *χαλεπόν*. Apollonius' *Lexicon Homericum* says that *χαλεπόν* can mean *ἀδύνατον*. But if so, and if saying that "only a god could do it" supports the claim that it is *χαλεπόν*, then ST 11–14 does not make sense. If we are being pedantic, then perhaps "hard" is contradicted by "impossible." But then, if we are being pedantic, things that "only god can do" are not impossible. They are possible (for god). We can't have it both ways. Is Simonides being pedantic, or isn't he?

qualifications and whatever “being good” (ἔσθλὸν ἔμμεναι) means, it certainly sounds much easier than “being [or becoming] truly good; perfect [τετράγωνος] in hands, feet, and mind, constructed flawlessly.” ST ignores, or goes against, that loud and clear implication in the wording.

4. Interpreters of ST must either (a) accept or (b) reject Socrates’ implausible idea that Simonides intends a contrast between “becoming good” (ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι) and “being good” (ἔσθλὸν ἔμμεναι). But with ST, either way, the song makes no sense. Here is why:

a. Assume the verbs are being contrasted (against the indications of the wording). We then assume that “being good” means “remaining good,” or being good all the time, which Simonides says is impossible, as contrasted with either (i) becoming good in the first place, or (ii) being good at a particular time (depending on your reading of γενέσθαι). The problem here is that there is no reason to think that “being good” on its own can mean “being good permanently.” Simonides himself shows us that he does not take the verb in that way. Just two lines later he says that “a man cannot help being bad (κακὸν ἔμμεναι) when some misfortune . . . takes him down.” It is clear that there “being bad” means being bad *then*, that is, when misfortune takes him down. Simonides does not mean that “he cannot help then being bad permanently.” That would be nonsense. So he is not using the verb ἔμμεναι in the required sense. He next says (ST 17–18) that “any man is good when he’s been doing well, bad when he’s been doing badly.” The second part of this explains the claim he has just made: that a person cannot avoid being bad at some point, when something overwhelms him. From that we can be sure that the first half means that it is easier to be (yes, *be*) good when things are going well for you—a perfectly intelligible claim. So, again, he does not take being good to mean being good all the time. He also implies that it is not impossible at all, contradicting the claim that he made just four lines earlier: “Being good is strictly impossible [ST 14] . . . Everyone is good when things go well for him [ST 18].” (This baffling contradiction arises, in fact, on any reading of ST.⁸)

In the third strophe of the song (PMG 542.21–30: see below) Simonides tells us again what he considers impossible: “a person who is completely without fault” (πανάμωμος ἄνθρωπος); he makes no mention of being good. This makes it extremely unlikely that the whole thesis of the song was that being good is impossible, with pedantic emphasis on the verb. More than that, it is obvious that the πανάμωμος ἄνθρωπος is the same as the ἄνευ ψόγου τετυγμένος of the first strophe. So it is that kind of perfect goodness (the kind that he referred to in the first strophe) that he thinks is impossible, not the kind referred to in Pittacus’ saying (some interpreters think it may be both, but that makes no sense either; see (5) on the following page).

8. Cf. Hutchinson 2001, 298: “Formally the third statement contradicts the first. . . . The whole passage is not an ingenious exercise in logic [i.e., is illogical]; it treats the discourse . . . audaciously [i.e., doesn’t make sense]” (my brackets). Ibid., 306: “[I]ts precise position is often made purposefully hard for the listener to grasp. . . .” ST is certainly extremely hard to understand. But that is a major problem for ST as a reconstruction, not evidence of Simonides’ playfulness or audacity.

b. If we assume (more plausibly) that there is no fuss made over the verbs, then with ST Simonides contradicts himself in a most confusing way. He says that being absolutely perfect is hard (χαλεπόν); then he pedantically corrects Pittacus for saying that being good is (merely) “hard” (χαλεπόν), rather than impossible, when he has just used the same term himself to describe something that sounds much harder. The criticism is incoherent to the point of mystery.⁹ Thus, either way, the song fails to make sense.

5. Could Simonides be correcting himself in the second strophe? Perhaps he is saying something like this: “Being good is hard—no, in fact it isn’t merely hard; it’s impossible.” But this is just not feasible. He does not correct himself. He corrects Pittacus, which makes it impossible for the thought to work in that way. The paraphrase just given badly misrepresents the text. He actually says this: “I think being absolutely perfect is hard. But I disagree with Pittacus for saying that being good is hard. Only a god can manage it.” Unlike the first (inaccurate) paraphrase, this appears to be gibberish, and we should not be satisfied with it.¹⁰

6. Two scholia mention the song. Both contradict ST, which on any reading forces us to take Simonides to be saying that being good is impossible rather than (merely) hard. One scholiast reports that Pittacus’ saying “it’s hard to be good” meant the same thing as “it’s impossible to be good.”¹¹ If this is right, then Simonides’ pedantic correction of the saying must have mystified his audience (all the more since he expresses it so poorly). If Pittacus means that being good is impossible, how can Simonides correct him by saying that, actually, being good is impossible? Another scholiast reports that Solon’s saying “it’s hard to act honorably” (χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ) was also sometimes given as “it’s impossible to act honorably” (ἀδύνατα τὰ καλὰ),¹² as if that meant the same thing. Scholiasts’ notes are often garbled. Even so, it is worth noting that ST is incompatible with this ancient evidence about how Pittacus’ saying was understood.

7. In ST there are seven lines missing from the first strophe. There is nothing too strange about those lines not being quoted (or paraphrased, or alluded to) in the *Protagoras*. What is strange, however, is that no one else ever quotes a single word of them in the whole of surviving Greek literature,

9. Most (1994, 138) rejects the “being/becoming” idea and explains the repetition of χαλεπόν like this: “[A]ccording to Simonides, it is not wrong to say, ‘It is hard to become a man truly noble, in hands and feet and mind, fashioned foursquare without reproach,’ for here it is clear that ‘hard’ means ‘impossible’; but it is wrong to say, ‘It is hard to be noble,’ for here ‘hard’ seems to mean merely ‘difficult’ [and being noble is not merely difficult, but, strictly speaking, impossible]” (my bracket). On this view, the song is a sort of sadistic cryptogram.

10. The self-correction theory has a long history in spite of being unworkable. See, e.g., Wilamowitz 1913, 167: “Nicht schwer, sondern unmöglich ist es, vollkommen zu werden.” Likewise, Bowra 1934, 232: “Having said that the aristocratic ideal is difficult, he [Simonides] goes a step further and says that, strictly speaking, it is impossible.” This is not what we have in the song. The paraphrase illegitimately erases the clear logical form of the text. It entirely removes the μέν . . . δέ contrast.

11. On *Hp. mai.* 304e (see Greene 1938, 178) the scholiast says by way of explanation of Pittacus: οἱ δ’ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀδυνάτου τὸ χαλεπὸν ἀκούουσιν, ἐπὶ πάντων γὰρ γενέσθαι ἀγαθὸν ἀδύνατον; i.e., Pittacus means “it’s impossible to be good all the time.”

12. The scholion is on *Il.* 1.546: ἐνίστε δὲ καὶ ἀντὶ τοῦ χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ, ἀδύνατα τὰ καλὰ κέϊται. Solon’s saying χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ was linked anecdotally with that of Pittacus (see Greene 1938, 178).

either. Yet the song is widely quoted: by Aristotle (three times), Diogenes Laertius (three times), Plutarch (four times), Polybius, Stobaeus, Julian, Damascius, Basilus, and various others. Why is there not the slightest trace of these missing lines, even though they come from the most widely quoted part of the text (the opening)? Of course it is possible that the lines were just never quoted, or that for some reason all later quotations of the song were taken only from Plato's dialogue. But either way, this is curious.

8. ST has another unexplained gap (*PMG* 542.31–32), and has always posed metrical problems. Editors disagree about how to incorporate the section of the song that appears as *PMG* 542.33–40. Some have guessed that the song contained an epode in addition to three strophes.¹³ But this “epode” has a text that fits suspiciously well into the metrical scheme of the other strophes.¹⁴ Other editors put them into a strophe, but do not agree on where it goes.¹⁵ And if we settle on Page's placement, there is the fact that no editor has found a satisfactory way of adapting Plato's paraphrase of the strophe's third and fourth lines (*PMG* 542.33–34), even though it ought to be a relatively simple matter to come up with at least something that works.¹⁶ These metrical puzzles remain unsolved after centuries of effort.

Many more points have been made about the obscurity of the song's line of thought.¹⁷ I do not claim that these problems are insoluble, but together they certainly make a good case for being suspicious of the current reconstruction, which has always been based only on the few indirect clues that can be extracted from Socrates' very misleading interpretation of the song.

Here is a different ordering of the fragments (NV) that removes the problems:¹⁸

ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι	στρ. α'
χαλεπὸν, χερσὶν τε καὶ ποσὶ καὶ νόῳ	
τετράγωνον, ἀνευ νόγου τετυγμένον·	
θεὸς ἂν μόνος τοῦτ' ἔχοι γέρας· ἄνδρα δ' οὐκ	
ἔστι μὴ οὐ κακὸν ἔμμεναι	5

13. For a text of the epode, see Gentili 1964, 298. It goes back to Hermann (see Heindorf 1810, 598) and Schneidewin (1835, 17). For the case for it, see Gentili 1964, 285–90; and against it, Giuliano 1991, 113.

14. See Bergk 1914, 387. Page (1962), Giuliano (1991), and Hutchinson (2001) reject the epode. *Pace* Gentili, Bergk's point about the meter was probably always enough. Note also that the prosaic phrase ὅς ἂν μὴ κακὸς ἦ (346c3) later appears (at 346d7) as ἂν ἢ μέσος καὶ μηδὲν κακὸν ποιῇ and thus seems to be a paraphrase. μέσος looks equivalent to μὴ κακός (“not bad,” “average”), and there is no indication that one or the other is original. It seems more likely that μὴ κακός glosses μὴ ἀπάλαμνος.

15. Bergk (1914) placed them in the first strophe. That results in a neat text of three complete strophes that is metrically plausible, but no more intelligible than other texts. Page (1962) and Hutchinson (2001) place the lines in a fourth strophe, which is missing its opening.

16. Bergk (1914) adapted one of the lines as follows: ὅς ἂν ἢ κακὸς μηδ' ἄγαν ἀπάλαμνος εἰδῶς τ' ὀνησίπολιν δίκαν. . . . Page (1962) and Hutchinson (2001) cite this as a restoration of *PMG* 542.34. But ὅς ἂν ἢ κακός means “whoever is bad.” Bergk asks us to assume the negative from the next clause, which is extremely awkward at the least, and probably impossible.

17. There is an overview of a number of different interpretations of the song in Donlan 1969, 77. The discussion in the *Protagoras* is surveyed neatly by Demos (1999, 11–39) and exhaustively by Giuliano (1991). Verdam (1928) does a good job of showing that the song does not make sense on any reading, Socrates' least of all.

18. For NV I keep the line divisions, spelling, and punctuation of Page's *PMG* 542. I adopt Hutchinson's (2001) ἔμοι in line 11, and Bergk's (1914) ἐπὶ δ' ὕμνῳ in line 26, and I conjecture a restoration of lines 9–10, and a small supplement in line 14 (see below for my explanations). Henceforth, line numbers will refer to the new text, NV.

ὄν ἀμήχανος συμφορὰ καθέλη, πράξας γὰρ εὖ πᾶς ἀνὴρ ἀγαθός, κακὸς δ' εἰ κακῶς, <οὓς δ' οἱ θεοὶ φιλέωσιν πλεῖστον, εἰς' ἄριστοι.> ¹⁹	10
οὐδ' ἐμοὶ ἐμμελέως τὸ Πιττάκειον νέμεται, καίτοι σοφοῦ παρὰ φωτὸς εἰ- ρημένον· χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι. <ἐμοὶ ἀρκέει> μήτ' ἄγαν ἀπάλαμνος ²⁰ εἰ- δὼς τ' ὀνησίπολιν δίκαν ὕγιης ἀνὴρ· οὐ ἤμην' ἐγώ ²¹ μωμήσομαι· τῶν γὰρ ἡλιθίων ἀπείρων γενέθλα. πάντα τοι καλὰ, τοῖσιν τ' αἰσχροῖα μὴ μέμικται.	στρ. β' 15 20
τοῦνκεν 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' ὕμιν εὐρὼν ἀπαγγελέω. πάντας δ' ἐπαίνημι καὶ φιλέω, ἐκὼν ὅστις ἔρῃ μηδὲν αἰσχρόν· ἀνάγκη δ' οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται.	στρ. γ' 25 30

1. For a man it's certainly hard to be truly good²²—perfect in hands, feet, and mind, built without a single flaw; only a god can have that prize; 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 he's doing well in life, bad when he's doing badly, and the best of us are those the gods love most.

2. But for me that saying of Pittacus doesn't quite ring true (even though he was a smart man): he says "being good is hard"; for me, a man's good enough as long as he's not too lawless, and has the sense of right that does cities good; a solid guy. I won't find fault with a man like that. After all, isn't there a limitless supply of fools? The way I see it, if there's no great shame in it, all's fair.

19. Plato's single paraphrase, at 345c3, is: ἐπὶ πλεῖστον δὲ καὶ ἄριστοί εἰσιν οὓς ἂν οἱ θεοὶ φιλόωσιν. Editors have tried to restore a text with Plato's double superlative: e.g., Page (1962, 283), following Bowra (1961, 328), suggests *κάπῃ* πλεῖστον ἄριστοι / τοὺς κε θεοὶ φιλέωσι. But "best the most" is tautologous. If both *πλεῖστον* and *ἄριστοι* were in the original, then it seems likely that Simonides said: "Those the gods love most are the best" (since it's easier to be good when life treats you well, the best people are those whom fortune favors the most). In that case, Socrates misplaces the *πλεῖστον* in his construal (just like his misreadings of *ἀλαθῶς* and *ἐκὼν*). The text I conjecture here sticks to Plato's paraphrase, but undoes the error while leaving it possible. On this theory, Socrates jokingly takes the last line as one phrase: *πλεῖστον εἰς' ἄριστοι*—"Are the best the most." I omit the *ἂν*, as in line 6 and line 28, and as in *PMG* 579 line 5, in accordance with Simonides' apparent usage. That allows us to leave the article, which seems preferable.

20. *ἀπάλαμνος* seems to mean "lawless" or "wicked" or "offensive." It can also mean "feeble." Plato clearly takes it in the former sense here, and he seems to be right. Simonides probably shows us what he means by it when he later says that he accepts *ἐκὼν ὅστις ἔρῃ* μηδὲν αἰσχρόν. The *ἀπάλαμνος* is the willful wrongdoer. But it is odd to speak of being *too* wicked. I tentatively conjecture: *ἐμοὶ ἀρκέει μήτ' ἐὼν ἀπάλαμνος* εἰδώς τ' ὀνησίπολιν δίκαν ὕγιης ἀνὴρ. A corresponding participle works well with εἰδώς τε.

21. οὐ ἤμην' ἐγώ MSS; οὐδὲ μὴ μιν ἐγώ Bergk (1914).

22. As noted above, this line really means "It's hard for there to be a truly good man"; but that misses the emphatic position of "man."

3. So I'm not going to throw away my dole of life on a vain, empty hope, searching for something there cannot be, a completely blameless man—at least not among us mortals who win our bread from the broad earth. (If I do find one, mind you, I'll be sure to let you know.) So long as he does nothing shameful willfully, I give my praise and love to any man. Not even the gods can fight necessity.

This new version seems to make far more sense. Here are a few of the points in its favor:

1. The first strophe of NV expresses a very clear and familiar thought: “A man cannot be perfect; only god can be perfect. Human beings are not flawless, and at some point, in the face of overwhelming stresses and difficulties, are bound to act badly.” This is refreshingly simple and coherent in contrast to the baffling second strophe of ST.

2. In the first strophe, the first and emphatic word, *ἄνδρα*, is contrasted with the emphatic *θεός* of the next sentence, and then repeated at the start of the next (*ἄνδρα δ' οὐκ ἔστι*, etc.) and again in line 7 (*πᾶς ἀνὴρ*), making the run of thought very clear.

3. The second strophe of NV also makes clear sense, as does the line of thought between the two strophes: “A man cannot be perfect; only god can be perfect; human beings are bound to do wrong at some point; but we shouldn't say ‘it's hard to be good’; in my book, you're a good enough man if you're basically decent, know right from wrong, and do the best you can; as long as there's no great shame in your failures, that's fine.” This seems very simple and clear, as well as reasonable and humane.

4. In the new second strophe, if we read οὐδ' ἔμοι ἐμμελέως (“but for me . . . not”) at the start, the emphatic personal pronoun is picked up in line 14 by ἔμοι ἄρκέει (“for me good enough is . . .”) and then by οὐδὲ τμὴν† ἐγώ, again making the train of thought clear.

5. In NV, the Socratic pedantry of ST is gone. There is no barely intelligible distinction between “hard” and “impossible.” When Simonides says he doesn't think that being good is hard he means that being good is *not* hard. This is far easier to understand (and fits with the evidence of the scholia).

6. In NV we have no need for the fuss over *being* versus *becoming* good. Simonides is saying that, yes, being absolutely faultless is hard, but it is not really so hard to be a basically good man. The antithesis between the strophes is, at last, perfectly simple. So in the first strophe he describes perfection, by way of the very clear qualifications attached to the term *ἀγαθός*: truly good, perfect in every way, flawless. He means that to sound much harder than merely being good, which he is saying is not all that hard. This makes good use of those qualifications, while the old version ignored them or on most readings actually worked against them. Also, this chimes with the claim in the last strophe that it is impossible to find “a man completely without fault” (as opposed to a merely good man). Notice that the third strophe exactly recapitulates the first two.

7. The claim we find in NV only, that being good is not all that hard, fits well with three other claims in the song: (a) The claim that “if there's no shame in it, then anything is all right” (*πάντα τοι καλά, τοῖσιν τ' αἰσχρὰ μὴ μέμικται*) is basically the same idea. Simonides is prepared to accept a wide range of

actions as καλὰ (“honorable”), with an obvious implication of generosity in his judgment. That is equivalent to saying that behaving honorably, and by implication being a good man, is really not all that hard. Simonides has these more lenient standards, so the task of being good must seem easier to him. (b) This is also what he means by the ἐμοὶ ἀρκέει sentence: he means that a person who is basically decent and ethically does the best he can is good enough for him. The clear implication is that it is not all that hard to be such a man, even if we all fail from time to time. (c) In the last strophe he says that he will “praise and love” anyone who is not willful in his wrongdoing. Again this is equivalent to saying that any such person is a good man—to praise a man is to call him a good man—and his lenient standards obviously imply that being such a man is really not all that hard. ST, by contrast, has Simonides say three times that he will judge other people and their shortcomings very generously, and that to be a good man is absolutely impossible, so that in his view no one at all is a good man—a bizarrely ungenerous claim. This coheres far less well.

8. Throughout the song “good” has the same ethical sense. There is no aristocratic concept of goodness that is being used, revised, or challenged. If there really was a dramatic transformation in the concept of the “good man” taking place in this period, then this new clarity and simplicity might be a disadvantage; but I see it as an improvement that we no longer need that controversial historical theory to make sense of the song.²³ An uncomplicated ethical reading of ἐσθλός and ἀγαθός also fits much better with the other apparently ethical terms scattered through the song: ἄνευ ψόγου (blameless), ἀπάλαμνος (lawless, wicked), ὀνησίπολιν δίκαν (civic righteousness), μωμήσομαι (blame), πανάμωμον (blameless), αἰσχρόν (shameful). Some interpreters treat some of these terms as nonethical. But we cannot treat all of them as nonethical, and the readings that propose a mixture of ethical and nonethical terms have simply not been successful. Also, we are now (much more modestly) in agreement with the clear ancient view of the meaning of the key terms, including the testimony of Plato himself,²⁴ and of Aristotle, who quotes the song and discusses the question that it raises, namely, whether or not overwhelming pressures can really force a good man to fail ethically.²⁵

23. The theory I refer to is known to philosophers through Nietzsche (1887), and to classicists through Snell (1948) and Adkins (1960). It was first applied to *PMG* 542 by Wilamowitz (1913, 169–75) and Bowra (1961, 326–36). It takes many forms, but the basic idea is that prevalent “terms of merit” radically transformed (specifically, became more ethical) around this time and that the shift is visible in Greek literature. Many commentators have thought that *PMG* 542 either predates or alludes to that transformation. Studies in evolutionary psychology have assigned our basic ethical interests a vastly greater antiquity, and seem to show that no fundamental change in those interests could have occurred in historical times; see, e.g., Dennett 1995, 461–67; Pinker 1997, 363–520; Axelrod 1984; Dawkins 1989, 202–33; Hauser 2006, 59–110. This issue needs to be carefully reexamined in the light of these new claims.

24. The speakers in the dialogue take it for granted that the terms have an ethical sense even though they are attributing a wide range of meanings to the song. Plato is interested in the song because of its ethical subject, and Protagoras states (339a5) that its subject is the same as that of their earlier discussion, ethical ἀρετή. Polybius (29.26) and Stobaeus (*Flor.* 4.5.51) also think that the subject of the song is ethical.

25. Aristotle disagrees with Simonides (see *Eth. Nic.* 1100b18–1101a8), being committed to the view that happiness should not depend too much on luck, and that virtue cannot be affected by misfortune (see

9. There are no missing lines in the first strophe. That is why no one ever quotes the (supposedly) missing lines. It now turns out that, just as we would expect, people do quote the second sentence of the opening strophe. Plato quotes it twice; Aristotle once.

10. We now have three complete strophes with the same metrical scheme. There is no suspicious epode, no unexplained gaps. The words ἐμοὶ ἀρκέει can be supplied at the start of line 14 where they fit neatly and make good sense. On this view, Plato's ἐμοίγ' ἐξαρκεῖ (at 346c3) and μοι ἐξαρκεῖ (at 346d7) are paraphrases of ἐμοὶ ἀρκέει, which seems a reasonable and conservative guess.²⁶ The uncontracted form is in any case preferable. The other paraphrases, ὅς ἂν μὴ κακὸς ἦ at 346c3 and ἂν ἦ μέσος at 346d7, are now squeezed out, so there is no need to try to fit them in (e.g., with Bergk's very unsatisfactory ὅς ἂν ἦ κακός). On this view, they are glosses on the term ἀπάλαμνος, which in Plato's time was archaic and presumably obscure. Socrates explains: a "not ἀπάλαμνος" man is, to put it basically, "not [morally] bad." This seems a satisfactory solution to the metrical puzzles outlined above.

In fact, NV poses us no problems at all. It is perfectly clear from beginning to end. It is consistent, humane, plausible, intelligent, well structured, and metrically regular. ST, by contrast, is unintelligible, self-contradictory, pedantic, and patchy. An economical explanation for all this is that NV, not ST, is the correct text of the song. At the very least, on these internal grounds, NV is clearly a more satisfactory and far more charitable text, and one that we have strong reasons to prefer, before we turn to reexamine the indirect evidence of the *Protagoras*.

So let us look again at the clues that we find in the dialogue, to see why editors have always felt sure that the dialogue pointed to ST. As I see it, the internal case in favor of NV is so strong that all we need to show here is that nothing in the dialogue decisively rules it out. In any case, it is an important part of my theory that the *Protagoras* has misled us, which is just to say that it does indeed appear to give some support for ST. The question to ask, then, is not whether the readings I shall now set out are easy or obvious, but whether they are possible. We ought to be sure beyond any doubt that NV cannot be right, before we abandon it in favor of the frustrating mysteries of ST. Note that this is a new approach to the task of the reconstruction. Since the old text gave no arguments at all in its own favor, it was always based only on the very shaky authority of Plato's jocular Socrates. But now

Eth. Nic. 1099b). "If a man is ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὸς καὶ τετράγωνος ἄνευ ψόγου," he says, "then he will always behave honorably, even in the face of extreme misfortune." Aristotle's ethical reading of the song is unlikely to be anachronistic. He was a well-informed historian of Greek ideas. He also provides testimony for NV in particular, and against ST, since he is rejecting the claim, found only in NV, that the reason nobody can be τετράγωνος ἄνευ ψόγου (NV 1–3) is that everybody fails in the face of extreme misfortune (NV 4–7).

26. Perhaps ἐμοὶ ἀρκέσει, matching the tense of μοιήσομαι. Or we could have something quite different that means the same thing as ἐμοίγ' ἐξαρκεῖ. I suspect that Plato is close to Simonides here. Note that γε is a natural paraphrase of the emphatic position of ἐμοί. His other paraphrase (ἀλλά μοι ἐξαρκεῖ) omits it.

we have a strong, independent case for the text, and it makes sense to take that text and check to see if Socrates' exposition can be read consistently with it. If it can, then that is surely all we need. That is to say, we should be willing to base our reading of the exposition, especially since it is so mischievous and so convoluted, on our prior grasp of the probable text of the song.

Socrates gives us five fairly large fragments of the song through verbatim quotation, complete with dialect forms and a set meter, leaving little or no doubt about the order of the lines within the fragments.²⁷ But he is not at all clear about how those sections go together. And far more often he quotes smaller snippets of the song in who knows what order, interspersed with a jumble of interpretation, jokes, and paraphrase. It is a sound principle that only uninterrupted verbatim quotes can fix the order with any certainty.

First, then, no continuous verbatim quotation in the *Protagoras* places lines NV 4–10 in the second strophe. Nor does any such quotation fix the lines in that way in the surviving quotations of the song in other authors. Further, no quotation rules out placing them in the first strophe. Nothing places any other line in that position. In short, no quotations anywhere contradict NV, out of the fifty or so that we have. Thus, in deciding between NV and ST on external grounds we have to rely solely on much more indirect evidence. Arguably, that evidence is bound to be too weak to overthrow the many and strong internal arguments in favor of NV. But we should examine it all the same.

Just two passages are supposed to give indirect indications in favor of ST, specifically, in favor of placing lines NV 4–10 (*PMG* 542.14–20) in the second strophe, after the saying of Pittacus. We will consider first the weaker, then the stronger of the two clues, and see if we cannot cast the necessary doubt over them.

1. At 344b6–c2 Socrates, who has been discussing the opening of the first strophe, says the following (his quotations from the song are underlined; here he quotes NV 1 and 4 only):²⁸

λέγει γὰρ μετὰ τοῦτο ὀλίγα διελθὼν ὡς ἂν εἰ λέγοι λόγον ὅτι²⁹ γενέσθαι μὲν ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν χαλεπὸν ἀλαθέως, οἷόν τε μέντοι ἐπὶ γε χρόνον τινά· γενόμενον δὲ διαμένειν ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ἔξει καὶ εἶναι ἄνδρα ἀγαθόν, ὡς σὺ λέγεις, ὦ Πιττακέ, ἀδύνατον καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώπειον, ἀλλὰ θεὸς ἂν μόνος τοῦτο ἔχοι τὸ γέρας . . .³⁰

In what he [Simonides] next says, just a little further on, it's as if his argument were that becoming a good man is hard, truly (but possible, at least for a while), but having

27. I follow Page (1962) and Hutchinson (2001) in delineating the five fragments of text. They are: NV 1–3 (*PMG* 542.1–3), NV 4–8 (*PMG* 14–18), NV 11–13 (*PMG* 11–13), NV 14–20 (*PMG* 34–40), and NV 21–30 (*PMG* 21–30).

28. And NV 5–8 in what follows. In his quote of NV 1–2 he changes the word order, while still clearly quoting the line. He puts *γενέσθαι* at the front, to misrepresent the emphasis. The rest is not quotation in any sense at all, until the quotation of NV 4. Then notice that οἷόν τε μέντοι ἐπὶ γε χρόνον τινά expands *χαλεπὸν* in NV 2, and *ἀδύνατον καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώπειον* interprets NV 4.

29. Burnet (1903) prints a comma here: . . . ὡς ἂν εἰ λέγοι λόγον, ὅτι γενέσθαι . . . etc. I explain below why the comma should not be there, and explain my translation.

30. For all citations from the *Protagoras* I follow Burnet's text (1903) exactly, except for the commas in 344b7.

become one, to stay in that state, and *be* a good man, the way you say, Pittacus, is impossible and superhuman: only a god could have that prize . . .

This is taken to put the “only a god” lines after Pittacus’ saying, since Socrates refers to the saying just before quoting those lines. But this proves nothing. Socrates could just as easily be referring to Pittacus’ saying as part of his interpretation of only the first strophe (NV 1–4); that is, as part of an expansive interpretation of the quoted lines. He would be explaining the connection between the first quote given here (line 1) and the second quote (line 4) which comes “next” a “little further on” (i.e., he means that NV 4 comes “shortly after” NV 1, which it does).

But how could Socrates be making Pittacus’ saying, which comes later in the song, part of Simonides’ train of thought in the very first strophe? Actually, there is nothing strange about this. It is what Socrates has already done, just before this passage, twice: first at 343d and then at 344a. Thus, at 343d3: “Pittacus says, ‘Being good is hard,’ and he [Simonides] disagrees, and says, ‘No. Becoming a good man is what’s hard, Pittacus, truly.’” No editor thinks that this shows that the opening line comes after Pittacus’ saying. But this is just as good a piece of evidence for that absurd view as the other passage is for placing the “only a god” lines after Pittacus’ saying. If we take the exposition at 344b6 to show that the “only a god” lines go in the second strophe, then we have to accept that the exposition at 343d3 (and at 343e6) equally well shows that the traditional opening of the song also comes after Pittacus’ saying. If we dismiss the latter, on the grounds that these clues obviously are not reliable, then we may dismiss the former passage on exactly the same grounds.³¹

But there is more to say about this. Editors have been strongly and unwisely influenced by the interpretation that Socrates sets out here. It is here (at 344b–c) that he makes his claim that “I do not think being good is hard” means “I think being good is impossible.” In doing so, he takes the words “that prize” as referring to the state of being good. (He thus reads Simonides as saying that being good is impossible.) That is, he takes the demonstrative τοῦτο—which must refer backwards—to refer to something in Pittacus’ saying.

Now, if we adopt NV, then τοῦτο (in line 4) apparently cannot refer to Pittacus’ saying (which has not been mentioned yet). It must refer to the state of perfection that Simonides describes in lines 1–3. So Socrates’ reading of the song appears to tell against NV, and to compel us to place the Pittacus quote before the τοῦτο.

This is an illusion. Socrates’ reading here is a reading of NV 1–4, and it is not an impossible reading; it is just outstandingly silly. Do not underestimate Socrates’ inventiveness. You could imagine that the τοῦτο in NV 4 referred to something other than the content of NV 1–3 by constructing a

31. Often Socrates implies an order in this way that editors nevertheless reject. His exposition jumbles the various thoughts in the song. At 343d4, 343e6, 344e, 345c, and 346d6, the order implied by Socrates’ reading is dismissed without comment.

suitable wider context, such that the words “that prize” referred to something prominent in that context—for example, to the “being good” of Pittacus’ saying. And Socrates does exactly that. He supplies a rich dialectical context for the opening of the song, precisely as if he were imposing his reading on the opening of NV (which he is). He claims that to understand the opening you have to imagine that Pittacus has just uttered his saying and that Simonides is answering it directly (343d1–6). He then says, again, that we have to assume that Simonides has “just mentioned” Pittacus’ saying (ὑπειπόντα τὸ τοῦ Πιττακοῦ, 343e4), as if the opening lines were the second half of an exchange in which Pittacus’ saying forms the first half (343e6). Three times he vividly places the saying *before* the opening of the song. And if we accept his setting of the song—if we do mentally place the saying right before the opening—then the demonstrative τοῦτο in line 4 can (just about) refer to it. The reading is clearly facetious and very implausible (like all of Socrates’ other readings) but it is possible.

Socrates’ reading of NV 1–4 may be paraphrased as follows (the lines that he is interpreting are underlined, the rest is his interpretation):

Pittacus says “Being good is hard!” and Simonides is saying “No. Becoming good is hard (but possible). Being good, that thing of yours, Pittacus, only a god can have that prize (i.e., it’s superhuman, impossible and therefore strictly speaking not hard).”

If you reexamine the longer passage quoted above you will see that it matches my paraphrase, except that I have also placed Pittacus’ saying at the start, as Socrates instructs us to do, twice: at 343d4 and at 343e6. This is a supremely ridiculous reading of the two marked lines. Let me repeat: this is Socrates’ interpretation of nothing more than those lines. More succinctly, he takes them like this: “Becoming good is hard, [Pittacus]; that prize [of yours] is superhuman [i.e., not hard].” “That prize” now refers to “being good,” as a result of the dialectical context that he has elaborately concocted right before our eyes.

Reading his exposition this way, as an interpretation of NV 1 and 4, is not only feasible, once you see it, but also does a better job of explaining other objective and independent details of the exposition. We can now see (1) why Socrates takes such pains to construct a context in which Pittacus’ saying is already being referred to by Simonides at the start of the song, and (2) why, at 344b6–c3, cited above, he quotes only lines 1 and 4 of NV. The context he constructs enables his interpretation, and he quotes lines 1 and 4 for the excellent reason that those are the only lines he is interpreting.³²

32. In connection with this expansive reading, notice the wording: . . . λέγει . . . ὥς ἂν εἰ λέγοι λόγον ὅτι . . . This is always punctuated with a comma before the ὅτι and taken like this: “he says (as if he were making an argument) that . . .” Taken that way, it is pointless. Better to take it with the ὅτι: “it’s as if his argument were that . . .” This signals the fact that Socrates is imaginatively filling out Simonides’ train of thought. Cf. the similar interpreter’s phrases elsewhere: ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ ἤκουεν αὐτοῦ λέγοντος ὅτι at 341c5; ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ θεῖμεν αὐτὸν λέγοντα at 343e4; ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ ἔλεγε at 346d1; cf. also *Ap.* 23b: . . . ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος, ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ εἶποι ὅτι οὗτος ὕμῶν, ὃ ἄνθρωποι, σοφώτατός ἐστι, ὅστις ὥσπερ Σωκράτης ἐγνώκεν ὅτι οὐδενὸς ἀξίός ἐστι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν. There, too, the phrase signals a very expansive interpretation. (For the repetition of the verb of saying that my reading needs, cf. *Cra.* 410b: ἴσως οὖν λέγει ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ εἶποι . . .) Thus, NV nicely explains what this odd phrase is doing.

Socrates is proposing an absurd but intelligible reading of NV 1–4. And in this context its absurdity is a plus. It is in keeping with his other readings, like his idea that “hard” means “bad,” or that Simonides thinks that “nobody ever does wrong willingly,” or that Spartans are the world’s best philosophers; it is as silly as his misreading of ἀλαθέως and ἐκών. It is a strong point in favor of NV that the idea that Socrates proposes here, that “not hard” in effect means “impossible,” can at last be junked. ST forced us to accept that part of an otherwise comical interpretation, in spite of the fact that it always was, on the face of it, a ludicrous sophism.

So the exposition between 343c6 and 344b7 fails to offer decisive evidence against NV. Arguably, it provides some good evidence in its favor. Reading it the right way also allows us to see just how very understandably we were misled by Socrates. We constructed a text (ST) that makes his crazy interpretation seem far more reasonable—it is the only way ST can be understood at all—with the unfortunate consequence that we were then stuck with it. We wrote his joke into the text, and have been trying and failing to make sense of a garbled version of the song ever since.

2. Another passage allegedly supports ST more strongly. When Socrates first mentions the “only a god” line (NV 4) he does so specifically to disprove his joke suggestion that Simonides means “bad” by the term χαλεπόν (at 341d9–e7):

ἐπεὶ ὅτι γε Σιμωνίδης οὐ λέγει τὸ χαλεπὸν κακόν, μέγα τεκμήριόν ἐστιν εὐθὺς τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο ῥῆμα· λέγει γὰρ ὅτι θεὸς ἂν μόνος τοῦτ' ἔχοι γέρας, οὐ δῆπου τοῦτό γε λέγων, κακὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι, εἴτα τὸν θεὸν φησιν μόνον τοῦτο ἂν ἔχειν καὶ τῷ θεῷ τοῦτο γέρας ἀπέ-
νειμε μόνῳ· ἀκόλαστον γὰρ ἂν τινα λέγοι Σιμωνίδην ὁ Πρόδικος καὶ οὐδαμῶς Κεῖον.

After all, very clear evidence that Simonides doesn’t mean “bad” when he says “hard” is in the very next claim he makes: he says that “only god could have that prize.” Obviously he can’t be saying that “being good” [ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι] is bad, and then say this is something only god could have, and hand that “prize” to god alone! On that view, Prodicus would be making Simonides out to be some sort of scoundrel—not at all what we’d expect of a man from Ceos.

This appears to be conclusive evidence for placing the “only a god” lines in their traditional position in the second strophe. On the usual reading of the passage, and above all on the strength of the use of Pittacus’ actual phrase (ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι), editors confidently placed the “only a god” line in the second strophe right after the Pittacus quote. But NV rejects that ordering and places the line in the first strophe. How can we possibly account for this part of Socrates’ exposition, if NV is correct?

My theory requires that Socrates’ use here of the phrase ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι is a slip, or at any rate misleading, and that in fact he is referring to the first strophe, not the second. Of course, I am not claiming this is very plausible in itself; merely (so far) that it would have to be the case, if NV is correct. Now let us see where that takes us.

Other objective features of the passage corroborate this theory. There is a very serious problem here if we assume ST. Socrates is saying that, if Simonides used χαλεπόν to mean “bad,” then he is guilty of a kind of blas-

phemy, or disrespect for the gods. That much is clear. But how does his point work? If we assume ST, and assume the “hard” = “bad” gloss, the relevant part of ST (*PMG* 542.11–14) goes like this: “I do not agree with Pittacus, who says that “being good is bad.” Only a god can have that prize.” Why is this blasphemous? Defenders of ST need to explain this. How does it show Simonides to be ἀκόλαστος? Socrates’ point here does not make any sense. He states that Simonides’ sin would consist in first “saying that being good is bad” and then attributing “that prize”—that is, something bad—to god. And indeed that would be blasphemous. But Simonides manifestly does not “say that being good is something bad”; he is rejecting Pittacus’ claim to that effect. So he is not assigning anything bad to the gods, even assuming the facetious “hard” = “bad” hypothesis. If anything, his claim here seems especially pious: “Pittacus is wrong to say being good is bad; in fact it is divine.” Perhaps I am misreading Socrates’ point. Perhaps Socrates means that Simonides could not first take Pittacus to mean that “being good is bad,” and then attribute it to god. But that does not help. Again, there would be no blasphemy whatsoever in Simonides first denying someone else’s claim that “being good is bad,” then himself attributing goodness to god. There is no way around this. The dialogue simply does not make sense (with ST).

So, can we make sense of his claim with NV instead? Imagine that I am right that ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι is loose and inaccurate, and that NV is the text, and Socrates is referring to its first strophe. That is, that he is referring (using ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι as a paraphrase, or perhaps in a momentary muddle) to Simonides’ own claim that “being a truly good man is χαλεπόν,” in NV 2, and the sentence that comes “right after it” (i.e., NV 4). If we assume the “hard” = “bad” gloss, the relevant part of NV goes like this: “Being a truly good man is bad . . . Only a god may have that prize.” The point now works exactly as Socrates reports. Simonides himself says that it is bad to be a truly good man and “then” (εἴτα) with his “very next sentence” (εὐθὺς τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο ῥῆμα) says “only a god may have that prize,” thereby assigning something bad to god. The accusation of blasphemy, in short, which makes no sense with ST, makes perfect sense with NV—allowing for the slight verbal slip, that is. The “only a god” sentence is said to be “the very next ῥῆμα.” The term ῥῆμα typically refers to an assertion, saying, or claim, as opposed to a mere word or phrase. (It is used with this sense of “claim” elsewhere in Socrates’ exposition at 342e2, 342e7, 343a7, 343b6, 343c2, 343c4, 343d3, 344b5, and 345d2.) Thus, the phrase properly means “his very next claim,” or “the very next thing he asserts”; and it seems perfectly worded to pick out NV 4, which is precisely the very next claim (i.e., the very next sentence) after Simonides’ use of χαλεπόν in his opening claim (NV 1–2) that “being truly good is χαλεπόν.”

Is it pedantic of us to notice that Socrates’ point (with ST) makes no sense? Why shouldn’t Socrates’ argument, taken in the usual way as a point about the second strophe of ST, just be a little muddled? We can perhaps accept that as a defense of ST against this problem. Socrates may well just be confused. But then by exactly the same token, why shouldn’t his wording be a little muddled, if instead we choose to read this as a claim about

NV 1–4—which we have far more reason to do? If confusion on Socrates’ part is necessary for ST, then it is also fine for NV. And in that case this passage no more supports the one text than the other. In fact, it seems to me that on balance the passage slightly supports NV, since it is more likely that Socrates’ thought makes sense, and that his choice of words is misleading,³³ than that his phrasing is precise, but his argument incoherent.

It might, finally, be objected that the wider context supports ST, not just the single phrase ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι. But this is not so. Let us carefully go through the whole section, starting at 340e8. There the question arises of what Simonides means by the term χαλεπόν, and specifically what the term means in Simonides’ (Cean) dialect.³⁴ This question about how he uses the term obviously must include Simonides’ own use of the term χαλεπόν in line 2, even if it also covers Pittacus’ use of it in line 13. But recall that Pittacus speaks in his own (Lesbian) dialect, as noted by Prodicus a few lines later (341c8), so the opening part of the discussion (340e8–341c2) far more naturally refers to line 2. Socrates asks: what did Simonides mean by χαλεπόν?³⁵ Prodicus, a Cean himself and expert on Simonides’ dialect (339e6, 341b8), says (with a wink) that he meant “bad.” Socrates exclaims that that must be why he “also” criticizes Pittacus.³⁶ He must take him to mean “bad” as well (in line 13), and to be saying that “being good is bad.” Prodicus agrees (341c6); Protagoras disagrees (341d2). He is sure that Simonides does not mean “bad” when he says χαλεπόν. Note that this naturally refers back to the earlier part of the discussion, which it matches exactly in wording,³⁷ and therefore, once again, more easily refers to Simonides’ own use of the term in line 2. Protagoras is saying, “No, he doesn’t mean ‘bad’ by that term [and therefore he would not take Pittacus to mean ‘bad’ either].” Socrates agrees, and presumably continues to refer to line 2: “Quite right. He obviously doesn’t mean ‘bad’ by χαλεπόν [i.e., in line 2]; this is perfectly obvious from his very next sentence” (i.e., line 4). The passage certainly can be read this way. Nothing in the build-up to Socrates’ point at 341e proves that they are not discussing Simonides’ own

33. Elsewhere, he jumbles the words of Simonides and Pittacus together. At 344c1 he paraphrases Pittacus with the words εἶναι ἄνδρα ἀγαθόν, ὡς σὺ λέγεις, ὁ Πιττακῆ and at 345c1 with the words εἶναι μὲν ἄνδρα ἀγαθόν. Then, at 344e5, he attributes γενέσθαι μὲν χαλεπόν, δυνατόν δέ, ἐσθλόν to Simonides. Note also that at this point in his exegesis Socrates is not asserting that ἔμμεναι and γενέσθαι are to be distinguished. His “hard” = “bad” idea is an alternative to that suggestion.

34. 341b5: ἴσως οὖν καὶ τὸ “χαλεπόν” αὐτὸ οἱ Κεῖοι καὶ ὁ Σιμωνίδης ἢ κακὸν ὑπολαμβάνουσι ἢ ἄλλο τι δὲ οὐ οὐ μανθάνεις.

35. 341b8: τί ἔλεγεν . . . το “χαλεπόν” Σιμωνίδης;

36. 341c3: διὰ ταῦτ’ ἄρα καὶ μέμμεται . . . τὸν Πιττακὸν . . . ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ ἦκουεν αὐτοῦ λέγοντος ὅτι ἐστὶν κακὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι. The καὶ seems to confirm that they were discussing Simonides’ own use of the term. “That’s why he *also* criticizes Pittacus,” i.e., Simonides takes Pittacus to mean “bad” as well as using it that way himself (in line 2).

37. 341d2: Protagoras: ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ εὖ οἶδ’ ὅτι καὶ Σιμωνίδης τὸ “χαλεπόν” ἔλεγεν ὅπερ ἡμεῖς οἱ ἄλλοι, οὐ τὸ κακόν, ἀλλ’ ὃ ἂν μὴ ῥάδιον ἦ. Note that τὸ “χαλεπόν” ἔλεγεν repeats the earlier phrase τί ἔλεγεν . . . το “χαλεπόν” at 341b8 (which more naturally referred to Simonides’ own use of the term), and differs from the phrase that refers to how Simonides understands Pittacus (341c5: ἦκουεν αὐτοῦ λέγοντος). When Socrates responds, he uses the simpler formula: Σιμωνίδης οὐ λέγει τὸ χαλεπόν κακόν. These clear patterns in the phrasing, plus the fact that the accusation of blasphemy requires that Socrates be discussing Simonides’ own claim, combine to form a good case in favor of this reading.

use of the term *χαλεπόν* throughout, except when they actually refer to the way Simonides “also” takes the saying of Pittacus (at 341c3), which they explicitly treat as a separate point. So in fact it is just the single phrase *ἔσθλὸν ἔμμεναι* that drives the traditional reading of the whole passage, and consequently underpins the entire case for ST (once we dismiss the other evidence, which was based only on Socrates’ deliberate misinterpretation of the song). Now that we have NV, a text strongly supported by internal considerations, it does not make any sense to give *ἔσθλὸν ἔμμεναι* such enormous weight. The tail should not wag the dog.

So, in summary: the text of the dialogue at 341, which is alleged to support ST decisively, is in fact incoherent on ST. This incoherence greatly undermines its support for ST,³⁸ and there is no solution to it, except to shrug and say that Socrates is muddled. But if he can be muddled in that way, he can certainly be muddled in his choice of the phrase *ἔσθλὸν ἔμμεναι*. If instead we assume NV, we posit a verbal imprecision on Socrates’ part, but his point now makes perfect sense. That seems preferable. Further, nothing in the wider context provides any more evidence for ST. The speakers are discussing what Simonides means by *χαλεπόν*—which more naturally refers to his use of the word in the first strophe. All in all, then, this passage fails to provide the decisive evidence against NV. Arguably, it actually supports it, in the weak sense that assuming NV makes things less puzzling than if we assume ST.

We have now dealt with both passages that were supposed to provide indirect evidence for ST, and shown that they fail to do so. Plato’s *Protagoras* therefore provides no evidence for the highly problematic standard text that is nearly strong enough to overthrow the catalogue of internal reasons (given above) for preferring a clear and meaningful text (NV) to one that has repelled all attempts at interpretation for two centuries. On the other hand, I have tried to show that the dialogue, in both these passages, can certainly appear to be pointing to ST. That fact explains why we so confidently adopted the wrong text, and is a key part of the full explanation of why the song has mystified us for so long. After all, if we have had the wrong text for all this time, we need some explanation of how that happened.

We have shown, then, that NV is much more likely to be the text of the song. And we have not even considered all the evidence in its favor that may be gleaned from the *Protagoras*.³⁹ But that evidence is in any case secondary; so let us now very briefly turn again to other questions.

The text of the song now presents no major interpretative difficulties. Simonides thinks that, sure, human beings cannot be absolutely perfect (perfection is for god alone; mortals are bound to slip up from time to time).

38. Incoherence of this kind would be unique in the exposition. Socrates’ suggestions are often facetious and absurd, but always intelligible.

39. At 340b, Socrates suggests that Simonides is saying (in *PMG* 542.11–13 = NV 11–13) that being good is easy. With ST this is astonishingly stupid (not facetious). It is ruled out by any reading of the next line—and both Socrates and Protagoras claim to know the song very well. Even more inexplicably (for ST), Protagoras rejects the proposal only on external grounds, as if the text itself does not prove Socrates wrong. With NV the exchange makes good sense. (Simonides is, in fact, saying that being good is easy, and the text cannot prove Socrates wrong on that point.) Also, 346c1–5 mildly suggests NV 11–14.

But he does not think that Pittacus is right to say that it is so hard to be a good man. To his mind, you are a good man—good within human limitations—as long as you try your best and only do wrong in the face of some impossible pressure or hardship. Such failures are unavoidable, and warrant our sympathy and lenience. We should not search for anything better than fallible, human goodness, in others or in ourselves.

Many commentators have felt that Simonides could not be discussing the ethically good man and the impossibility of ethical perfection, on the grounds that it makes no sense for an ethical failure to be brought on by external forces. But in fact that idea is very plausible. When Simonides speaks of “some crisis that you cannot deal with” (ἀμήχανος συμφορά) knocking you down, he has in mind situations where people face extreme pressures—the catastrophe of war, for example, or desperate poverty, the death of a spouse or child, the destruction of one’s home, or some humiliating provocation or oppression. And he is also probably referring to the force of our emotions: overpowering grief, despair, love, anger, frustration, fear, resentment—the emotions that we feel in reaction to overwhelming pressures and temptations. We express a very similar idea when we say that “all is fair in love and war.” Love and war are classic ἀμήχανοι συμφοραί. The saying recognizes their power to overwhelm us, and recommends lenience toward the lapses that they cause. Notice that “all is fair” here exactly matches Simonides’ πάντα τοι καλά. Simonides’ point is that human beings are flawed, and life is unpredictable, and at times impossibly stressful, and there will always be situations in which even a good man (who “has a sense of right”) does something that he regrets and recalls with shame, even if he feels it was forced on him by circumstances, or by his flawed humanity.⁴⁰

The ethical reading is fully intelligible, and we have already noted that the song is interpreted in exactly this way by Aristotle. That alone ought to be decisive. But we also have a fragment of another song attributed to Simonides himself (*PMG* 541),⁴¹ which supports this reading further. It expresses a view close to that of 542, except that it describes more fully the kinds of things that can overwhelm us and make it hard (or impossible) for us to be perfectly good. It helps us to see what Simonides probably means, and certainly may mean, by ἀμήχανος συμφορά:⁴²

40. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, Phaedra calls her desire for Hippolytus a συμφορά (433, 596, 691, 716, 769). It is something that she feels comes from outside her better judgment and overwhelms her. The nurse uses the term to excuse an affair (493). In *Medea*, Jason feebly excuses his betrayal of Medea by saying that he faces many συμφοραί ἀμήχανοι (522); see also Donlan 1969, 84–85. συμφορά seems able to refer to either circumstances, or passions, beyond our control.

41. The attribution seems plausible and is widely accepted (see Lobel and Turner 1959, 91; Treu 1960; Gentili 1961). Bowra (1963) and Lloyd-Jones (1961) thought the poem might be by Bacchylides. At the very least *PMG* 541 is a poem from the same period and in a similar style that discusses the difficulty of being perfectly good (the subject of *PMG* 542).

42. This is *P Oxy.* 2432.6–14. It appears as 541 *PMG* (Page 1962, 281). The text here is that of Henry (1998, 303), except that I read ἀτά[σθα]λοι in line 11: “reckless feuding,” or “sinful feuding.” Page (1962), West (1980), and Henry (1998) think that the traces before -θαλοι suggest τι, and propose ἀρτίθαλοι. The traces easily fit a mostly erased sigma. (The papyrus can be viewed at the online Oxford papyrology site <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy>.) West (1980, 143) thought ἀτά[σθα]λοι possible, and the sense is far better. ἀρτίθαλοι (“recently blooming”) does not even seem to exist (only ἀρτίθαλεῖς is attested).

must start from his rejection of the tragic view of life, and to understand why he deliberately mangles Simonides we have to consider why he is so bothered by the poet's acceptance of ordinary moral failings, and by the seemingly modest and plausible idea that nobody's perfect.

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