Plato's Styles and Characters

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Theaetetus and Protarchus: two philosophical characters or what a philosophical soul should do*

Plato's spokesmen and Plato's voice

Plato speaks through his characters; even those characters who seem to be far from a view that we would attribute to Socrates (Plato) can be understood as spokes of Plato himself. When in the final section of the Gorgias the character Socrates discusses the Callicles thesis of rude hedonism, nobody, I think, would be seriously willing to assume that Plato endorses Callicles' argument. But without a Callicles saying that the good can be identified with pleasure unless qualification, Socrates could not deploy his arguments against that kind of hedonism. In the Philebus Plato does successfully show that a certain sort of pleasure can and should be incorporated into the good life, but in order to do that he must show first that the crude hedonism defended by Philebus and Protarchus (at the beginning of the dialogue) is not feasible.

The characters who appear to endorse sometimes antithetical positions in the dialogues (such as Protarchus and Socrates in the Philebus) may be understood as the means Plato makes use of to put difficulties to himself and thus to think that, after all, the dialogue is just a discourse (logos), a conversation the soul has with itself, since when one thinks, one dialogues, asks himself questions and answers, affirms and denies (Theaetetus 189e-190a; Sophist 253e). To be sure, when one debates with another, such a dialogue is not necessarily interior; but even in this case the question-answer method describes the movement of thought: thinking is dialoguing, conversing. It is the same procedure which allows one to think through an issue without having formulated it definitively.

I intend to discuss here two of these Platonic characters, namely, Theaetetus and Protarchus. In spite of their distinct personal characteristics they can be understood as "philosophical characters", which I believe to be so for the following reasons: (i) they are willing to dialogue (and this is probably so because they take for granted that they can be wrong and hence they should modify what they believe). (ii) They note early on in the conversation that the dialogue permits one to observe from a different perspective what they themselves thought and, at least in some cases, they start to believe that there is reason to modify what they think (and this is not because of shame or because of an external pressure, say, but because of genuine conviction that what they believe is false); (iii) they also understand that they should not respond to Socrates (the great questioner of Plato's dialogue) with what he wishes to hear, but what they really believe to be true; (iv) finally, even though at the end of the conversation they are not completely certain with regard to the correct answer to the proposed question, they know that they have made some progress. If this is really so, there is reason to suspect that they have acquired an awareness, both of the limits of their own knowing and of the psychological change they have undergone after the dialogical debate. Naturally, all the points I have just listed actually are part of a set of common places in the dialogical practice, as we know from the dialogues. But in the development of my presentation I hope to show that the manner in which both Theaetetus and Protarchus can be regarded as good examples of such common places constitutes the conditions themselves of the philosophical dialogue.

Theaetetus and Protarchus as philosophical interlocutors

When one examines the character Theaetetus in the homonymous dialogue and the character Protarchus in the Philebus, an important point emerges with regard to the characters Theodorus and Philebus. A salient point of convergence between Theaetetus and Protarchus (two characters who, from the viewpoint of the characters themselves, appear to be very different) is that both end up taking the place of their respective mentors in conversation. It is true that the way in which Theodorus abandons the dialogue is considerably different from the manner in which Philebus does. However, they give up their place in conversation to their disciples on account of reasons that, from Plato's viewpoint, turn out to be unphilosophical.

Let us first examine the case of Theodorus; even though his participation in the Theaetetus is relevant at the beginning of the dialogue, he is reluctant to actively participate in conversation and in the process of research that he suspects

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such a conversation involves. First, Theodorus claims that he is unused to such kind of conversation and that, due to his age, he is not willing to accustom himself (Theat. 146b); later he justifies his retreat from the discussion asserting that he prefers to be a spectator and not to be dragged into the arena, so he does not have to struggle with someone younger and more supple (162a6-7). He Elsewhere reproves to anybody socrates for this, for the sake of the argument he makes, for the sake of the argument he makes, see also for his experience, see also 162a-b). In the previous passage (162a) Theodorus declares that he could not accept that Protagoras was refuted by what he (i.e. Theodorus) admits or acknowledges (δι᾽ ἄλλον δημολογοῦντος; and immediately he adds that, against his own opinion, he may not oppose Socrates. Actually, this is Theodorus' justification for suggesting that Socrates should take up his dialogue with Theaetetus again, since "he was listening to Socrates very carefully". This remark produces Socrates' immediate reaction, who complains that if one attends a Spartan wrestling-school it would not be fair to be a spectator as other people exercise naked without stripping and showing one's own body (φίλος; Theaet. 162b). The meaning of this comparison is clearly that, such as it is done in the wrestling-arena, one should exercise (or train) like the others. So Socrates' exhortation indeed points to the fact that Theodorus, just as Theaetetus, must be cooperative with the dialogue and should be an active participant in it.

There is a general sense in which the reasons provided by Theodorus to avoid participating in the debate seem to be reasonable; after all, he is not a professional philosopher, and the explanations Plato puts in his mouth for abandoning the discussion and the cooperative research process that such a debate presupposes appear reasonable if they are viewed from this perspective. Of course, Theaetetus is not a professional philosopher either, although, as Socrates has already noted, he possesses the ideal conditions to be so: in spite of the fact that at the beginning of the conversation Theaetetus has certain doubts, he finally decides to get involved in the debate. Yet, Theodorus probably also wants to retreat from discussion due to Socrates' intimidating style of addressing the audience which can be viewed as a way of announcing that the debate will be tricky, a situation in which Theodorus does not want to be involved. After the argument intending to show that knowledge (ἐμφανίζεται) and wisdom (προφαίρεται) are the same thing, Socrates challenges the audience again when he explains his puzzle (ἐμφατώμα), since he is unable to sufficiently understand what knowledge is. Before this statement he challenges the audience to answer his question (166a1: τί φασιν;), but there is complete silence (166a5: τί εὑρέτη). Certainly, one could think that after Socrates has said that the one who makes a mistake (or who always fails) will go to sit down like a donkey, the Socratic calling to dialogue and attempt to examine such a hard subject (knowledge) does not sound very friendly. By contrast, whoever makes it through without error will be a king and will question whatever he or she wants. It is natural that no one should want to respond: the person who makes no assertions is the only one who is free from error. As we know, whoever dares to answer Socrates' questions chances being turned down and, apparently, being viewed as "the donkey who goes to sit down", and ridiculed. However, as is well known from the Gorgias onwards, Plato declares (through his spokesman Socrates) that to be refuted should not be understood as an insult; on the contrary, refutation is what guarantees that one is able to check his own view and, if necessary, to correct it. But, of course, Socrates himself realizes he is being a little rude and immediately he attributes that to his "love of argument" and to his eagerness to make people converse and become friends and talkative to one another.

Theodorus is the one who attempts to break up this tension, although his maneuver can be understood as an elegant strategy to swiftly retreat from debate: he, Theodorus, is not accustomed to this kind of discussion and, due to his age, he is not ready to become accostumed. By contrast, it would be fitting for the young people around him to get involved in conversation, and if they do so they will improve and make progress. After saying that, Theodorus straightforwardly points to Theaetetus as the person Socrates should question (146b), Socrates already had the opportunity to talk to the young and promising Theaetetus, and now tries to persuade him to take the responsibility of conversation by arguing that he cannot trust Theodorus, someone from whom Theaetetus admits having learned. And if he has recognized that he learns from him it is because he thinks Theodorus knows something. That is to say, if Theodorus takes Theaetetus

1 It is true that Theodorus plays a significant role in the discussion of Protagoras' theory (cf. 168a-168c). But Plato always shows Theaetetus to be reluctant in the dialogue, and he intends to give a certain prominence to Theaetetus (see the final section of 168c).

2 Plato, Gorgias, 468a2-b1. Cf. also Enchiridion 295a and Sophist 208b-c. It is true that in the Sophist 230d1-2 Plato makes emphasis on the fact that one's soul cannot be released from what prevents it acquiring knowledge until the one who refers shames it by refusing it (ῥήτο ἐκλέγειν τὸν τῶν ἐλεήμονος ἕναν ἐλεήμονας καταφέρεται). But maybe this is part of the shocking way with which Plato intends to move a person in order that such a person not believe that he or she knows what actually he or she does not know. Refutation as such has a therapeutic character towards as the best thing to do is to rid one's soul of ignorance, which is badness. 3 Theaet. 166a5 ἀλλ᾽ ἔναν φιλολόγος δρούσκειται. 4 Cf. also Meno 75d. 5 A similar scene can be seen in the Laches 194a6-7 (cf. one this reference to Professor Michael Ede).
to be able to converse with Socrates, it is because Theodorus believes that he can do so. With his characteristic docility Theaetetus responds that he has to dialogue with Socrates since he was asked to do it, both by Theodorus and Socrates; anyway, if he makes a mistake, Theaetetus says, they will correct him (144c). This is a sign of trust on Theaetetus' part, who appears to assume that, even though he looks like a donkey, Socrates will take care of him. Probably Theaetetus thinks so because, although he just met Socrates, he notices that Theodorus, his mentor, trusts him. And if this is so, it must be true that, in spite of the initial manner (a little violent and intimidating) in which Socrates calls for dialogue, Socrates' purpose is to create conversation, to become friendly and talkative with the people he is conversing with.

Now if Plato really decides to leave Theodorus out of the conversation since said character realizes that his professional knowledge does not allow him to contribute to the debate, one should wonder why he, Theodorus, at the very beginning of the dialogue, makes the flagrant mistake of stating that his opinion has some worth even though he lacks the knowledge that would permit him to formulate a sound view. Theodorus asserts that Theaetetus is not handsome (καλός), but he resembles Socrates in the snubness of his nose and the bulging of his eyes (Theaet. 143e). When the young Theaetetus appears before Theodorus and Socrates, this one asks him to approach, so that he may examine for himself what sort of face he has (144d). This apparently trifling episode, which gives life to the dramatic plot in the introduction of the characters, is helpful to present for the first time one of the central topics of the dialogue: knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). In fact, in order to know whether or not Theodorus' view regarding the resemblance between Socrates and Theaetetus is well grounded one should look at Theodorus' expertise.

With regard to the resemblance of the faces, one should examine whether or not Theodorus speaks as a person who is a skilled draftsman (γραφέας). In other words, Theodorus' judgment is valuable if and only if it presupposes some form of expert knowledge related to what has been said, but insofar as he is not a skilled draftsman but a geometer, his opinion is not reliable (144e–144a). Therefore, knowledge is an indispensable condition for one's opinion to have some value. At any rate, one should appeal to charity in matching Theaetetus' position to our own, since in fact it is he who acknowledges in Theaetetus the extraordinary qualities that make him the ideal interlocutor for Socrates: Theodorus introduces Theaetetus as a person who is unusually well-endowed by nature with the qualities of a philosopher; he is naturally good at remembering, quick to learn, high-minded, graceful, and so on. In addition to that he also

is a person of an unbelievable gentle temper or docility.6 Maybe one should also grant Theodorus the fact that he often remains with Theaetetus when Socrates has raised a difficult problem; thus, it looks as if Theodorus' purpose is to encourage Theaetetus (Theaet. 165b), even though one could interpret Theodorus' attitude as a manner of running away and passing the problem to his disciple.7 However, if one is still charitably with Theodorus, one can continue to think that his intention is to support the young Theaetetus and accompany him in the middle of the dialectical storm. It seems to me that Theaetetus' docility should not be understood in the sense of someone who is willing to assent to everything that is said; of course, it is not the case that such a situation never occurs in the dialogue,8 but it would not be strange that Plato is thinking of the remark the Visitor makes to Socrates in the Sophist:

"Well, Socrates, if the interlocutor submits to guidance easily and painlessly (εὐθύμος, ἑλέος συν, ἀκακίας) it's easier this way, to do it before someone else; but if that's not the case, by oneself (τῷ αὐτῷ εὐμέτρει)" (Brasil, Benedito).9

An interlocutor who submits to guidance easily and painlessly is not (at least not necessarily) someone responding "yes" to anything; such a person can be someone who answers yes to what is reasonable. In the Sophist, after the Visitor has persuasively and clearly argued that the soul will have no benefit from what is learned unless the person has eliminated the opinions that are impediments to what is learned, and such a person is "purified, believing he knows just what he does know and nothing else", Theaetetus responds that this is "the best and most moderate of states" (Sophist 230c-d). His answer is not a submissive "yes", but he is convinced that that is the case. A little earlier in the dia-

6 Θεώτ. 164c–2: ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἡ προσφορὰ ὑδραγοῦσα ἀπὸ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶ, ἀλλὰ ἑλέος ὁ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀνθρώπος, καὶ ἐπεὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἄδικον γίνεται τὸ ἄτοπον τοῦτο διὰ τὸν ἀνθρώπον τοῦτον [...] δὲ τοῖς ὑδραγομένοις ὑπὲρ τούτου, ἐπειδὴ δὲ τὸ πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπον τοῦτον, ἂν ἐπιθυμήσῃ καὶ μάθησιν. ἐπειδὴ δὲ τὸ πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπον τοῦτον, ἂν ἐπιθυμήσῃ καὶ μάθησιν, ὑπὲρ τούτου εὑρίσκεται ἐπιθυμία (cf. Parnell 2011: 210, n.15). Theaetetus gathers several characteristics that, according to Plato, the guardians of the city should have (see Republic 487c, 490c; 494b, 501d, where "high-mindedness"—μετωποκεφαλάζουσα—is added as a distinctive quality of a philosopher). The philosopher must have a character that is both gentle and high spirited at the same time (μετωποκεφαλάζουσα ἡ ἀνθρώπος τῆς Ρήγες, Res. 375e–6). The argument intending to prove that these characteristic features, apparently opposed, are possible starts at 375d10.

7 When at 165b a difficult matter is under discussion and Socrates is about to start questioning, he addresses Theodorus and asks him: "Shall I tell you how this might happen, or Theaetetus?" Theodorus responds that he should tell both of them, but the younger (i.e. Theaetetus) should answer, because if he slips up, it would be less embarrassing.

8 As noted by Illeland, whom he is attacked, he is a "yes-man" (2000: 278).

9 Sophist 217d1–8.
Theaetetus and Protagoras: two philosophical characters

...with a beautiful intonation, he possesses an extraordinary character as he goes smoothly, unafraidly and affectively to his lessons and investigations and, despite the fact that his tutors have squandered his property, he is wonderfully open-handed about money (144b–d).

...It is very clear, it seems to me, that in the Theaet. 165a–5 Plato is playing with the aesthetic moral ambiguity of the word “beautiful” (καλός), in spite of his ugly look. Theaetetus is καλός, since the one arguing speaking “beautifully” is “beautiful and good” (6 γάρ καλός λόγων καὶ δικά καὶ δύνατόν τινα εἶναι), and...he is a good and distinguished person. Of course, arguing “beautifully” is arguing soundly, avoiding sophistical resources, saying what one really thinks, and admitting the consequences that follow from what one has taken to be true. This is why the one arguing well is both a praiseworthy and fine person (Theaet. 185a4). Interpreters have rightly suggested that Theaetetus, a fifteen or sixteen year old young man, is presented by Plato as the intellectual and human alter ego of Socrates.

Unlike Theaetetus (who avoids dialogue), Theaetetus is well disposed to discussion and is not afraid to make a mistake since, in the case he be wrong, he will surely be corrected (146c5: καὶ τό ἀλήθευς καὶ προφανεστέρας). If what one says is false and is refused, and if one is aware that the refutation is sound, one should be pleased to be refuted. And this is so because falsehood and ignorance are evils. Perhaps one might suspect that the ignorance and stupidity Plato is speaking of in these kinds of passages cannot be ignorance in the sense of lack of certain cognitive contents. In the Republic 588b3–4, for instance.

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10 Theaet. 145b6–7. Ἱος τελεά, Σφῆνα θεραπεύει, καὶ μὴ ἀκολούθον ἔχει ἡ εἰρήνη.
11 It may be interesting to note that Socrates has not made any (explicit) agreement with Theaetetus, even though in this passage he refers to “what has been agreed” (146c3: τὸ ἐνόψειναικότικον) and to the “agreement” (146c6: ἐνοικοῦσαι).
12 Benardete (1994: 135) understands differently this passage: Socrates really is ugly and his ugliness is that of an old woman and signifies the art he practices. But as Benardete himself reminds, by his same art Socrates needed that Theaetetus was beautiful.
14 See also Theaet. 146b: There is a similar scene in the Charmides. Socrates, coming back to Athens, asks Crises if any of the young men had become distinguished for wisdom, beauty or both (Charmides 185b). The talented and handsome young man is Charmides, and, as in the introductory scene of the Theaet., he has been practicing gymnastics, and incepts (both the youth and the elenches) because of his beauty as well as his talent (see Charmides 194c–c, with the comments by Dover 1989: 55–56). Later on Socrates clarifies that Charmides' soul should be good by nature and that that means being "a very distinguished person" (καλὸς καὶ ἀμφότερος; 196a4), indeed Charmides, unlike Theaetetetus, also is physically beautiful. For Socrates' erotic disposition towards the beautiful young man, see Plato, Symposium 216c.
ignorance (δυνάμεως) and stupidity (ἀκοφορόντος) are understood as a sort of emptiness of the soul’s state or condition (κόσμος ἔννοιας ἄθλου μαθήματος) in a very similar sense to the one just indicated. I mean, even though Theaetetus is aware that he can be mistaken, when he is asked “what is knowledge?”, and answers “kinds of knowledge are what one could learn from Theodorus” (Theaet. 146c7–8), he also depicts a proper psychological condition which can be taken as a certain type of knowledge: the proper attitude or disposition to receive the needed objection that would permit him to correct his error. But there is another ingredient showing Socrates that Theodorus cannot be accused of committing perjury after he had noted Theaetetus’ intellectual and human qualities: even though Theaetetus is aware of having an expertise, he is also aware of the limits of his own knowledge. In other words, although he is conscious that he possesses a specific type of knowledge, he does not believe to know what he actually does not know, let alone to be able to correctly answer a difficult question like “what is knowledge?” (146b). Theaetetus has the conviction that simply by virtue of possessing a specific knowledge he cannot assume that he knows other things, and this is so because each specific field of knowledge has its own object. This shows, once again, the philosophical and human temper of Theaetetus, which makes him the ideal interlocutor for dialogue. Moreover, after he has provided his initial answer to the question “what is knowledge?” and is refuted by Socrates (who in turn urges him again to endeavor to give a new answer) Theaetetus claims:

“But know well, Socrates, it’s often that I tried to make an examination of it, in hearing the questions that are reported as coming from you. But for all of that, I am myself incapable of either persuading myself that I say anything adequately or hearing someone else speaking in just the way you urge.”

And Socrates replies:

“The reason is, my dear Theaetetus, that you are suffering labor pains, on account of your not being empty but pregnant” (Theaet. 146e; transl. Bernardete).16

Socrates probably gathers that Theaetetus is “pregnant” because he recognizes his incapability to properly respond to what was asked. In other words, Theaetetus acknowledges that he does not know, and such recognition is the first step to knowledge: not believing to know what one really does not know (The-

16 On the analogy of the woman in labor to refer to the state in which the one who is experiencing a learning process see Bernardete 1984: 139-140; Sedley 2004a 8–13.

act. 210c), and, what maybe is more significant, the fact of being aware that possessing a knowledge does not enable one to believe that he or she knows another thing about which he or she does not have an expert knowledge. Theaetetus’ attitude is decisive since, as Plato states, the worst form of ignorance is not knowing something and believing that one knows it.17

But what is the criterion necessary for knowing that one does not know? For, as Plato suggests, nobody believes that what he or she believes is false.18 Obviously, I do not even plan to endeavor to respond that question, although the problem of self-knowledge is a promising path to investigate, such as is suggested in a memorable passage of the Alcibiades I, where Plato makes emphasis upon the relevance of distinguishing between caring for what belongs to oneself and caring for oneself (128a5–67; 129e–130c; 130e–132a). If "oneself" is one’s soul, one should attempt to know one’s own soul (which means to know oneself, not what belongs to oneself), which is the state of mind in which one is.

If what I have been arguing is sound, it would be reasonable to admit that without a proper psychological disposition one will not even be willing to notice the power of an argument. This appears to be explicitly suggested by Plato when he states that those who live according to the unhappiest model (ἐκτεθῆσθαι), due to their folly and extreme foolishness (τὴν ἀρχήν τε καὶ τὴν ἐκτεθήσεως ἐνοχήν; Theaet. 176e5–177a1), will live with bad people and will be associated with evils. And given that they are terrible and wicked (τεῖλον καὶ μαύραγγευσιν), they will surely take the suggestion that they should change their lifestyle as a recommendation coming from unintelligent people, even though actually they themselves are those who lack intelligence. It is pretty clear to me that the foolishness (which could be associated with "ignorance" in other parts of the dialogue; cf. Theaet. 176c) Plato is talking about here cannot be understood in the sense of lack of certain specific cognitive contents, but as a state of mind, a dispositional state, consisting in being unable to admit one’s own mistake and hence believing to know what one actually does not know. Thus the ignorance Plato speaks of is the typical attitude of a person who is unable to doubt himself, no matter how powerful the objector’s argument might be.

This last point is useful by way of transition to the discussion of the character Protagoras and his relation to Philebus. Maybe nobody would have any doubts about why one could consider Theaetetus to be a "philosophical character", although probably one does have such doubts with regard to Protagoras. First I would like to point out that Protagoras, unlike Theaetetus, already has

17 Soph. 229c–5.
a philosophical (and well defined) conviction; furthermore, he somehow believes himself to already be a philosopher. Perhaps this explains Protagoras' confident attitude from the very beginning of the dialogue as an active participant in the debate. As is usual in the argumentative strategy of Socrates, one should start by establishing certain basic agreements (δουλοφωνία) to which the results of the discussion will have to fit in. Socrates proposes to begin by the following agreement: each one will attempt to show a state or disposition of the soul (Philebus 12d6 έρει ψυχής καὶ δυναμεών) capable of providing a happy life to every human being. Once the two conflicting views have been summarized and clarified (Philebus 12b-c), Socrates is certain that the hedonists, Protagoras and Protagoras will endorse the state and disposition of pleasure; by contrast, Socrates will support the view of intelligence or wisdom. With regard to this assertion Protagoras responds with a natural and maybe emphatic "quite so" (ἐνθ' ἐπιτύμβω). That is, from the very beginning of the dialogue Protagoras has already assumed the thesis of pleasure as his own.

On his part, Theaetetus is a geometer and, even though he is also disposed towards the dialogue and portrays philosophical qualities, he does not presume to be a philosopher. What I would like to note is that, even if I think that both Theaetetus and Protagoras are two "philosophical characters," the manner in which Plato presents them in the respective dialogues where they are one of the central figures is quite different. The case of Theaetetus is relatively clearer, insofar as it is Protagoras himself who has his philosophical qualities. Protagoras, though, does not seem very docile, especially when the debate starts, but his attitude changes when he begins receiving the first of Socrates' onslaughts (particularly after the "moralistic argument," when Protagoras claims that the argument has left him "absolutely speechless for the moment"); 21d4-5: ἐφ' ἀφεσιν παντυποίκοι ὑπ' ἄγαντος ὁ λόγος ἐμβάλλει τὸ νόημα. Maybe this is the moment in which he starts to discover that the certainty he believed to have was actually quite weak, or that the fundamentals of his thesis were not as sure and reliable as he thought they were.

But before describing the philosophical characteristics of Protagoras I would like to reemploy the same strategy I previously used when I attempted to describe the philosophical traits that Theaetetus possesses. In order to bring Protagoras into the scene I shall compare, just as in the previous case, his attitude (disposed towards the dialogue, and even, one could say, his eagerness to obtain a certain prominence in the debate) to that of his mentor Philebus, who is reluctant to keep conversing (Philebus even looks upset with Socrates). Naturally, this fact is not surprising at all, and one should suppose that it is part of a dramatic strategy carefully planned by Plato. One might imagine, for example, that this is due to the fact that Philebus has already been discussing the matters at stake and he does not wish to tolerate Socrates' objections, criticisms and arguments any longer. But in this case Plato explains the reasons of this situation from the beginning. The Philebus starts suddenly, taking again a conversation that was in progress. This accounts for the need to summarize the opposing views which is done both by Socrates and by Protagoras again later in the dialogue.22 As is well known, this is one of the first interesting dramatic details in the Philebus: the dialogue starts in medias res, without any introduction, with a conversation that follows another one on the same topic (presumably the good), which has taken place just before and whose central conflict has not been solved yet.23 Socrates quickly attributes to Philebus the crude hedonist thesis; it is as if Plato pointed out that there already was a conversation on the topic at issue. After Socrates summarizes the two competing views, and asks Philebus if they have expressed themselves thus, Philebus responds with a laconic "Yes Socrates, exactly in that way" (Phil. 11e4). Immediately we learn that Protagoras will defend the cause of pleasure, as long as Philebus is not willing to keep dialogueuing.22 Philebus' refusal to keep dialogueuing shows Protagoras that he is the one who must take the leading role in the defense of pleasure.24 The next intervention of Philebus is in section 12a7-8, when Socrates states that if there is a state or condition that is superior both to the state of pleasure and that of wisdom, and if such a superior state shows itself more akin to pleasure, the life of pleasure will overcome that of wisdom, and that if this new state is more akin to wisdom, wisdom will overcome pleasure. Once Protagoras has accepted this strategy, Socrates asks Philebus what his opinion is about this matter, and Philebus categorically responds:

20 Philebus 12b-c: Protagoras summarizes again the views on the good in 12c-d (cf. also the new summary of Socrates in 60a10).
22 Philebus 11e-12a8: "the beautiful Philebus has backed down" (παχί ἀκομήν); ἀποδόθηκαί
23 Thus it is indicated by Protagoras later when he suggests that Socrates not bother Philebus with his questions (12b-9); surely Protagoras remembers that Philebus had already said (12b) that he released himself from any responsibility and that he invoked his goddess as a witness.
It seems to me that this kind of recalcitrant attitude explains the fact that Plato leaves Philebus out of the debate. As is clear, Philebus is a dramatic construction of Plato, whose intention may be to describe a certain sort of character that is not necessarily hard to find: the character of the one who prefers to keep dogmatically his or her beliefs and views without considering them in the light of the dialogical discussion. The way in which Philebus persists in his belief and his refusal to allow the others to examine his view reveals an unphilosophical attitude on Philebus’ part. By contrast, in Plato’s view the healthy philosophical attitude and the commitment to the dialectic presupposes being able to review one’s own beliefs and, if necessary, to change them. Philosophical beliefs are liable to be modified by an argument; if Philebus’ attitude were correct, the object of discussion would become a doctrinal object or rather a dogmatic object of investigation, which is the same thing as saying that the problem of good requires no more research. However this approach sounds strongly anti-Platonic, for not only has Plato pointed out to us that philosophical beliefs can be modified by argument (logos), but also that in order to modify our beliefs by argument we need to transform our own soul’s state. But all of this would be possible for someone who is willing to take care of what follows (at least whenever it follows) from the starting points of his or her own logos. However this somewhat presupposes one’s willingness to review one’s own beliefs against ignorance and foolishness there is not any possible argument.

Even though Philebus does not participate much in the dialogue (much less than Theodorus in the Theaetetus, indeed), he remains attentive to the discussion (“as a sleeping dog”) and eventually he adds some remarks, annoyed by the direction the conversation takes.

For example, in passage 17c–e, when Socrates attempts to show the way in which the one-multiple distinction can be applied to determine what being an expert in a discipline (such as grammar or music) is, Protarchus enthusiastically gives his assent to Socrates’ account.

Apparently, Protarchus talks to Philebus, who is on his side. Philebus responds that Socrates has argued (spoken) well, but anyway he does not see why Socrates is bringing up this point now. After a brief digression, Socrates tries again to answer Philebus’ doubt; but the one who notes what Socrates means is Protarchus. In fact, he claims that what Socrates is doing is asking about the kinds of pleasure (19b). The interesting detail that, once again, Plato emphasizes in a fresh dramatic turn (which describes Protarchus’ philosophical attitude and his collaboration with the dialogue) is focused on the manner in which Protarchus becomes again the main interlocutor of Socrates and, hence, puts aside Philebus as a valid partner for conversation. According to Protarchus, he (who had been acting as the replacement of Philebus in the defense of pleasure) would be making a fool of himself in asking Philebus to respond to such a difficult question (19b). Protarchus’ attitude shows again his commitment to the role he has taken in the defense of pleasure and in the relevant function that his participation plays in order that the dialogue progresses. There is even a passage where Philebus excludes himself from the dialogue: in 27e–28a a decisive conversation between Socrates and Philebus takes place; Philebus accepts that both pleasure and pain should be put among what admits “the more”, for

pleasure would not be the whole good if it were not unlimited by nature, both in quantity and intensity” (27e).

27 See Frede 1996: 218. Philebus’ sporadic interventions are for complaining that he does not understand (18a), or in order to protest that even though his goddess (Aphrodite) cannot be identified with the good, Socrates’ god (Apollo) cannot be identified with it, either. In the same line Philebus complains to denounced that Socrates is praising his god.

28 A sound spoken by a person is a single thing, and yet it is also indeterminate in number. But we are not wise because of this, but because of knowing how many species of sound there are, and of which kind they are (this is what makes us grammarians, cf. Philebus 17b). The same thing occurs with music: sound is a single thing, but there are kinds of sound (height and depth), which also shows that it is multiple. But what makes us experts in music is understanding for knowing: how many intervals of sound there are with regard to what is height and depth, how many combinations, and so forth (17c–d).

29 “And, it seems to me that Socrates has perfectly argued what has been said now” (17e−7a).

30 At any rate, Philebus never disappears completely from the scene; in fact, there are some passages where Socrates talks to him directly (cf. 26a 27a).
When Socrates asks him in which genus wisdom, knowledge and intelligence should be put “without sacrilege”, Philebus complains that Socrates is praising his own god. Socrates replies that Philebus is praising Aphrodite, but the question must nonetheless be dealt with. Protarchus claims that he is right; then Philebus reminds Protarchus that he had chosen to speak on his behalf (28b6). Protarchus admits that he is puzzled and asks Socrates (not Philebus) to be his interpreter. Both Philebus’ withdrawal from the conversation and Socrates’ understanding give a new thrust to the dialogue. I think that what I have said so far is enough to show how and why Plato leaves Philebus out of the discussion and to depict the philosophical character of Protarchus. Once Philebus has stated that he thinks and will continue to think that pleasure always wins and has shown his intention to not keep dialoguing in an active way, Protarchus notes that Philebus should no longer take it upon himself to agree or disagree with Socrates. Interestingly Philebus freely chooses to relinquish any and all responsibility. But whether or not Philebus consents, Protarchus is interested in moving on with the discussion (Philebus 12a–b). Protarchus attitude, if compared to Philebus’, is quite different: first, because he quickly notes that if Philebus backs down and is not willing to continue discussing, Philebus will have no authority with regard to the fixed agreements, or as the “official” speaker in favor of pleasure. This is a way of saying that Protarchus is aware that a certain agreement should be established as a necessary condition of the dialogue and of assuming the responsibility in the defense of pleasure in the contest for the good. In fact, as is well known, in the Platonic dialogues it is usual to emphasize the previous agreements among the speakers, agreements that will have to be kept for the sake of coherence of argument.31 Second, Protarchus disposition is relevant because he takes seriously the dialectical mechanism that compels one to check one’s own beliefs; even though Protarchus is not disposed to easily abandon his position, he is ready to review the scope of his thesis after Socrates’ first attempt at refutation has taken place. Moreover, Protarchus claims to return to the question-answer method when he realizes that the matter is hard to explain (24a) and, in spite of Socrates’ attacks, he does not lose his good disposition towards the dialogue. A paradigmatic case of this is shown in section 15e–16a, where Socrates criticizes the ambiguous use of language and the generally ludic attitude of which young people are so fond. They have no mercy, Plato says, on their father or mother or on any other of their audience (15e–16a). Protarchus reacts to such comment by noting that they are a crowd of young people, and stating that Socrates’ remark is a little insulting; however, Protarchus claims to have understood Socrates’ concern and that he will endeavor to keep the discussion free of such upsets, in addition to the fact that he is willing to accompany Socrates in his path, “a gift from the gods to human beings” (16c). This good disposition towards the dialogue once again reveals Protarchus’ philosophical attitude.

At the beginning of the debate Protarchus shows himself to be confident with regard to his view; the good is pleasure without qualification. It appears to me that Protarchus’ initial confidence cannot be compared to the confidence Theaetetus starts acquiring when after a brief initial doubt he begins conversing with Socrates and, so to speak, he relaxes himself and feels more confident. As I indicated above, it is clear that Socrates notes Theaetetus’ doubt and encourages him to keep moving on; besides, Theaetetus seems to trust his master and what Theaetetus believes about Socrates. But Protarchus’ confidence is different from Theaetetus’: Protarchus is confident because he appears to be convinced that there is no way to refute his hedonism. In 12c Socrates opens a new front for discussion in order to try to show that pleasure and the good cannot be identified without qualification, and he observes that “he knows that pleasure is varied” (or “diversified”); 12c: την δ’ ἠδήν οὐδ’ ὡς ἐν τοίνυν. In fact, pleasure takes all sorts of forms, which somehow are unlike each other.32 The argument he provides for demonstrating this is simple but forceful: both the temperate and the intemperate person are pleased, but he is obvious that what pleases the one and the other are different things (22b). Naturally, Protarchus finds this account a little outrageous, and this is so because what in his view finally counts is that those pleasures come from opposite things. But those pleasures, qua pleasures, are different. By contrast, Socrates believes that, even though from a general viewpoint the whole is a unity, from the point of view of the parts some are as opposite as they can be: black and white are two species of color (two “parts” of the genus color). Qua colors they are the same, since both of them are “color”; but at the same time they are dissimilar, as they are the species of color most opposite of each other. The same thing occurs in the case of pleasures: the pleasures of the temperate and intemperate people are the same thing qua pleasures; but from a specific viewpoint, they are as opposite as they can be (12e–13a). Protarchus, of course, is firm in his position and believes that this type of argument cannot damage his thesis; but if one recognizes, as Protarchus implicitly does at the beginning (and later explicitly 13c), that given that one is dealing with dissimilar things, calling them with a different name,

31 See as way of example Gorgias, 461b; 466b; 488b; 487a; 495a (with the comments by Eder 1991: 431–32). Theaetetus 346c–5; 159e4; 46, 166a5–7 et passim.

32 12c–d: μορφάς δ’ ἠδήν οὐδ’ ὡς ἐν τοίνυν: καὶ τὰ πράγματα ἄνωθεν διάλεξαν.
then, it is reasonable to assume that not every pleasant thing is a good, which does not mean to say that the pleasing things are displeasing (13a–b). Regardless of Socrates' argument against crude hedonism, what concerns me is Protarchus' attitude before Socrates' objection: (i) he is not willing to abandon his position for, as he himself puts it, the person who states that pleasure is the good could not be disposed to admit or tolerate that someone says that some pleasures are good and others bad (130–c); (ii) even having clarified this point, Protarchus admits that pleasures are dissimilar from each other and that some of them are opposite (although he makes it clear that not all pleasures are opposite). (186d) When Socrates introduces the one-multiple problem (whose application is seen later: 186d ff.) he addresses a powerful attack to the young men, who are fond of making use of an ambiguous use of the language (154a–16a), as if one's treatment with language were a mere entertainment or a game. Socrates' remark can be grasped (as in fact Protarchus grasps it) as an elegant way to say that the hedonist view is a childish position resorting to improper uses of language. Note that it is Protarchus who asks Socrates moderate the tone of confrontation in order that the dialogue be possible. That is, Protarchus understands Socrates' tone as agonistic or polemical, i.e., as unphilosophical. But as it can be seen in what follows in the text, Protarchus is still well disposed to continue discussing, since he declares to recognize Socrates' concern. In addition to the fact that he has no problem in eliminating what preoccupies Socrates and that he (Protarchus), along with the others (surely the silent audience), will accompany him as far as possible.

The mollusk argument is a fantastic piece which combines both dramatic and philosophical ingredients: the argument identifies neither wisdom nor those distinct intellectual abilities with the good or the good life. What the argument actually shows is that without such capacities one would not even be able to postulate the possibility that pleasure is the good, for one would be unable to know if he is enjoying a pleasure, or if a certain sensory state can be recognized as pleasant or not (this makes clear the necessity of possessing at least true opinion). Memory, on its part, guarantees that one can remember that in the past one was enjoying a pleasure, and calculation guarantees that one will be able to enjoy a pleasure in the future. These three ingredients, which are the Socratic candidates to win the competition for the good, are at least a necessary condition of pleasure and, if this is so, it cannot be true that Protarchus cannot be in need of anything but the greatest pleasure to be happy (Phil. 21a). As it can be seen later (21d–e), although with less emphasis, Socrates applies the same argumentative strategy to show that the good life requires pleasure. On the other hand, there are also some dramatic ingredients that one should not overlook: as I already pointed out, at the beginning of the dialogue Protarchus' confidence and, in a certain way, arrogance is noteworthy. To be sure, with absolute confidence he has been defending the thesis that the good is pleasure, or that the best life is the pleasant life. Obviously, the point is not that one cannot defend hedonism as a philosophical view, but Protarchus' initial attitude in this respect depicts a certain naturalness and evidence that require examination and justification. This is why Protarchus' question of whether he would accept to live his entire life enjoying the greatest pleasures turns out to be unusual, although it is quite clear that the question seems definitely outrageous to Protarchus. However, Socrates' argument persuasively shows that it is untrue, as Protarchus had supposed, that pleasure is enough to decide whether or not he is really living a good life. Towards the end of the argument, both seriously and jokingly, Socrates suggests that the one who is willing to defend Protarchus' view will live a mollusk life or the life of those sea animals that live in shells, the most stupid and ignorant of all, according to Plato (Timæus 52a–b).

After this first blow Protarchus looks a little overwhelmed ("this argument has left me absolutely speechless for the moment"), and after Socrates' argument he is not so confident; but the dialogue as a method of joint research to find the truth must continue (at the beginning of the dialogue Socrates reminds Protarchus that they are not engaged in rivalry (οὐδὲν ἐν ἀντάξει), but they have to be allies for what is nearest to the truth (τῇ ἐλεύθερῃ ἀλήθείᾳ ἀλήθειαν ἐξισοπεύχειν); 335–7). Refutation (in case the mollusk argument can be considered as a refutation of Protarchus' view) as a therapeutic method has started to change Protarchus' disposition in the right direction. This does not mean that Protarchus should change his mind, but rather he must be able to allow the other

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33 On the ambiguous expression τῶν λυκῶν ... ἡμᾶς (Phil. 155b–5) cf. Casserio 1999: 408; Pradeau, 2002 (note ad loc.).
34 There is a similar scene in Theaet., 167e–168c, where Protagoras (in his defense) tells Socrates not to confuse verbal strain (λόγος ὄρατος) with a genuinely philosophical conversation (λόγος ὁρατός), without ill will or hostility, and in a kind spirit (168b–c: ὅταν διηγήσεσθαι μη ἔργον τοῦ ἄνθρωπος).
35 See 63d and 45c, where it is clear enough that the greatest pleasures are the sexual ones, even though probably not the sexual pleasures without qualification, but the sexual pleasures lacking measure.
36 One might interpret the mollusk argument as an ad hominem argument, but indeed it is helpful to show that the life of pleasure is neither a sufficient (or self-sufficient) nor a perfect life, two necessary conditions of the happy life, as was agreed at the beginning of the debate (20c–21a).
37 On the example of the mollusk, see Lefèvre 1999.
ers (and he himself) to scrutinize his view. Clearly Socrates notes that Protagoras is overwhelmed; this is why Socrates immediately replies: “Let us not be softened, let's turn now to examine the life of intellect” (216d–7). One might understand this remark in two ways: Socrates shows that his own view should be scrutinized as well, and that it eventually can be objected (this way producing a certain confidence in the overwhelmed Protagoras). But the phrase “Let us not be softened” (Μην τολμήν μαθαίνομεν αὐτού) can be a way of saying “let us not be mollusks, let us not be the most stupid and ignorant animal living in shells” (36) (which does not sound very friendly, even though it can be taken to be part of the serious game Socrates is playing).

It is true that Socrates does not devote much time to the examination of his own thesis, even though it is clear that he appears to agree, along with Protagoras, that a lifestyle in which one possesses any kind of wisdom, intelligence, knowledge and memory without participating in the slightest pleasure (or pain) does not constitute a choice-worthy life (216d–e). This is what in the dialogue permits to introduce a third type of life (the mixed life), which is presented as a position that overcomes both the life of pleasure and that of wisdom (22a). At this point Socrates is willing to give up, and he admits that his model of the good life does not lack difficulties, either (how would the life of a person who does not feel pleasure or pain be... it would be the life of a person without feelings of any kind). Then he suggests the type of life which is made up of a mixture of both lives. Protagoras' conclusion before this new perspective leaves no doubts that, even if he is still a little overwhelmed, he wishes to move on, concluding that “of the three possible lives before us, two of them are neither adequate nor worth choosing for a human being or a beast” (22a–b). It is probably just at this point that Protagoras understands the eligibility requirement (that Socrates early introduces in conversation 1/6), a requirement that must be satisfied by anything that purports to be a suitable candidate in the contest for the good. The argument by itself was already enough to warn a well-intentioned and collaborative interlocutor that his view at least needed to be nuanced; but the dramatic ingredient enhances the dramatic force of the argument, as Protagoras, rejoicing in his hedonism, is unwilling to allow himself to be confused with a mollusk or a sea animal living in a shell.

Once Protagoras has ruled out the life of pure intelligence or knowledge as eligible, a life in which there is no pleasure or pain, he admits that pleasure seems to have been beaten by Socrates' argument. But he also makes the interesting point that the life of reason cannot claim the first prize, either (22a–23a). That is, after Socrates' comparison of the hedonist life to the life of a mollusk, Protagoras has taken a beating, but he is not completely overcome yet. It is clear that the argument has shown that a life of pleasure without qualification is not self-sufficient or perfect (two basic requirements of the good; 20d–21d), but it has not proved that a life of pure intelligence and knowledge, deprived of any pleasure, fulfills these requirements.

From that moment Protagoras is increasingly collaborative and active in the dialogue, and although in some passages he seems to be a “yes-man”, he continues to make his way into a healthy dialogue attempt to find the truth. When Socrates notes that Aphrodite realizes the excess and evil of all things and that there was in them no limit to pleasures and indulgences, and when the goddess established law and order as determinants of such pleasures and indulgences, Protagoras entirely agrees that it is so (Philebus 26b–c). But this does not mean, I submit, that Protagoras is willing to assent to all that Socrates says. Much later in the dialogue (36e), after Socrates' question, Protagoras admits that one cannot be asleep or awake, in a state of madness or delirium—believes that one is feeling pleasure when one is not, or thinks oneself distressed about something when one is not. All of us, Protagoras adds, have supposed that it is so (ὅταν ἐπικοίνωνος; 36e10). Then Socrates asks if such an assumption is right or not, or if it should be examined if it is; Protagoras has no doubt that the view should be scrutinized (ἐκτείνεται, δις καὶ ἡ γὰρ όμοια φήμη; 36e13). The character Protagoras continues to defend his thesis that there cannot be false pleasures; however he also is willing to admit that his view should be examined.

Maybe he still remembers his experience at the beginning of the discussion, when he stated that he would have no need of any other thing if he had pleasures. Moreover, after Socrates provides his image of the soul as a book and explains the role of memory as a scribe writing speeches in our souls, Protagoras says...

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38 See Timaeus 92b-c.
39 Phaedra 216d ἀλήθη τοῖς πολλοῖς κακολογούσης πάντως τοῦ ταπείνου. This is a kind of life that Aristotle (maybe thinking of this passage of the Phaedrus) does not accept either (see Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics 1230b13–14).
that he seems that this is so because he accepts what has been said (Διδάσκωσις τὰ προφέτες ὁ θεός; 396a–2). That is to say, he accepts what Socrates says because apparently he admits that what has been said has passed the dialogical test. At this point of the dialogue Protagoras has already incorporated the Platonic teaching that beliefs should be subject to the joint effort of the dialogical conversation.

Epilogue: the dialogue as a cooperative work

At the outset of this paper I pointed out that the characters of Plato's dialogues can be understood as his spokesmen, whether, or not Plato agrees with all the views defended by his characters. He invented a way of doing philosophy in which he himself is never entirely committed to the "I say" level. Both Theaetetus and Protagoras are sometimes accused of being "yes-men". But it is arguable, I think, that it is not necessarily something bad to be a "yes person" at a certain point of the debate: on the one hand, there are questions whose answer is so obvious that they require a "yes" as a response. On the other hand, one might respond "yes" but not in order to escape from the attack of the question or to avoid being ridiculed if one gives a wrong answer. Rather, such an answer can be the result of the joint examination that both Theaetetus and Protagoras, understood as philosophical characters collaborating in the investigation, conduct with Socrates.

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