

Protagoras Questions

Protagoras and Pericles

Sometime either in 450 BCE or in 430 BCE, Protagoras and Pericles had attended the Greater Panathenaea, where they watched the pentathlon together, and one of the events for the pentathlon was the javelin throw competition. Yet while competing in the javelin throw, an athlete accidentally killed the spectator Epitimus of Pharsalus with a stray javelin. As a result, Pericles and Protagoras spent the rest of the day investigating the *main* or *primary* cause of the tragical, accidental death of their fellow spectator Epitimus. They asked, “Was it mainly the *javelin*? Was it mainly the javelin *thrower*? Was it mainly the *organizers* of the competition?” Sure, Epitimus died from being skewered by a javelin, but the javelin thrower caused that, and the organizers of the competition brought Epitimus and the javelin thrower together in that deadly situation.

1. What (or who) *primarily* caused the tragically accidental death of the young man Epitimus? What (or who) was the main cause of his death? Explain.

Protagoras and Zeno

Perhaps as early as the year 450 BCE, Protagoras and Zeno discussed a paradox.

Zeno: Imagine two different scenarios. On the one hand, a single grain is dropped, and it hits the ground. On the other hand, a heap (or pile) of grain is dropped, and it hits the ground.

Protagoras: Okay. So what?

Zeno: When it hits the ground, does a single grain make a sound?

Protagoras: No, a single grain does *not* make a sound when it hits the ground.

Zeno: Yet, what about a *heap* (or *pile*) of grain? When it hits the ground, does a *heap* of grain make a sound?

Protagoras: Yes, because a *heap* (or *pile*) of grain is a very *large* amount of grain.

Zeno: Is there *some* amount of grain between only one *single* grain and a whole *heap* of grain?

Protagoras: Yes, because *multiple* grains make up a heap of grain, and a heap is so large that even *half* of its grains are more than only one *single* grain.

Zeno: Yet when it hits the ground, an amount of grain that is a fraction of the *size* of a heap will make a fraction of the *sound* of a heap, and so if a *heap* of grain makes a sound, then even a *single* grain will make a sound!

Protagoras: Alas, this time I disagree! Man is the measure of all things! Something bitter to one man might not be bitter to another man. Justice for one city might not be justice for another city. Indeed, man is the measure of all things! When it hits the ground, an amount of grain that is half the *size* of a heap *doesn't* always have to make half of the *sound* of a heap. Although the number might vary from one person to another, there is always some *least* number of grains that make *some* sound, and that number of grains is always one grain *more* than the *greatest* number of grains that make *no* sound *at all*. Hence when it hits the ground, a heap of grain makes a sound, but a single grain makes no sound at all. It isn't a contradiction!

Zeno: How can you be so sure that your senses can be trusted?

Protagoras: The senses are connected to soul. I cannot deny it when I hear a sound, nor can I deny it when I don't hear a sound. Only my sense of hearing can tell me what I hear, and that is the reality that my soul inhabits.

Questions -

2. Zeno said, "When it hits the ground, if a heap of grain makes a sound, then even a single grain will make a sound." Why did he think so? How does that remark reflect how he was a *rationalist* (rather than an *empiricist*)? Hint: It has to do with how he mathematically related something's size to how loud of a sound the thing makes when it hits the ground.

3. Protagoras said, "When it hits the ground, a heap of grain makes a sound, but a single grain makes no sound at all." Why did he think so? How does that remark reflect how he was an *empiricist* (rather than a *rationalist*)? Hint: It has to do with why he believed that "man is the measure of all things".

Protagoras and Hippias

While in Sicily, the sophist Protagoras met the sophist Hippias of Elis. Unlike how Protagoras charged only 100 minas per lesson, Hippias charged 150 minas per lesson. As a result, Hippias considered himself to be better than Protagoras at being a sophist.

4. For any two people who have the very same job, if they make *different* amounts of money, then is the person who makes *more* money always *better* at their job? (Yes or no?) Explain.

Protagoras and Euathlus

For a price of 100 minas, Protagoras gave Euathlus a lesson on how to win a debate.

Protagoras: Now that I have taught you how to win a debate, you must pay me 100 minas, because that was our agreement.

Euathlus: I understand, but I have not yet won a debate, so how can we be so sure that you've actually taught me how to do so? Until I've won a debate, I refuse to pay you.

Protagoras: Very well. Shall we debate over whether or not you should pay me 100 minas?

Euathlus: Yes! Let us debate over whether or not I should pay you 100 minas!

Protagoras: If I win the debate over whether or not you should pay me 100 minas, then you'll pay me 100 minas, because I'll have *convinced* you that you *should* pay me 100 minas. Yet, if *you* win the debate, then you'll *have* to pay me 100 minas, because I'll have proven that I've taught you how to win a debate, and so you'll have to pay me 100 minas for teaching you how to win a debate.

Euathlus: You think you've won, but I won't pay you! Instead, you shall pay for your sophistry! I'll let all of Athens know that you're an agnostic, and you will be punished for your impiety!

Questions -

5. Was it wrong for Euathlus to refuse to pay Protagoras? Why or why not? Explain.

6. After refusing to pay Protagoras, what mistake did Euathlus make? How did he fall into a trap?

7. After agreeing to debate, should Euathlus have paid Protagoras?