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The *Protagoras*

Rebecca Sparks

In the *Protagoras*, Plato points out the reasons Socrates was allowed to be tried and condemned to die even though this was against everything the city stood for. By being at conflict with the society and those around him, and in no small part, because he was a Sophist, Socrates ends up doing himself in. As Socrates moves from one narrative frame to another, he not only shows what it is he cares about, but also how he manages to annoy just about everyone.

As the “Socrates meets a friend” narrative frame starts out, the friend takes a jab at Socrates about Alcibiades and how he is too old for Socrates to be courting him. Socrates replies by twisting Homer to justify doing what he knows is unacceptable, just as Sophists supposedly do (309a-310b). This conflict between the two starts out the dialogue. Yet by the end of this frame, they are talking amiably, and Socrates is going to tell him how he came to be talking to Protagoras. The friend, up until this point, has been picking at Socrates, but when Socrates mentions Protagoras the friend is very eager to hear anything about him. It seems that Socrates knows that the friend would like to hear about Protagoras and plays it up, uses it, to get him to listen to his story. The conflict at the beginning is never resolved, just brushed to the side.

The second narrative frame, Socrates and Hippocrates, begins with Hippocrates banging on Socrates’ door before dawn (310b-314c). Typically, banging on the door before dawn signified that one was being hauled away to stand charges. By doing so, Hippocrates is showing a lack of respect due not only to someone older, but also to someone who is supposedly his

teacher. Not only that, but Hippocrates has come to beg Socrates to introduce him to Protagoras, and expects him to be willing to throw in money to get Protagoras to teach him. Socrates doesn't stand for this and starts a debate in which he not only makes Hippocrates ashamed for wanting to become a Sophist, but also reasserts his authority as the teacher and as the one Hippocrates should be coming to for wisdom. At the end of this narrative frame, Socrates makes a speech in which he states that Hippocrates is risking his soul by going to Protagoras for wisdom. During this speech, Socrates keeps reiterating the fact that this knowledge would have to be purchased and puts Protagoras on the level of a "retailer," and one whose morality should be suspect. This is an even bigger conflict than the one at the beginning of the dialogue. During the first conflict with the friend, Socrates really didn't seem to care about what was going on. Also, Socrates is able to take care of it fairly easily by baiting the friend with his story. This conflict, Socrates takes more time over and it takes longer to resolve. Really, the resolution is only partial as Hippocrates is still considering going to Protagoras for teaching.

Each narrative frame so far has started out with conflict, and the third one is no different (314c ff). Before Socrates even gets in the house to see Protagoras, he is confronted by an angry porter who thinks he is just another Sophist. Given the vehemence with which Socrates denounced Sophists during the confrontation with Hippocrates, Socrates could not have been pleased. As Socrates enters the house, he makes two comments from the *Odyssey* which place him firmly in Hell. Indeed, if one equates the angry porter with the gatekeeper of Hell, this only reinforces the idea. Socrates does not like Sophists and feels as if he is going through Hell by having to deal with them. Once Socrates has begun to talk with Protagoras, Protagoras makes a

speech that underlines just how dangerous it is to be a Sophist. Later, Protagoras tells the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus, insinuating that Prometheus' fate will be Socrates' if he keeps being a nuisance. Socrates, instead of taking the hint, does his best to be as annoying as possible. Socrates uses small speeches and debate to nit pick at Protagoras' definition of virtue, and to goad him into losing his temper. Later, when Protagoras is questioning Socrates, Protagoras turns the discussion to a more accepted topic, that of Poetry; Socrates responds to this by making the biggest speech in the whole dialogue to prove that he can deal with the classic forms of discussion quite easily (342b ff). He then proceeds to shift the topic back to what virtue actually is. The dialogue ends very abruptly with Socrates having made Protagoras out to be a fool. This conflict has taken much more time to resolve than either of the two before it, and has actually been resolved, at least in Socrates' mind.

These three conflicts show what it is that Socrates really cares about. The first conflict between Socrates and the friend was unresolved because Socrates didn't really care, either about how other people saw him, or about the social customs which he was violating. Since Socrates doesn't care, it gets brushed aside. All Socrates is willing to do is make a half-hearted comment about Homer and move on. The second conflict only gets partially resolved. Socrates makes his point about how Sophists are not to be trusted, but Hippocrates barely listens to him and they go to see Protagoras anyway. In this frame, Socrates does try a little harder; he questions Hippocrates and makes a small speech to try and convince him that Protagoras isn't worth it. The third conflict, between Socrates and Protagoras, actually does get resolved as Socrates comes out the victor in their discussion. Socrates cares whether or not he is considered as good as Protagoras and takes the time to prove it.

He uses long and short speeches; and numerous debates to make his point. This third conflict may also be seen as a continuation of the second. Socrates has just summarily proved to Hippocrates that he is a better teacher than Protagoras, but this is really secondary to winning.

Socrates is really another Sophist; he keeps getting accused of it everywhere he goes. Also, he keeps doing things that are typically assigned to Sophists. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates twists Homer to suit his own ends, which Sophists were frequently accused of doing. The entire third narrative frame is a competition between Socrates and Protagoras; who is the better Sophist? At the beginning of this frame, Protagoras makes a speech about how Sophists have hidden themselves in the past by professing to do something else. He also mentioned the fact that nobody was really fooled by it and everyone knew them for the Sophists they were. Protagoras makes this speech to point out that this is what Socrates is doing. Everyone knows Socrates for the Sophist he is, but Socrates won't admit it.

The Protagoras is an account of why Socrates ends up being tried and condemned to die. He was at conflict with everything and everyone and never tried to remedy the situation. Socrates was considered a Sophist by everyone except himself. Protagoras' speech about how dangerous it is to be a Sophist, combined with his myth of Socrates as Prometheus warns Socrates about how chancy it is to keep annoying everyone and that he had better be careful. Later on in the dialogue, when Protagoras turns the discussion to poetry it is yet another hint of what it is they should be doing. By using myth and poetry in his discussions, Protagoras is taking the most ancient and venerable way. He is showing Socrates that this is what he should do to be acceptable. When Socrates basically spits on the classical method and turns the discussion back the way it was, a

direct comparison can be made to Socrates' trial in the *Phaedo*. The council tries to let him off the hook, show him what he needs to do to be acceptable, and Socrates doesn't heed the advice. He proceeds to make a speech which leaves them with no other recourse than to condemn him.