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# EXPLICATION OF PLATO'S PROTAGORAS

*Keri McMurry*

In order to get the full meaning of any of the Platonic dialogues, one must carefully analyze the structure Plato shapes. *The Protagoras* presents its reader with a view of Classical Greek social and political structures as well as personal attitudes and morals. These views are not all explicitly stated in the dialogue, but implied through the narrative frame, the speeches, the debates between various speakers, and the use of allusion and mythopoesis.

The narrative structure of *The Protagoras* is clearly defined, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. The dialogue opens in narrative present tense with Socrates speaking to a friend. He begins to recount the adventure from which he has just returned, his "long talk" (Plato, 309) with Protagoras, and the majority of the dialogue is thus recounted in narrative past tense with occasional ventures back into present to address his listener. The narrative frame ends as it began, in present tense, with Socrates speaking to his companion.

The story that Socrates is laying before his companion is, for the most part, set in the portico of Callias' home. A detailed description is given of the scene Socrates and Hippocrates are entering upon. The reader is first told of Protagoras walking in the portico and a "long line" (314) of men walking with him, some of

whom are conversing with him, others just following and listening to the discussion. Socrates remarks specifically how delighted he was "to notice what special care they (the listeners) took never to get in front or to be in Protagoras' way" (314). When Protagoras and those in discussion with him turned around, "the listeners divided this way and that in perfect order, and executing a circular movement took their places each time in the rear" (314). Socrates' comments on social order in Athens and everyone's proper place in society cannot be ignored, nor should it be thought to be just a Greek social characteristic that Socrates felt indifferent to, for in the remark directly following this one Socrates states: "It was beautiful." Plato presents this theme of class discrimination throughout the dialogue. When everyone is gathered together to hear Protagoras address Socrates' inquiry of what effect Protagoras' teaching will have upon Hippocrates (31) all of the men sit on benches arranged in a circle. This circle represents a closed community, restricted to only those present in it; it gives the ironic impression that all those in the circle are equal, but the distinctions between the men and within that "community" are unfolded as the dialogue progresses.

In focusing upon the "unified integral discourse" of the dialogue, the theme of class separation is reinforced along with an emergence of other predominant Greek values and structures. The purpose of Socrates' visit to Protagoras was to represent Hippocrates and speak on his behalf. Hippocrates wishes to gain wisdom and become a student of Protagoras'. Socrates and Hippocrates discuss Hippocrates' reasoning and purpose for doing so before reaching Callias' home. Socrates presents a series of questions to Hippocrates through analogies to other professions which examine what it is Hippocrates wishes to gain. The emphasis placed upon giving a specific name to every profession stresses the importance in Greek society of classifying things into a set structure. Does Hippocrates want to study with Protagoras, a Sophist, "to

become a sophist?" (Plato, 311). "Yes" cannot be his answer because it would be shameful for him to proclaim himself a sophist to his fellow countrymen; the resulting answer of not to become a professional, but a better citizen and gentlemen, unveils the ethical situation of entrusting your "soul" to someone you know little to nothing about. The Athenian value of the soul is metaphorically compared to the body. Socrates states that one does not entrust his body to someone and take the risk of the treatment coming out beneficial or harmful without a great deal of thought and consultation of family, friends, and other experts; the same amount or more care should be taken with dealing with one's soul.

The main body of the dialogue consists of discourse primarily between Protagoras and Socrates. Protagoras starts out his first speech with a circle full of eager listeners as he explains the answer to Socrates' question about Protagoras' ability to teach virtue. At this point Protagoras proposes to his audience two forms in which he feels he is capable of presenting his answer, a story or a reasoned argument (318). The audience wishes to hear whichever form he pleases, so he proceeds to relate a story which begins "Once upon a time..." Not only does it seem ironic for a Sophist to revert to an earlier form of explanation, mythopoesis, when the sophist's main goal is to get rid of the cloudy thinking of the past, but for him to then begin his myth with "Once upon a time" and to give no exact beginning for his story appears absurd. Two explanations could be given for this action. First, that Plato has Protagoras tell a myth to make a sarcastic statement about Sophists. Or, Second, and the more likely case, that Protagoras returns to the use of myth condescendingly in order to communicate with all of those present about him. This reoccurs many times as both Protagoras and Socrates use analogies to common things and summarize their discussion, thus lowering their discussion to their audience's level of intelligence and comprehension.

At any rate, Protagoras' myth of mankind's creation highlights points that reinforce Protagoras' view of virtue being teachable; men were endowed with the art that enabled them to discover articulate speech and names, invent houses, clothes, shoes, bedding, and to get food from the earth. Zeus sent Hermes to distribute equally to man respect for others and a sense of justice to bring order to the cities and create friendship and union among man (320). Upon ending his story Protagoras gives a reasoned argument with many metaphors to illustrate his point. When Protagoras finishes, all sit in awe until Socrates speaks to praise Protagoras' speech and present to him "one small question" (324) that Protagoras' answer has raised in Socrates. What follows is a long series of questions and answers, not just one, solely between Socrates and Protagoras. No one else enters the discussion until Socrates attempts to leave because Protagoras refuses to answer the questions briefly, but prefers to ramble on. A social ladder is being built at this point with Protagoras at the top and Socrates below him, for Socrates professes he cannot speak at the same level as Protagoras. The rest are a rung below Socrates.

Finally other individuals from the "community" speak; they do so in an attempt to protect the unity of their "community." The first to speak is the resident of the dwelling, Callias; he requests that Socrates stay, but sides with neither Protagoras nor Socrates when approached with solving the problem. A series of short speeches follow in favor of one or the other. Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus, and Hippias all voice their desires to have the two continue their discussion and work to produce a satisfactory means of doing so. Hippias presents the idea of an arbitrator to the discussion, which wins consent and a round of applause from the audience. Socrates rejects what the majority agreed to and plays a dictator, ironically suggesting that, instead of one man to oversee the discussion, since no one present is truly qualified (again another presence of social barriers), all watch over the discussion together.

The discussion hits a turning point here. Socrates is no longer questioning, but rather, Protagoras is asking the questions and Socrates is responding. The dialogue again returns to the dominance of Protagoras' and Socrates' speeches, but occasionally, Hippias and Prodicus are called upon by Socrates to input their thoughts to back up his opinion in a type of "majority rules" effort. The discussion continues, but soon it is back to Socrates asking questions and Protagoras answering, though reluctantly. The same line of interrogation is undertaken questioning whether wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, and holiness are of a single reality, or of separate realities and whether all of these together are virtue. Socrates weaves Protagoras through an exploration of pain, pleasure, good, and evil, all in relation to courage. Upon Protagoras responding the only way he can to the questions, Socrates calls upon Hippias and Prodicus again to join the conversation issuing the support of the majority once more. He asks that all three verify the validity of the answers which Protagoras gave. After they all assent Socrates uses the power he has gained and turns the questions again to just Protagoras asking him to apply these agreed upon conclusions to his original statements, which he cannot do without contradicting himself. One might say that, by this showing of Protagoras backing down and letting Socrates finish it himself (351), Socrates has proven himself the better orator, and has succeeded in outwitting "the wisest man now living" (309), but is this truly the case? Socrates himself points out that at the conclusion of the debate he has proven that virtue is indeed teachable which is what he set out to prove was not possible.

Socrates is continually presenting himself as a liar and contradicting himself. He repeatedly states during the dialogue that he has an appointment he must get to, and that he really does not have the time to continue the discussion, but what does he do upon leaving the house of Callias? He

encounters an acquaintance and proceeds to recount the entire story of what transpired in real time. He also ends Protagoras' line of questioning by remarking that they should leave the subject of poetry, for it reminds him of "wine parties of second-rate and commonplace people" (340). He then begins his address to Protagoras with a quote from Homer's *Iliad*.

Allusions to the cultural corpus do not stop at just that one; Socrates quotes Homer several times and Plato has used very powerful references. Socrates' first line of the dialogue answers his companion's question about Alcibiades' age with an allusion to Homer. When he enters the portico at Callias' house Socrates makes the allusion of going to hell. As he recounts seeing Hippias and Prodicus he makes reference to book eleven of *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus makes his trip to the underworld and encounters all the spirits of the dead. The next allusion Socrates makes is from *The Iliad*, book twenty-one. He does this to emphasize the strength of Protagoras and that Socrates needs the help of Prodicus to ward off Protagoras' sacking of Simonides, as Skamandros called upon Simoeis to help him stop Achilles from sacking Troy.

Socrates and Protagoras discuss knowledge and power, and their debate is the epitome of both, a show of a battle of the minds and the power of using words and thoughts to one's means to manipulate others' minds. The dialogue depicts the social and political structuring of Athens and presents to the reader some of the values and attitudes Classical Athenians held. One could not begin to understand the dialogue by purely looking at the philosophical content without looking at the structure. The way Plato incorporates all elements of *The Protagoras* adds to a total understanding of the work and the culture.

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