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THE PROTAGORAS : AN EXPLICATION

Victorya Khary

The *Protagoras* intertwines various individual structures and forms throughout the work to make a larger meaning possible. The narrative frame and setting of the work, along with the manner and tone with which speeches and debates are conducted, convey the larger measure of Greek life including: social structure, attitudes and values of people during this time period, and the interactions between individuals.

The narrative frame, an important and marked structure in the *Protagoras*, follows a definite order of events, consisting of a clear beginning, middle, and ending. This work begins in apparent present tense with Socrates, who narrates the dialogue to his companion, and thus falls into a narrative past tense. On occasion, Socrates addresses his companion, and the tense structure briefly returns to the present, but once again falls and stays predominantly in the past tense form.

The setting of the *Protagoras* is primarily in the portico at Callias's home, where Protagoras is staying, and a description of the arrangement of the men present at the portico is well defined and significant in noting.

During the speeches, the gentlemen sit on benches arranged in a circular pattern. This circle, representing a closed and restricted environment, is quite ironic when looked at in terms of the entire dialogue, which consists of speeches portraying a broad picture of Greek society.

When analyzing the manner in which speeches and debates are presented, the social structure in Greek society becomes evident. Looking at individuals isolated from conversations or those participating to a greater or lesser degree, illustrates varying levels of this structure. In the *Protagoras*, women are excluded altogether, as only men participate in the discussions. Men possessing the greatest knowledge, such as Protagoras and Socrates, are those presenting the longest speeches and getting into significant debates. Men with less knowledge interact in the conversations, but not to such an extent, and these are the individuals occasionally interrupting Protagoras and Socrates. Still, there are those who come to these discussions for the sole purpose of listening to what is being said, without participating themselves.

Circulating in the *Protagoras* is the theme of knowledge leading to power, therefore, Socrates and Protagoras, being the most knowledgeable and powerful, are the primary focus at the beginning of the discussions, while the others are isolated from their initial discussion of virtue. This isolation is foreshadowed when Socrates and Hippocrates first arrive, and Socrates constantly speaks for Hippocrates, thus isolating him and not allowing him to respond to questions. During their argument, Protagoras constantly addresses Socrates by name, drawing attention to what Protagoras is saying. While debating whether virtue is teachable or not, the atmosphere in the dialogue becomes intense and encompasses the two powerful speakers, Protagoras and Socrates. At first, because nobody else becomes involved in the debate, an empty feeling exists, as though these two men were the only individuals present in the room.

When Socrates asks that Protagoras speak slower and shorten his answers, a hierarchy is formed between these great speakers, placing Protagoras on top, since Socrates cannot follow his responses. Because Protagoras chooses not to cooperate, Socrates decides to

leave, and for the first time, since the beginning of their discussion, other men begin to speak, starting with Callias, who ask Socrates to stay and continue the debate. Those present begin to take sides with either Protagoras or Socrates and give their opinion about whether or not Socrates is correct in asking the other to cut down on the speech and speak more slowly. Alcibiades sides with Socrates, while Hippias takes sides with Protagoras. Men such as Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus, and Hippias give their opinion regarding how Protagoras and Socrates should conduct their debate, so as to please both these men.

At this stage in the *Protagoras*, a turning point occurs. Both Protagoras and Socrates will conduct a question-answer discussion, suggested by Socrates, where one will ask questions and the other will provide answers, and these roles will be alternated. Topics discussed include a continuation of virtue, education, pleasure, pain, and evil. Discussion becomes less focussed solely on Protagoras and Socrates, and encompasses others who are interested in participating. Those not involving themselves in speaking are primarily foreigners, and this may be due to a communication gap, although this is not directly stated. At this point in the dialogue, after one provides a favorable response to a question, the surrounding men applaud showing their approval for the response, thus providing a more participatory environment at the portico.

While analyzing the conduct of speeches and distinguishing those participating from those removed, we recognize a social structure in the form of a pyramid. Men possessing a great deal of knowledge and power in the community, such as Protagoras and Socrates, are at the peak of this pyramid; others come to hear them debate. Rather than giving their knowledge out of love, however, these men take money for passing their knowledge on to others. Further down the pyramid, one encounters men such as Callias, Critias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Hippocrates. Many of these individuals are wealthy and knowledgeable, and are interested in further educating themselves; thus they are the ones coming to hear men like Protagoras and Socrates debate. Women, not given credit in this society, are encountered still further down the pyramid, and are excluded from

participation in speeches and debates. At the base of the pyramid, Greek society puts its slaves, who are certainly portrayed without knowledge, and exist to serve those above them in the pyramid. Thus, by observing those involved in or isolated from the discussions, the pyramid of Greek social structure becomes manifest.

The analogies, metaphors, allusions, and myths presented within these discussions demonstrate, in part, the attitudes and values of people during this time period of Greek life. For instance, being taught by a Sophist one entrusts his soul to the educator, and the knowledge received goes straight to the soul thus benefitting or harming the individual accordingly. The great Athenian value of the soul is illustrated in the metaphor used by Socrates when discussing with Hippocrates the importance of getting a second opinion before entrusting one's soul to a Sophist, namely Protagoras. Socrates argues that if one must put his body into the hands of a stranger for treatment, the individual consults many others before going through with a procedure. Because the Athenian value of the soul is greater than that of the body, it is therefore more significant to be cautious of a Sophist and to realize into whose hands one is entrusting his soul.

Hippocrates wishes to become a pupil of Protagoras, thus Socrates, after communicating his friend's wish to Protagoras, asks him what will be made of Hippocrates. After Protagoras answers that he will teach him to do the right things in private and public life, Socrates expresses doubt as to whether the science of right conduct or virtue can be taught. Apparently, the Athenians as a body do not think virtue can be taught, therefore they do not impart it on their sons or demand it of their politicians.

The Myth told by Protagoras illustrates the answers to these difficulties raised by Socrates. The Myth's objective is to show that the five virtues Protagoras enumerates: wisdom, temperance, justice, holiness, courage—can be taught. Beginning with "Once upon a time...", no specific time reference is made as to when the myth took place, but soon it is learned that it was a time when there were Gods, but no mortals. Discussing how man and other creatures evolved, obtaining their individual characteristics, Protagoras points out that man was given the gift of skill in fine arts and the gift of knowledge.

By possessing the art, man discovered articulate speech and names, invented clothes, shoes, homes, and obtained food from the earth. Soon imparted to man were qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice, so as to bring order into cities and create a union, and those not able to acquire these virtues would be put to death. Thus, through the myth, Protagoras attempts to disprove the Athenian viewpoint that is virtually not teachable.

Socrates and Protagoras resume their conversation and it is made plain that the five virtues must be reduced to one: knowledge, represented by the art of measuring values. Presenting itself at the close of the conversation of virtue, the dialogue builds up to an enormous ironic twist: Protagoras admits that virtue is knowledge, so as to not contradict his view that it is teachable; while Socrates, in showing it is knowledge, confirms that thesis, which he originally disputed. This is a major irony in the work because these men engage in a long and deep discussion and eventually end up taking the others viewpoint.

While demonstrating to Socrates that virtue can indeed be taught, Protagoras uses an analogy comparing the teaching of virtue to the teaching of individuals at school and by the state. This analogy provides an understanding of the importance of respecting laws of the state. Protagoras illustrates that when students have finished with teachers, the state encourages them to learn laws and use them as a pattern for life, lest left to themselves they drift aimlessly. States set up laws, invented by lawgivers of ancient times, and compel citizens to rule and be ruled in accordance with them. Protagoras points out that whether the states realize it or not, what they are doing is taking a great deal of care over this great faculty called "virtue." With this illustration, it is also noted that the Greeks put a great emphasis on having a good body to accompany a good mind, therefore a trainer is used to condition the body to serve the individual.

Continuously, throughout the dialogue, speakers use a broad variety of analogies and metaphors to prove and illustrate their arguments and carry their points across to others. This may be done for purposes of simplifying debates and speeches for the rest of the audience to understand, thus, not giving enough credit to those

listening. Analogies are also used by Protagoras and Socrates to help ensure that it is understood where these men are coming from.

When Protagoras speaks too fast for Socrates to follow, an analogy of Crison, the runner from Himers, is used to demonstrate to Protagoras why he should slow down. This analogy helps the other men at the portico, including Protagoras, understand where Socrates is coming from, but it also puts the men down to a slight degree, showing that they would not understand how Socrates is feeling without the simplistic example that Socrates makes about the runner, saying that a fast runner could slow down for a slower one to run with him, just like like Protagoras should slow down for Socrates to converse with him. At this point, Socrates is seen as putting himself down in front of others and showing that he is not able to keep up with his debating partner. Socrates may be sincere about his feelings, or this may be done to be sarcastic towards Protagoras.

The discussion breaks down between Socrates and Protagoras, and the sarcasm that takes place between the men is a foreshadowing of the parody that occurs after this incident. Resuming the discussions, Protagoras asks the questions while Socrates provides the answers. Protagoras asks Socrates to consider a poem by Simonides, and Socrates becomes quite sarcastic in his approach to explicating this poem. Sparta, he portrays as a center of learning and Simonides as a philosopher of subtlety, closely resembling Socrates himself. Through interpreting the poem, Socrates moves words around, ignores important passages, and pays no attention to the author's own intentions. Socrates' parody of literary analysis is therefore meant as a criticism of Protagoras. Socrates tries to prove that explicating poetry is a dubious way of teaching virtue, since a little ingenuity is what is needed to put astonishing doctrines in someone else's mouth.

As mentioned earlier the speeches conducted in this small circle of men provide a window on Greek life and culture through what is discussed. From answering a question that Protagoras poses to Socrates, the reader of the *Protagoras* learns that among the Greeks, Crete and Sparta are the two cities where most Sophists may be found. So that their superiority over the rest of Greece may not be known to lie in wisdom, they conceal their wisdom and pretend to be fools,

feeling that if their real excellence became known, everyone would set to work to become wise. To be Spartan implies a taste for intellectual rather than physical exercise.

The use of allusions in the *Protagoras* allows the work to go beyond the men at the portico. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates alludes to Homer and Phidias when speaking with Hippocrates. In the context of the dialogue, Socrates suggests that as Homer is a poet and Phidias a sculptor, Protagoras must also be given some kind of title, just like the rest of these people mentioned. The allusion to these men suggests that it is an important part of Greek life to put a title on men, to recognize prestige and the class structure, thus all great men must have a title attached to their name.

Throughout the discussions, Socrates is portrayed as one that always wants to have his own way, and Protagoras goes along with this up to a point, but eventually gets frustrated and disputes arise between these two men. The others in the circle are quite often portrayed as being there to help settle these disputes, and this puts both Protagoras and Socrates in a comical position, as if they cannot handle problems on their own and need others to help them cope with each other. At the closing of significant speeches or debates, the discussion is summarized by either Protagoras or Socrates. Even when speaking about issues such as education, pleasure, pain, and evil, the conversation always manages to refer back to the original discussion of virtue, and then continues with the present topic being debated.

The *Protagoras* paints a picture of the Athenians, illustrating themes having a charming manner not being affected by the hottest debates, their passion for fair play, and their love of listening to the wisest men.