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THE PROTAGORAS: JUDGE ... JURY ... AND EXPLICATION

Patrick Hamilton

In *The Protagoras*, Plato uses a myriad of methods and structures in order to portray the people and circumstances under which the dialogue takes place. While the discussion contained within the dialogue takes up the subject of virtue, the dialogue itself is not constrained to this single topic. Instead, it presents many different sides to the characters and situations held within, in addition to the different sides of the question of virtue presented within.

In *The Protagoras* Plato first sets up the circumstances under which the dialogue will be told. This narrative frame opens as Socrates meets an unnamed friend who, when he finds out that Socrates has just talked with Protagoras, whom Socrates describes as “the wisest man now living” (*Protagoras and Meno*, 309), asks Socrates to tell him of their conversation. This Socrates does enthusiastically. How this simple conversation sets up the circumstances of the dialogue is not revealed until much later in the dialogue, when Socrates and Protagoras nearly end their conversation. At this point, Socrates says “. . . I have something to do and could not stay while you spin out your long speeches, I will leave you. I really ought to be going” (*Protagoras and Meno*, 330). Here, Socrates claims that he cannot stay with the conversation

as another appointment takes precedence, and he repeats the same excuse when he does finally take his leave at the end of the dialogue. Yet when his friend approaches him on the street, just after he has left the discussion, he promptly begins the lengthy recapitulation of the discussion. Socrates is lying in saying he must go away in order to leave the house of Callias; this further casts doubt upon the truth of the actual conversation, as the story of that discussion is told only by Socrates. One would be quick to conclude that the story Socrates tells may not be true, and may even decide that it is based on this information. Yet, if one looks at Socrates' story, it becomes obvious that he is more than likely telling the truth, for throughout the dialogue and conversation with Protagoras, Socrates himself is constantly portrayed as petty and manipulative. If Socrates was indeed lying about the events that had just occurred, he surely would not have portrayed himself as such. In this way, though Socrates is still shown to be a liar as detailed earlier, one is safe in assuming that what he says occurred with Protagoras is the truth.

From here, Socrates begins to describe the course of events that brought him to the house of Callias and to the meeting with Protagoras. Now the only reason Socrates went to see Protagoras was at the request of Hippocrates, who came to him for his help in becoming one of Protagoras' followers. The circumstances under which Hippocrates asks for Socrates' assistance are an example of Plato's constant use of symbolism and allusion. Hippocrates comes to Socrates in the pre-dawn hours, while it is still dark. While waiting for light to break, the two men go out into the courtyard and Socrates begins to test Hippocrates to see if he knows what he will be getting himself involved with. One aspect of this conversation is that it takes place while it is gradually getting lighter and, when it is light, the two men have reached the house of Callias. This movement from dark to light is an often used symbol of the movement from ignorance to knowledge, and this instance is

no different. Hippocrates came to Socrates ignorant of what he was truly asking for, effectively in the dark, and Socrates proceeded to enlighten him, corresponding with the gradual break of day.

Yet there is also a second allusion in this section, one that is continually prevalent throughout the dialogue. The circumstance of Hippocrates coming to Socrates for his help is one of many allusions by Plato to the structures of law courts and trials. Hippocrates comes to Socrates for his help in “pleading his case” to Protagoras, in effect, engaging Socrates’ services as a lawyer. This allusion is particularly interesting in that Socrates himself was subject to a trial and condemned to death himself during the “Tyranny of the Thirty.” Yet, in this “trial,” the situation is reversed and Socrates is instead the questioner instead of the one being accused. This idea of a trial is a strong aspect of the structure of Socrates’ discussion with Protagoras.

But before the trial can begin, Socrates and Hippocrates face one obstacle, an obstacle that Plato again uses as an allusion to an important part of Greek culture, that of the Homeric epics. When Socrates and Hippocrates reach the house of Callias, a porter answers the door and promptly slams it on the two, calling them Sophists. Socrates then explains that “it seemed likely that the crowd of Sophists had put him in a bad temper.” When the porter answers again, Socrates says “My good man . . . we are not Sophists. Cheer up” (*Protagoras and Meno*, 313, 314) and bids the porter to let him and Hippocrates in. While this also clearly shows Socrates’ opinion of Sophists, as he decides that the presence of the Sophists has had an adverse effect on the porter, while his own will do nothing of the sort, it also clearly alludes to Homer, specifically *The Odyssey*. When Odysseus journeys into the underworld, before meeting with the seer Tiresias, he encounters a gatekeeper who also is in a bad temper. Allusions to Homer continue immediately after Socrates has

passed the porter and enters into the presence of Protagoras and his Sophists. In typical Homeric style, he goes through and lists each person present, much like the cataloging Homer did in *The Iliad*. And while he is listing the Sophists, Socrates continues to borrow from Homer with two quotes from *The Odyssey*, again from Book 11, when Odysseus journeys into the underworld.

By the use of these quotes, Socrates effectively says that by entering this house, he has journeyed into Hell and all around him are just shades. Yet while Odysseus meets the shades of other heroes in his search for Tiresias, who gives him knowledge of his journey home, Socrates is instead seeking the exact opposite. He is meeting, instead of heroes, living fools (in his opinion) as he seeks out the biggest fool of all, Protagoras, whom Socrates will eventually prove to be ignorant.

At this point, the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras truly begins. Now, just as there were two ways of looking at Socrates' conversation with Hippocrates, there are two ways of looking at the conversation between him and Protagoras. These are the earlier mentioned structure of a trial, and also as a form of an aristocracy. This aristocracy is clearly displayed by the fact that the conversation takes place only between Socrates and Protagoras, while the rest of the men present only listen. Even though the actual request is on the part of Hippocrates, it is Socrates and only Socrates who presents it and Hippocrates remains silent, as if he were not able or of sufficient standing to present his request. The idea of only certain people taking part in the conversation and decisions is continued throughout the dialogue. When the two men first disagree, it is Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus and Hippias who convince them to continue. Of these five men, Callias was walking with Protagoras and Hippias was "sitting on a seat of honor" (Plato, 314) when Socrates entered. Critias enters with Alcibiades who is, of course, highly favored

by Socrates and Socrates himself praises Prodicus as a genius. All of these men, in different ways, represent an aristocracy, as they are all highly regarded and make the decision to continue the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates.

The allusion to the structures of a trial, being more prevalent throughout the dialogue, also sets up a series of roles based on that structure for the characters taking part in the conversation: Socrates, Protagoras, and the surrounding Sophists. Socrates and Protagoras function as both questioners and answerers, as they switch these roles throughout their conversation. The circle of men around them serve as a type of jury, as they would applaud when one of the men made a stirring speech or proved a point. Also, when Socrates and Hippocrates entered, the men were in a procession about Protagoras, similar to the way a jury would enter into a courtroom. The role of judge is fulfilled by both Prodicus and Hippias jointly. Hippias, as mentioned earlier, was seated in honor, much like a judge would be. Prodicus enters the room where the conversation takes place from his "chambers," swathed in robes as a judge would be and is also the last person to enter the room which is also a characteristic of a judge.

At this point, with all the roles established, the discussion truly begins. Protagoras is the first to answer the question of whether or not virtue can be taught, but the way in which he proves his opinion is interesting in that it is the exact opposite of what Protagoras is supposed to represent. Protagoras is supposed to be the wisest and, consequently, the most advanced person present. Yet his opening argument is to tell the myth of Prometheus and how man gained the gifts of art and sense of respect and justice. Then he shows how men are taught, through punishment, correct morals, and virtue. The use of the mythic opening is interesting in that, while it does help "prove" Protagoras' point, the actual existence of it is something he is supposed to be superior to.

Once Protagoras has finished, Socrates feigns being awestruck at his eloquence, much like he did in *The Phaedrus* when Phaedrus finished his oration of Lysias' speech. As he was in *The Phaedrus* Socrates was not impressed by the speech and was fully prepared to question it and its maker. The tactic Socrates uses is to question one single aspect of the speech made by Protagoras, as Socrates begins his first role as questioner. Instead of displaying support for his own position, he instead seeks to undermine Protagoras' by examining one minute aspect of his speech and leading Protagoras around by his nose until he contradicts himself, which is not accomplished by Socrates as he and Protagoras reach the point at which they first decide to end the conversation.

In this disagreement, the rest of the men in the room participate in the conversation for the first time. When the two speakers are unable to come to terms in order to continue their discussion, Callias, Alcibiades and Critias all offer "evidence," acting almost as witnesses to why they should continue. Prodicus and Hippias fulfill their role as judges, as, after the "witnesses" finish, they both make general statements of why the discussion should continue, much like a true judge would compel a trial to continue. The solution to this problem is reached by Socrates himself, who proposes that he and Protagoras switch roles as questioner and answerer, in order for Socrates to "show him how, in [his] submission, the respondent should speak" (Plato, 334), as the source of the argument was that Socrates complained of Protagoras' answers being too long for him to follow. This again shows Socrates' true opinion of Protagoras for, though he earlier praised him as wise, he now is going to show him his faults.

Protagoras, now acting as questioner, begins by asking Socrates to explain an apparent discrepancy in a poem by Simonides. When faced with this challenge, Socrates calls on Prodicus as a "witness" and in doing so, again quotes Homer. The quote comes from Book 21 of *The Iliad*, when Achilles

was battling Skamandros. Skamandros called on his brother for assistance in defeating Achilles. But, in fear that he could be defeated, Hera sent Achilles assistance in the form of Hephaestus who forced Skamandros back. This passage being invoked here by Socrates alludes to the fact that, unless Protagoras is aided from some other quarter, he will be defeated by the combination of Socrates and Prodicus. That is exactly what happens as the discrepancy is resolved by the two by the fact that the word "hard" in the poem had a different meaning for Simonides and that there was no discrepancy. By this explanation, Socrates succeeds in showing Protagoras' ignorance, as he vehemently denied the existence of two meanings that truly did exist. But not only is Protagoras shown to be lacking in this section, so is Socrates again shown to be a liar. His objection to continuing the argument was that Protagoras' answers were too long. Yet, in his explanation of the poem, Socrates himself begins an equally lengthy speech in interpretation. His ability to form and follow a line of thought throughout a speech is clearly shown here and his earlier objections are shown to be false.

Once Socrates has finished his defense, Protagoras silently refuses to continue with the agreed upon rules, in which he now becomes answerer. Socrates answers for him as he again quotes from Homer, again from *The Iliad*. The quote is from Book 10 in which Diomedes chose Odysseus to accompany him in infiltrating the City of Troy. In the circumstances of the discussion/trial, Socrates could be seen as readying an assault on Protagoras, which in fact he does, resuming his ironical role of questioner, considering his fate to come. Socrates again returns to the same minute point that he examined in Protagoras' original speech, once again leading Protagoras into contradicting himself, which he is able to accomplish this time. In the process of this questioning, Socrates again continues a lengthy line of thought, the same of which he claimed to be incapable. But Socrates does manage to make his point, that

virtue cannot be taught. At this point, the discussion ends and Socrates takes his leave, again citing his fictional other appointment.

The structures that Plato uses throughout this dialogue all serve to give more detail to the circumstances and characters that are within the confines of the dialogue. They succeed in showing the different sides of the participating members, through the exchange of roles and multiple allusions, even as they themselves debate the different sides of the question of virtue.

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