

Method and soul-shaping in the *Protagoras*

HALLVARD J. FOSSHEIM

I wish to suggest an explanation for why Plato lets Socrates present – and force those present to agree to – the hedonist theory in the *Protagoras*. My suggestion is that the *Protagoras*, by means of a combined effort on an argumentative-structural level and on a dramatic level, lets us see and experience central facets of the two methodologies defended by Protagoras and Socrates, respectively: while Protagoras' sort of speechmaking lets the listener be lured in by a loose and semi-digested vision, Socrates' favoured form of question-and-answer activity comes with a built-in defence against such psychological shaping, making it, in this respect, a safer way of submitting to pedagogical soul-forming. This quality of his activity has to do both with the format itself and with the sort of mode in which it sets those who are exposed to it.

While I think that the hypothesis constitutes a believable explanation for the presence of the hedonist theory, I think that it (the hypothesis) is also worthy of interest independently of a need to explain that theory.

A question of method

The bulk of the *Protagoras* constitutes a battle of wits between Socrates and Protagoras. Crucially, the open disagreements concern both theses/truths and methodology. Perhaps surprisingly, it is on the methodological level that the disagreement creates the most drama. At the point where this disagreement surfaces most forcefully, we have already had a taste of Protagoras' penchant for longish monologues and Socrates' desire to carry out his investigation by means of short questions and answers. And Socrates goes as far as to threaten to leave the company and the conversation altogether if he does not get his way.

As you can argue in both styles, you should have made me some concession, so that we could have had a conversation. But now, since you are not willing to do so, and I have an engagement, and couldn't wait for you to spin out these long speeches – I have to go somewhere – I shall go. (*Prt.* 335C)¹

¹ All translations are by Taylor 1996.

Socrates adds emphasis to his threat by actually getting up as if to leave (*Prt.* 335D). His ultimatum provokes a series of methodological comments and suggestions from several of those who are present. The comments also have the function of bringing home what has already been indicated by Socrates' words at this point – namely that the two methodologies are well known among those present as alternative ways of communicating.

The drama of the dialogue also lets us appreciate how the difference between 'shortspeaking' (βραχυλογία) and 'longspeaking' (μακρολογία),² i.e. a difference in methodology, may additionally be related to differences in character that are not altogether accidental. This point is emphasized by Plato when he lets Prodicus and Hippias dramatize themselves in the course of the methodological discussion, thus reminding us that the method of each is intimately linked to the personality or character of each. But the role of character is the most emphatic in the contrast between Protagoras and Socrates – the one jovial and friendly, but easily distressed by attempts to undermine his authority, the other sharp and shift, but always willing to go through an extra round of testing in order to get rid of mistakes and move closer to the truth.

So what are the two interlocutors' preferred methodologies? The method of instruction favoured in this case by Protagoras is exemplified in his so-called Great Speech. He presents what is supposed to constitute an explanation by combining mythological storytelling with elucidations or arguments pertaining to certain parts, and he does so without interruptions in the course of the presentation. The result is a rather grand vision, fleshed out in very broad outlines with little detail. In addition, the replies are presented mainly in a mythical format that hides which mechanisms or causal relations are really in play (provided, of course, that the individualized figures of Epimetheus, Prometheus, and Zeus are not to be taken literally as the ultimate explanations offered).

The method of instruction favoured by Socrates is exemplified not least in the long section (from 351B on) where he drags the others along the path towards hedonism. By contrast with the Protagorean approach to imparting putative knowledge, Socrates' method requires dividing the package to be delivered into small fragments and forcing the interlocutor to consider and agree to them one by one before proceeding to the next one. Formally, this process consists of Socrates posing leading or hypothetical questions, interspersed with explanatory notes, and the interlocutor indicating that he agrees to the step being taken for each move. (Presumably, as long as the

² The terms are used by Socrates in a parallel discussion in *Grg.* 449C.

interlocutor follows the exposition and does not arrive at a point where he is clear that he is no longer willing to accept the consequences of what has gone before, the instruction's success does not depend entirely on his saying his responses out loud. But since the audience for most people, including Protagoras, provides extra motivation for being careful about what one agrees to, the inclusion of some public affirmation will have a sharpening effect on the respondent.)

The danger in soul-shaping

The ridiculousness of the setting where all the sophists are introduced (*Prt.* 314E ff) makes for quite a contrast with the opening of the *Protagoras*' main bulk (i.e. following the framing sequence); the main dialogue's opening possesses an unambiguous, down-to-earth earnestness which we find only rarely in Plato. Says Socrates to his eager young companion:

Don't take chances in a matter of such importance. For you know, there's much more risk in buying learning than in buying food. If you buy food or drink from a pedlar or a merchant you can carry it away in another container, and before you actually eat or drink it you can set it down at home and call in an expert and take his advice on what you ought to eat or drink and what you ought not, and how much, and when you ought to take it. So there is no risk in buying. But you can't carry learning away in a jar; you have to put down the price and take the learning into your soul right away. By the time you go away you have already assimilated it, and got the harm or the benefit. (*Prt.* 314A–B)

At the point when Socrates says these words to Hippocrates, the young man has tried to pull Socrates along to meet Protagoras, so eager for the meeting that he has arrived at Socrates' place while it is still too dark to see. (This fact is used by Socrates as an argument for them to wait for daylight before setting off, and it is the excuse which makes it possible for Socrates to have a proper tête-à-tête in order to warn Hippocrates before confronting the great sophist in *Prt.* 311A).

What is conveyed by Socrates in the opening sequence is the fact that through our being educated, we are, partially through our own agency or engagement, affected by the educator in such a way that we become something we were not, without knowing beforehand what it is we will become, or whether that development is for the better or for the worse. For the sophistic forms of soul shaping, the normal state of affairs is one where the person does not know what the education does to him before it has already entered and become an integral part of him (if even then). In other words, the issue framing the drama of the *Protagoras* is that of being altered by someone. This is something Socrates

clearly believes to be possible – in fact, that possibility is the source of his worries. (When at *Prt.* 319A–20C he says he does not believe that virtue can be taught, he thinks of teaching in a narrow sense as systematic instruction, in contradistinction to Protagoras’ much wider understanding of teaching as socialization).³

There is a humorous little reminder of the difficulty involved in identifying types of educators at the stage where Hippocrates and Socrates try to enter Callias’ house. The person opening the door mistakes them for sophists, a fact which immediately shifts the mood from the seriousness of the preceding scene into something almost farcical, since he slams the door in their faces (*Prt.* 314C–E). While this episode functions as a coda for the scene confronting them inside, it also illustrates how it is not obvious who is who in matters of education.

Protagoras shares Socrates’ understanding of what is at stake, in the sense that Protagoras in his public self-presentation places himself in the company of all sorts of educators up to his own time.

I maintain that the craft of the sophist is an ancient one, but that its practitioners in ancient times, for fear of giving offence, adopted the subterfuge of disguising it as some other craft, as Homer and Hesiod and Simonides did with poetry, and Orpheus and Musaeus and their followers with religious rites and prophesies. Some, I have heard, went in for physical training, like Iccus of Taras and, in our own day, Herodicus of Selymbria (originally of Megara), as good a sophist as any. Your fellow citizen Agathocles, a great sophist, used music and literature as cover, and so did Pythocleides of Ceos and many others. (*Prt.* 316D–E)

The most interesting feature of this passage is not that Protagoras refers to all educators as sophists – that is a ploy to provide himself with the legitimacy and authority of tradition and acknowledged expertise – but that he presents himself as an educator. With this in mind, it is easy to appreciate the intimate relation between the opening part and the main part of the dialogue.

Method and substance

So why the hedonist section? The presentation of this theory does not forcefully dramatize that people are changed by instruction, because in the end no one seems to comfortably believe that theory. I suggest that the function of that presentation may be the very opposite of persuading anyone of its truth, namely, that of illustrating for us that there is a safety valve in Socrates’

³ The qualities are described and named in different ways in the *Protagoras*, but at least from 320A on ‘virtue’ (ἀρετή) figures prominently.

manner of teaching, consisting of the fact that this methodology forces the pupil, interlocutor, or reader to face rationally whatever is introduced before making it part of his/her soul.

This suggestion has the merit of fitting perfectly with the opening's description of how most soul shaping is dangerous precisely because the teaching goes on in a manner such that elements are assimilated into one's soul before one can examine them. This was, as we remember, Socrates' greatest worry. The dialogue dramatizes, through the interlocutors' hesitant reactions and the reader's own reactions, that the worry is nowhere near as acute if we stick to the Socratic manner of teaching.

Which qualities of this brand of βραχυλογία make it so different to Protagorean μακρολογία when it comes to the possibility of imparting (putative) knowledge with a lower risk of unhealthy assimilation? Two features in particular stand out when the two methods are contrasted as they are in the *Protagoras*. First, there is the analysis of the content into minimal packages, which can then be considered in isolation. And secondly, there is the demand that the interlocutor take an active stance towards each parcel, deciding then and there whether or not he or she is willing, for now, to accept each proposition.⁴ In contrast, Protagorean μακρολογία gives one a feeling that one is in the presence of a grander vision of something, with few details even visible; and instead of critically examining that vision, one accepts it – if it is accepted – on a combination of trust in the speaker's insight and some kind of admiration of his ability to conjure up the apparently seamless image in the first place.

The dialogue indicates, then, that one form of education is safer than the alternative with which it is contrasted, while at the same time it reminds us that we are the sort of beings that are susceptible to different kinds of education. The final hedonistic tour de force lets us experience this difference first-hand.

A final remark on form and content

We can make sense of one additional feature of the *Protagoras* by adopting the suggested interpretation. Plato's *Protagoras* is made to present a view of education, and of human beings, as not only rational but multi-faceted even on the best of days. One thing that might strike the reader of the dialogue is the extent to which this vision, at least superficially, resembles the complex view of humanity and moral psychology that Socrates details in certain other

⁴ This also suggests another aspect of dialectic in the sense of critical, leading questioning: it is a method of inquiry whereby the participant and audience do not just learn during the interaction, but whereby important parts of the learning process normally take place after the actual interaction is over.

dialogues.⁵ Protagoras holds that our qualities are more like the parts of a face than they are like pieces of gold (*Prt.* 329D–E). A version of this view is what we find in e.g. the *Republic* – a version which operates with three politico-ethically relevant soul parts, each with its distinctive function and dynamics, analogous to the relation between, say, eyes and mouth (only by each doing its unique job properly and in coordination with the other can most of us function in everyday life). Similarly, Protagoras is made to conjure up a vision of education as socialization, that is, as something which is the prerogative of the city as a whole and which takes place through a thousand nudges from a thousand directions, not only from a specific kind of rational interaction with a teacher (although that activity is what can bring someone to the final, higher realizations of reason). Again, this is more or less the gist of the *Republic's* version of how to produce a decent human being.⁶

I take it that this otherwise baffling and confusing feature of the *Protagoras* makes perfect sense if the primary aim of the dialogue is not to present a given content ('Here's the truth about ...'), but rather a certain form ('This is how you ...'). Precisely by letting the sophist wander closer to a believable version of the truth about moral psychology and education, while Socrates is made to present a theory that is over-simplistic and alien to most of what the author pays attention to in his other works, Plato manages to bring out the difference between the two. In the *Protagoras*, the central issue is not which theory to believe, but which methodology to abide by.

The *Protagoras* forcefully demonstrates how Plato focuses on questions of methodology not only when he lets his characters stop in their tracks and discuss it explicitly, but also – and not least – when the reader is lulled into thinking that only the theses and arguments under consideration define what is going on in the text.

References

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⁵ For a corresponding argument that the hedonist theory presented by Socrates is a natural consequence of Protagorean relativism and constructivism, see Rowett 2013.

⁶ I argue that a correspondingly complex moral psychology is in play in the *Laws* as well in Fossheim 2014.