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Commentary on Jonathan Lavery: "Plato's *Protagoras*: Negotiating Impartial, Common Standards of Discourse"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Lavery's paper presents a thorough interpretation of an intriguing passage in Plato's *Protagoras* (335c-338e), a passage that is mostly referred to as an "interlude" (see, e.g., Hubbard and Karnofsky 1982, pp. 121-122; Goldberg 1983, p. 131), but more aptly as a "dispute over methods" (Szlezák 1999, p. 105). Although Lavery, too, retains the popular appellation as "interlude", his analysis successfully demonstrates that the passage is clearly much more than that.

2. WARP OR WOOF?

Lavery takes as his starting point a paper by Erik C.W. Krabbe, first published in 2000 in the journal *Argumentation* (Krabbe 2000), and again in a revised version in 2002 in a book entitled *Dialectic and Rhetoric: The Warp and Woof of Argumentation Analysis* (Krabbe 2002). As Lavery is well aware, the passage on the scene in the house of Callias is not really the very center of Krabbe's piece. Krabbe's main objective is to demonstrate a practicable way of "intertwining" dialectic (defined as the theory and practice of conversations) and rhetoric (defined as the theory and practice of speeches). His solution is that, in practice, rhetorical and dialectical ways of discussion can be mutually embedded as functional parts of each other (Krabbe 2002, pp. 38-39). For this kind of entanglement of rhetoric and dialectic he finds an historical example in the *Protagoras*, with the passage in question shifting the discussion "to a metalevel" of negotiation about procedures (Krabbe 2002, p. 37). Lavery rightly challenges Krabbe's view in this point. The basic question of the 'interlude' with respect to the dialogue as a whole after all certainly is whether the warp will prevail over the woof or vice versa.

At first sight it might appear strange that Socrates should need to convince sophists such as Protagoras (or, for that matter, also Gorgias) of employing dialectic. For those sophists were credited with the invention of dialectic. Protagoras' works such as the *Antilogies* or the *Crushing Speeches* will surely have contained dialectical exercises similar to the preserved *Dissoi Logoi*. Yet if Edward Schiappa and Thomas Cole are right in affirming that the term 'rhetoric' was not coined before the 4th century, presumably by Plato himself (cf. e.g. *Gorgias* 449c; see Schiappa 1991; 1999; Cole 1991), prior to this

the two arts would perhaps both have been referred to as the 'art of *logoi*' and thus have been less distinguishable from each other than we would presume from a modern view.

Protagoras and Gorgias, however, clearly regarded the 'art of *logoi*' as an art of combat. Protagoras explicitly says so when he warns Socrates in 335a that he has already undertaken many contests of speech and has always prevailed thanks to his control of the rules (cf. 339e, where Socrates feels as if hit by a boxer's punch by Protagoras' argument). Gorgias is even more explicit when (in *Gorgias* 456c-457c) he compares the art of *logoi* to martial arts such as boxing, wrestling, or fencing. But even martial arts do have rules and umpires, and it is clearly about rules and their control that the illustrious party in the 'interlude' mainly argue.

So Lavery most rightly points out (p. 5) that the basic disagreement consists in the fact that Protagoras thinks of the current debate as a competitive contest, an *agōn*, and so do Callias and Alcibiades, the first two speakers in the interlude, but that Socrates aims at a completely different kind of conversation, namely a collaborative conference striving towards a common aim. He is also right in observing that this "ethical" disagreement is far more important than the outwardly predominant "procedural" one about brief or long answers.

Lavery's fundamental analysis of the progress of the 'interlude's' argument is fully appropriate. Callias' intervention amounts to little more than an attempt to let Protagoras have his way after all. Alcibiades counterbalances this by a similar advance in favour of Socrates. Both, however, interpret the disagreement as one of personal preferences. Their respective partialities are laid bare by Critias, who tries to take a less personal stance by asking the two other prominent foreign guests, Prodicus and Hippias, to set up general, impartial rules for the further discussion. Prodicus first invites both Protagoras and Socrates to continue the debate in a spirit of friendship instead of enmity, thus appropriately addressing the 'ethical' problem, yet without offering any 'procedural' solution. Goldberg (1983, p. 137), too, comments: "A grand aim without means for implementation is rousing but vainly formalistic."

The procedural problem seems to be overcome by Hippias, who repeatedly pleads for a "middle way" (*méson*, p. 9; cf. Goldberg 1983, p. 138) and proposes to nominate an impartial umpire. Incidentally, at this point I am not fully convinced by Lavery's hesitation (p. 9, note 9) to accept that Hippias primarily imagines himself in the role of the umpire. His pompous and flattering speech is that of a professional diplomat, and Hippias generally conceived of himself as a perfect mediator between apparently irreconcilable philosophical positions (Brunschwig 1984). Remember also Hippias sitting on a throne at the beginning of the dialogue (315c). His self-conceit is further unveiled by his crushingly abortive proposal to declaim his own interpretation of Simonides (347a-b).

Socrates' subsequent refusal to accept Hippias' proposal of nominating a single person as umpire and his suggestion that everybody jointly perform the office of umpire instead is appropriately interpreted by Lavery in the light of the introduction of a general impartial and impersonal criterion (p. 9-10). As this criterion turns out to be wisdom (*sophía*), the results of the negotiations perfectly dovetail with the dialogue's main topic of the teachableness of virtue.

Socrates also makes a procedural proposal: He suggests that he and Protagoras switch roles in questioning and answering. As this, in spite of Protagoras' stubborn reluctance (*pánu men ouk éthelen*, 338e), finally settles the question of the mode of

discussion for the rest of the dialogue, Protagoras has clearly lost the *agōn* on procedures to Socrates. The warp has prevailed over the woof.

3. RESCUING THE *LOGOS*

While I in general fully agree with Lavery's astute interpretation of the passage, which I find most helpful, at this point I should like to add a few afterthoughts that may be regarded as extensions of Lavery's thoughts with regard to the passage's position within the entire dialogue and Plato's thinking as a whole, or as tentative answers to some questions left open.

Another major motive of the passage seems to be the notion of help and rescue. Each one of the five (or six, including Socrates) interlocutors in his particular way tries to help continue a conversation that has reached an impasse. Yet the notion of help (*boētheia*) is a strong and permanent motive in the whole dialogue (Szlezák 1985, p. 168-169). Even in the prelude, Hippocrates seeks Socrates' assistance in getting introduced to Protagoras, for whose help in getting wiser he strongly hopes. Much later, in 341d, Socrates insinuates that Prodicus apparently wants to put Protagoras to a test, whether or not he will be able to "come to the rescue of his *logos*". Yet this is what Socrates has been doing from the very beginning.

After Protagoras completes his Great Speech, Socrates is still hopeful (or pretends to be) that Protagoras will not be one of those orators who, like books, are incapable of answering a question, or, like a bronze vessel, ring on and on in the same tune (329a, on the striking reference to Plato's criticism of writing in *Phaedrus* 274b-278e see Szlezák 1985, pp. 160-161). To find out, he puts Protagoras to a test by asking him for the famous "one small detail" (329b; in fact, he has before asked him much the same questions as he had earlier asked young Hippocrates; cf. 311b-e with 318b-d; see Szlezák 1985, p. 167). Obviously, Protagoras fails this test (Szlezák 1999, p. 123, note 55).

With this in mind, we may return to the question why ultimately Socrates should want to break off the conversation so abruptly at 335c. His complaints about the length of Protagoras' answers and about his forgetfulness are clearly inappropriate, as Alcibiades already suspicions (336d), and Lavery also rightly points out (p. 12). His memory is so perfect as to enable him to subsequently retell the whole conversation word for word to the unnamed friend in the framing dialogue. No less is Socrates' statement about some business (335c) that calls him away a dissimulation, as there is no mention of any such business when the friend asks him to retell the conversation "unless something hinders you" (310a; Szlezák 1985, p. 177-178).

Yet the popular interpretation that Socrates' real demand is that Protagoras' answer be relevant (e.g. Krabbe 2002, p. 37) is also misleading. For what Protagoras had just attempted, namely a definition of the good, would in Plato's view be most relevant to the question at stake, i.e. the nature of virtue. Yet it is precisely Protagoras' definition of the good as a variegated thing (334a-b) that leaves Socrates dissatisfied. What he realizes at this point is that Protagoras is evidently unable to come to the rescue of his (basically correct) *logos* (i.e. that virtue is teachable) by an appropriate definition of the good itself. This, it would seem, is the substantive disagreement Lavery does not find in the passage (p. 5). And this is why Socrates decides to break off the conversation.

Much differently, when Socrates later finds himself in a quite similar situation, after Protagoras at 350c5-351b2 convicts him of a logical mistake in his argumentation for the unity of virtues, he is neither spellbound as after the sophist's Great Speech nor taken aback as in a similar situation at 339e, but immediately sets off to engage in a dialectical discussion of the nature of the good. Thus Socrates, yet not Protagoras, proves able to come to the rescue of his endangered *logos* by introducing a higher level of reflection. He alone is able to "bring the *logos* to an end" (*perainein*, cf. Szlezák 185, p. 174, note 29). But this also evinces that the kind of dialectic Socrates has in mind is not the Aristotelian/Krabbean notion of dialectic as the art of conversations vs. speeches, but Plato's view of dialectic as the methodical ascent to the one ultimate truth founded in the idea of the good itself.

4. MAKING END(ING)S MEET

Lavery initially seems to be somewhat disquieted about the aporetic ending of the dialogue (p. 2). Yet this need not really disconcert us, as aporetic endings are a standard feature of Platonic dialogues. In fact, in *Protagoras* the argument seems to keep returning to earlier points in loops. After Socrates demonstrates in a relatively lengthy speech (342a-347a) that Simonides' opinions about the nature of virtue are consistent, the situation, with reversed roles, resembles the one after Protagoras' Great Speech (Szlezák 1985, p. 170). Yet, unlike Socrates, Protagoras does not ask any further questions, which enables Socrates to call for a return to the issues abandoned after Protagoras' speech. Again, near the very end of the dialogue (357b) Socrates brings the discussion back to the very point where the interlude began (334a-c): Whereas there Protagoras' inappropriate definition of the good had prompted Socrates' desire to leave, now that positions are curiously reversed (with Socrates arguing that virtue is teachable, and Protagoras denying just this), Socrates now in fact willingly and deliberately aborts the conversation by adjourning it to "some other day" (Szlezák 1985, p. 175). He, who alone is able to come to the rescue of his *logos*, also knows at which point to break off dialectical reflection, so as not to give away full truth to an audience that has proved unworthy.

In this respect, the curious conversation of Socrates and Hippocrates on some topic that "occurred to them (*enépesen*)" on their way to the house of Callias gets important. This conversation, we are told, comes to a conclusion in perfect agreement (*sunōmologēsamen allēlois*, 314c). Yet we do not hear a word about the topic of this conversation (the only successful one in the whole dialogue). Lavery wonders why (p. 3, note 4). But there is one person who overhears this conversation, namely the doorkeeper, who consequently mistakes Socrates and Hippocrates for newly arrived sophists. So the conversation must have been about some serious matter of the kind the doorkeeper would naturally attribute to sophistical discussions. Why else then should Plato have included this strange episode if not in order to indicate that in orderly conversation conducted according to impartial procedural and ethical standards agreement about serious matters is in fact attainable?

5. CONCLUSION

On the whole, Lavery's explanation of the 'interlude' passage in the *Protagoras* proves perfectly appropriate and instructive. Particularly his clear distinction between procedural and ethical questions is helpful. If the preceding comments have propounded a few further thoughts that go beyond Lavery's interpretation, these do in no way tell against it, as it is fully compatible with any of them.

link to paper

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