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One ~

Protagoras' Political Art

Protagoras' Art of Living

In a number of Plato's dialogues Socrates is shown eager to create the impression that he is not in the same business as the Sophists. Yet there are some striking overlaps. Socrates goes around Athens discussing the nature of virtue and the question of how best to live one's life, while the Sophists—most notably, Protagoras—go all over Greece discussing, among other things, the same topics. In Plato's *Protagoras* Protagoras makes a point of saying that he does not, like the other Sophists, burden his student with subjects such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, or music. He will teach Hippocrates precisely what he has come to learn, how to deliberate well in both his private and his public life (*Prot.* 318d 7–319a 2). It is practical matters concerning the conduct of life that Protagoras focuses upon—much like Socrates.

When Protagoras says that those who associate themselves with him will become better (*Prot.* 316c 9–d 1, 318a 6–9), this is really another way of saying that his concern is with virtue, *ἀρετή*.[1] Apart from the focus on human virtue, Socrates and Protagoras seem to share the following, more specific, views. To begin with, they both appear to assume that there is such a thing as doing well or ill in life, and that humans generally want to do well in life. As far as Socrates is concerned, see for instance his words at *Prot.* 313a 6–9: '. . . but when it comes to something you value more than your body, namely your soul, and when everything concerning whether you do well or ill in your life depends on whether this becomes worthy or worthless. . . .'. 'Doing well' translates *εὖ πράττειν*. To do well in life is the same thing as to attain

[1] The Greek *ἀρετή* designates the highest, or a very high, level of some praiseworthy quality. This noun is related to the superlative *ἄριστος*, the best. In everyday speech all sorts of desirable qualities, such as physical beauty, physical fitness, wit, or charm, can be designated by the term *ἀρετή*. Living things and inanimate objects alike are described as having virtues, or, as the word is sometimes translated, excellences. The scope of *ἀρετή* Socrates and Protagoras are interested in is in fact narrower than this, but is still broader than that of the English term 'virtue'. For instance, cleverness, an *ἀρετή*, is not usually designated in English by 'virtue'. With regard to the connection between *ἀρετή*—as a term related to *ἄριστος*, best—and *εὐδαιμονία*, note that *εὖ* in *εὐδαιμονία*, and in *εὖ πράττειν*, means 'good' or 'well'.

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εὐδαιμονία—, rendered usually as 'happiness' or 'the good life'. Protagoras for his part acknowledges, for instance at 351b 3–4, in response to Socrates, that some people live badly and others well. It seems to go without saying that he thinks that they all want to live well. (The discussion that follows upon 351B presupposes this.) Socrates and Protagoras are thus in agreement that there is such a thing as *εὐδαιμονία*, and that humans in general want to attain it. Further, they agree that having *ἀρετή* leads to doing well in life. Given how far-ranging the term *ἀρετή* is, this second claim is more open-ended than it might at first sight appear to be. If one can hit upon the good life by one's own effort, it is some combination of admirable qualities called 'virtue', whatever this may turn out to be, that enables one to do so.

In addition, Socrates and Protagoras both use the term *τέχνη* in order to throw light on the connection they envisage between virtue and the good life. The role played by Socrates' frequent references to *τέχνη* in the early dialogues is the following. A particular art or craft leads to success in some specific domain of practice: for instance, the knowledge of medicine enables this particular person, a doctor, to be reliably successful in curing people. Now if it is possible to achieve success, or some measure of success, in restricted domains of practice—in curing people, sailing, building houses or tables—by employing a relevant body of practical knowledge, might it not be possible to achieve success, or some measure of success, in living one's life by employing an appropriate body of practical knowledge? The question thus is whether there exists a counterpart to the established arts and crafts (carpentry, architecture, medicine, navigation) which, if one had it, would enable one to live well. This art, if it existed or if it could be developed, would appropriately be called an art of living.[2]

A *τέχνη* is practical knowledge or expertise. For Plato, as for Aristotle (*EN* VI. 3 1139b 14–7, 1140a 23) and Greek philosophers generally, this is in the first place a set of capacities a person has. It is something that belongs to the person's soul; only secondarily is it a set of abstract rules, or a set of established practices that constitute the exercise of a profession. The human soul is what makes us live; if the soul had the art of living, it would be in good shape and well-equipped to make us live well.

As we shall see shortly, when Protagoras comes to formulate his own *μάθημα*, teaching, his words on the face of it suggest that such an art is possible. Under one reading of his formulation at any rate, what he professes to teach is, precisely, an art that enables his students to lead a good life. After he has given his formulation, he will agree with Socrates that it is 'political art' or 'civic art', *πολιτικὴ τέχνη*, that he professes to teach. When he speaks of political virtue, *πολιτικὴ ἀρετή*, he treats it as identical with political art.

[2] The term itself—'the art of living'—is attested only in Hellenistic writers. The concern, however, goes back to Socrates.

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Virtue and art are not obviously identical, since virtue need not be thought of as an expertise of the sort I have just described. However, Socrates appears to identify the two, and he is not alone in this. Protagoras appears to do pretty much the same. (I say 'pretty much', because part of what Protagoras has in mind when he claims that he has the *πολιτικὴ τέχνη* is that he can *make* other people have virtue. He need not take virtue in every variety to *be* a *τέχνη*. His view, judging from the speech he makes as a whole, might be that virtue in its highest form, as possessed by a teacher of virtue, is a *τέχνη*.) Socrates will question Protagoras' claim to be a teacher of virtue. Against Protagoras, he will argue—at any rate, to begin with—that virtue is not teachable, or more generally that it cannot be deliberately and reliably transmitted through any human practice.[3]

Keeping this general framework in mind, let us look at the issues more closely. What is it exactly that Protagoras professes to teach? When he says that his students will be improved by their studies with him, what kind of virtue does he have in mind? Does this correspond to virtue as Socrates understands it?

Prodded by Socrates (318d 5 ff.), Protagoras becomes more specific about his teaching. At 318e 5–319a 2, he offers the following:

> What I teach (*τὸ μάθημα*) is sound deliberation (or good judgement: *εὐβουλία*), both in domestic matters (*τὰ οἰκεῖα*), so as to best manage one's household, and in the affairs of the polis (*τὰ τῆς πόλεως*), so as to become most capable (or most competent, *δυνατώτατος*)[4] in word and deed in such affairs.

Two readings immediately suggest themselves of the characterization Protagoras gives here of his own teaching. First, one can think of a 'pragmatic' reading of his words, according to which he teaches how to manage best one's household affairs—handling things like household finances, slaves, etc.—and also how to speak well in public, and how to be conventionally speaking successful in politics or public life. On the second reading, *τὰ οἰκεῖα* or domestic affairs include one's own affairs in a broader sense. The relevant questions here are how one should treat the members of one's family or household, how one should deal with whatever problems arise in one's household, and more generally, how one should arrange one's own affairs so as to live one's life in the best way. As for *τὰ τῆς πόλεως*, the affairs of the polis, these would cover issues such as how to be a good citizen, how to participate well in public life both in speech and in action, and perhaps also how best to run the city. In the context of the second reading, political or civic art should be construed

[3] To be more precise, he is arguing that the sort of virtue Protagoras aims to impart is not teachable. I shall return to this point below.

[4] The superlative *δυνατώτατος* indicates possession of the highest, or a very high, degree of some *δύναμις*—power, capacity, or competence.

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broadly: the art of being a good *πολίτης*, citizen, can be seen as including the art of being a good husband, good father, good head of household, and in general a good human being. For in response to Protagoras' characterization of his teaching, Socrates says that this seems to him to be the *πολιτικὴ τέχνη*, political art, or the art of making people good citizens (319a 3–5), and Protagoras agrees. Socrates thus includes the running of one's own affairs in the art of politics, and Protagoras goes along with it.

If the virtue that Protagoras professes to teach is understood in the second way, the virtue that he aims at imparting to his students looks a lot like the sort of virtue which Socrates, according for instance to the account we find in Plato's *Apology*, spends his days debating with his fellow citizens. On this reading, the convergence between Socrates and Protagoras is great, but may still not be complete, since Socrates as presented by Plato never professed to have an art of this sort, or to teach virtue. As Socrates stresses in the *Apology,* he has never been anyone's teacher. Leaving this difference aside for a moment, let us focus upon the virtue which Protagoras professes to teach.

Socrates appears to think that the virtue Protagoras believes himself capable of imparting is not the same as that virtue the nature of which he himself is at such pains to discover in all his conversations. He imputes, in his habitually indirect way, something far more pragmatic to Protagoras—something much more along the lines of the first reading of Protagoras' teaching outlined above. In order to find out about this, he proceeds with his inquiry. As a way of challenging Protagoras, he claims that the virtue the Sophist professes to teach cannot be taught, or transmitted to others through a reliable human practice.

Socrates argues, at 319a 8–320c 1, that what Protagoras professes to teach is not—on the face of it at least—teachable or learnable. He brings up two observations about his fellow Athenians. (i) Whereas in technical matters people seek advice from specialists, in public affairs (political affairs, affairs of the polis) everybody deliberates, makes decisions, and gives counsel to others; (ii) in private, the wisest and best citizens, such as the statesman Pericles—a striking example of someone of remarkable political virtue—fail to impart their virtue to their sons and others around them. So they either try to teach virtue and fail, or they do not even try, knowing that this cannot be done. The two observations suggest, according to Socrates, that Athenians do not think that virtue can be taught. Socrates is offering them in support of his own view (as professed here) that the virtue in question cannot be taught.

In this argument, Socrates assumes that the beliefs underlying the Athenian practices of deliberating political issues in the assembly are true—otherwise (i) would not support the conclusion he is arguing for here, that virtue is not teachable. The assumption is deliberate. He makes it explicit by declaring at the outset that in his own opinion and that of the rest of the Greek world Athenians are wise (319b 3–4). But why is he assuming this? He

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appears to think that Protagoras will take as true what the majority of Athenians take to be true of themselves.[5] Protagoras might do so because of his own democratic leanings, or because he tends to side with the opinion of the majority, or in order to ingratiate himself with those whose city he is currently visiting. Or, Protagoras could be taking as true what the majority of Athenians think to be true because of his own view that what *appears* to a person or a community *is* so for that person or that community. The relativist tenet that Plato attributes to Protagoras in the *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus* is not explicitly mentioned in the *Protagoras*, but the possibility that it lies behind some of the arguments must be borne in mind.

The belief that Socrates imputes to the Athenians—namely, that virtue is not teachable—is presented by him as something that justifies Athenian democratic political practices, such as their willingness to keep the floor open during discussions and deliberations in the assembly. If the belief in question plays this role, a supporter of democracy would find it hard to disagree with. But Protagoras' own credibility as a teacher of political virtue demands that he disagree with this opinion. Socrates appears to have set up a test, and possibly a trap, for Protagoras. As he has constructed the argument, either the reputation of the Athenians as wise has to go, or Protagoras' own reputation as a teacher of virtue has to go. Protagoras is free to step out of the trap. Whatever he does, Socrates' two prima facie arguments are set up so as to test the man himself—his sincerity as a supporter of democracy, his integrity as a self-styled teacher of virtue—and not merely his professed beliefs. Protagoras' standing as a teacher of virtue is at stake here, but no less so is the thing he wishes to impart to others—his own virtue.

Protagoras' Anthropogonic Myth

Protagoras gives his answer to Socrates' challenge in a long speech (320c 8–328d 2). I shall look in this section at the first part of his speech, in which Protagoras tells a myth about the creation by gods of mortal races, and their endowment upon the creation (320c 8–322d 5). It is the endowment of human beings that the myth is focused upon.

Protagoras' myth can be read as a story about human *δυνάμεις*—the capacities, powers or competences that human beings possess. These capacities fall into three different categories. The myth conjoins this difference in kind between the capacities with their temporal accession: upon creation by gods, human beings are *first* given a bunch of capacities, *then* another bunch, and *at*

[5] When Socrates says, with some irony, that he and the rest of the Greek world think that Athenians are wise, he is referring primarily to what many Athenians believe of themselves. Will Protagoras dissent?

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the end yet another. Epimetheus, The One Who Thinks After The Fact, prevailing upon his brother Prometheus, The One Who Has Foresight, to let him distribute capacities to mortal races, is said to have 'used up' all the powers and abilities he had at his disposal on the non-reasoning animals (321c 1), leaving the human race 'naked, unshod, unbedded and unarmed' (c 5–6). The powers that Epimetheus set out to distribute were all of a certain sort, and there was nothing more left *of that sort*. When Prometheus afterwards gives human beings fire, he gives them something different in kind from the powers that non-human animals had received.

Desperate to find a means of survival for the human race after Epimetheus' blunder, Prometheus steals fire on behalf of humans, taking it from the house where Athena and Hephaestus, the patrons of arts and crafts, practice their arts. Prometheus' gift to humans is, however, not just fire, but something larger: a whole set of practical abilities that make humans go about things in a way that is different from the way non-reasoning animals go about things. As Protagoras puts it at 321d 1, together with fire humans receive from Prometheus *ἡ ἔντεχνος σοφία*—technical wisdom, or wisdom in the arts or crafts. (Later, at 321e 1–2, the theft is described as that of 'the art of fire', which belongs to Hephaestus, and another, Athena's, art.) As a result of this gift, humans go on and—by themselves—invent houses, clothes, blankets, etc., develop articulated speech, and start founding cities (322a–b).

The last part of the myth (322a 3–d 5) describes humans being destroyed by wild beasts, and attributes this to human beings not having the art of war, which is part of the political art. They try to band together and form cities, but not being able to abstain from attacking one another, they have to disband, falling prey again to wild animals. Zeus, fearing that the human race might be all wiped out, sends his messenger Hermes to give humans *αἰδώς* and *δίκη*—shame and justice—so that they may live peacefully together under bonds of friendship (*δεσμοὶ φιλίας*, 322c 3) in the cities they had started to form. He decides that, unlike the particular arts or crafts they had already received, shame and justice will be distributed not just to some human beings, but to all. He lays down the law that those who cannot partake of shame and justice should be killed as a 'disease (*νόσος*) to the city'.

By receiving technical wisdom along with fire, human beings receive an ability to make for themselves precisely the sort of things Epimetheus forgot to give them. It is in virtue of a certain use of reason—the kind of reason that finds its use in arts and crafts—that humans can now do things for themselves, namely, take care of themselves by themselves. In acquiring reason—the technical sort of reason—humans do not just acquire some one extra thing, unrelated to the endowments they had received before, but a capacity that changes the way in which they use their basic, animal-type, capacities.

There is a symbolism in the hierarchical choice of the gift-givers, which matches the hierarchy of the endowments that are bestowed upon human

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beings. The first gift-giver, Epimetheus, the one who thinks after the fact, is succeeded by Prometheus, the one who has forethought. The capacities Epimetheus bestowed are for the most part used after the fact. When attacked, one runs, or uses bodily strength to counter the attack. Prometheus' gift is of the abilities that embody and exercise foresight. Anticipating their future needs and the situations that may arise, human beings use technical arts to provide for their needs in the anticipated situations. The highest and most valuable gift is bestowed upon human beings by the most powerful among the gods, Zeus, who acts through his messenger Hermes. Zeus is the god that governs the whole realm of mortals and immortals, and the gift he gives to human beings enables them to govern their mutual intercourse, and themselves. The precise role of *δίκη* and *αἰδώς* is not specified, but *δίκη* or justice is the component that primarily governs mutual intercourse among human beings, enabling them to live peacefully together; *αἰδώς* or shame the component that enables each to govern himself in his conduct toward other human beings. *Δίκη* and *αἰδώς* are treated as belonging together, as if forming a unity. When present, they jointly ensure the right attitude of humans toward gods.

In his explanatory 'postscript' to the myth (322d 5–323a 4), Protagoras professes that the Athenians and others (presumably, citizens of democratically run cities) rightly accept advice from everyone when the debate concerns political excellence because they correctly assume that everyone has a share in political virtue, or else 'there would not be any cities'. The myth is presented as giving a certain kind of account or representation of this 'because' (see *αἰτία* at 323a 4).

Protagoras has not made it clear what kind of virtue humans—all humans—get from Zeus. In the myth he refers to Zeus's gift as being that of *αἰδώς* and *δίκη*, shame and justice; in the postscript he speaks of advice being taken from all concerning *πολιτικὴ ἀρετή*, political or civic virtue. He thus appears to take *πολιτικὴ ἀρετή* as covering the ground that the language of the myth expresses as *αἰδώς* and *δίκη*. Since political virtue is just what he had previously himself professed to teach, he must see the myth as connected with the characterization he had previously given of his own expertise. Political or civic virtue, he also says in the postscript, must entirely proceed from justice, *δικαιοσύνη*, and temperance, *σωφροσύνη* (323a 1–2). *σωφροσύνη* now seems to pick up the role of *αἰδώς*,[6] and *δικαιοσύνη* that of *δίκη*. The link between the latter two is straightforward; the two words are often used as variants. As for *αἰδώς* and *σωφροσύνη*, it is the government of oneself, which finds its expression especially in imposing limits on oneself, that seems to underlie the two notions.

[6] Recall Charmides' characterization of *σωφροσύνη* as *αἰδώς*. A traditional link between the two seems to stand behind this, as well as behind Protagoras' linking of the two in his postscript to the myth.

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However, Protagoras himself has not taken trouble to make clear the relationship between the various virtue terms he uses, relying on some kind of conventional, shared, understanding of them. That he has not bothered to make clear the nature of each of these virtues, and their mutual relationship, will be of importance later on, at 329c 2 ff., when Socrates turns to the question whether the particular virtues—justice, piety, temperance, courage, and so on—are really distinct, or whether they all amount to the same thing. Protagoras has implicitly spoken of them as a unity; the roles of 'shame and justice' have not been differentiated, but whatever their specific assignments, they have come implicitly together in the virtue that is the domain of Protagoras' expertise, political virtue. Does Protagoras' expertise embrace the whole virtue of a man, or some part of it, roughly covered by the 'shame and justice' of the myth? Is courage, the virtue Socrates will give his account of at the end of the dialogue, to be included in Protagoras' expertise? His speech as a whole does not tell us, and Socrates will therefore, reasonably, try to get Protagoras to be more specific about the relationship of these supposedly distinct virtues and their place in the virtue of a man as a whole.

'Shame and justice' is itself a traditional formula,[7] which Protagoras has appropriated here, but has not spelled out. He evidently wants to use the formula to flesh out through the expressive resources of his myth the content of the 'political virtue' which he had specified before as the thing that he imparts to his students. One of the lessons of the myth is the function that shame and justice serve. Like the other capacities and competences that have been bestowed upon the human race upon their creation, shame and justice ensure the *σωτηρία* of the human beings, their preservation. One could complain, and Socrates probably would, that shame and justice have been made into something purely instrumental. They are in place merely to preserve the human race from extinction. Protagoras' emphasis on the art of war as the part of the political art that was needed to keep the humans in existence can add fuel to this reading. But although the function of preserving the human race is stressed throughout the myth, a far more sympathetic reading is available.

The same term, *σωτηρία*, will be used later by Socrates as he argues against the commonly shared assumption that weakness of the will exists. As used by him, the word *σωτηρία* clearly does not indicate mere preservation from extinction; he has in mind something like salvation. The working assumption here is that the human good is pleasure. If in such circumstances human beings had the art of measuring pleasures, their possession of the art would constitute their salvation in life. They would, in other words, calculate correctly what makes life worth living and hit upon it, thus finding their own well-being. There is no reason to bar Protagoras from this usage, even if he has not said much in the myth to draw attention to it. The hallowed origin of shame

[7] Found, for instance, in Hesiod, *Works and Days* 192.

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and justice, the fact that they come as a gift from the highest god, makes humans partake in the divine. They will surely partake in it at least as much as they are said to be able to partake in the divine through Prometheus' gift of fire and technical wisdom (322a 3). When they received the new Promethean arts, human beings became something different from the other, *ἄλογα* or non-rational, animals. From then on, their fulfillment in life started to depend on the exercise of their newly acquired, providential, expertise. Resourcefulness (*εὐπορία*) comes along with it, together with cunning, ingenuity and other propensities of practical intelligence. Similarly, *αἰδώς* and *δίκη* come to capture what makes human beings into the creatures they are.

Αἰδώς, shame, is best characterized as that feature of the human soul that restrains it from *πανουργία*. *Πανουργία* is the 'doing of everything'. A *πανουργός* stops at nothing; a person who has shame will not take whatever expedient at his disposal will enable him to achieve what he wants to achieve. Technical reason is concerned with the provident manipulation of whatever lies about ready to be used and harnessed to some purpose. It chooses and rejects in accordance with its own standards of how to achieve the desired goal. *Αἰδώς* puts restraint to the technical use of reason, when this counsels something that is inappropriate on grounds that go beyond anything prescribable on technical grounds. *Αἰδώς* thus restrains and governs the previously acquired, Promethean, level of competences. Shame chooses and rejects in accordance with a new set of standards. Shame can restrain a person not only from taking particular means to a goal but also from the pursuit of certain goals. Something else seems to be in place now, distinct from the ability to find means for the fulfillment of one's immediate needs.

As a force in human action, shame is only apparently negative. Shame avoids what is *αἰσχρόν*, ugly, ignoble or disgraceful. This framework presupposes the presence of something that is its opposite, the *καλόν*, something that is beautiful, respectable or admirable. Similarly, *δίκη* is exemplified in doing not only what is just in the narrow sense, thus refraining from harming others, but also in doing what is generally speaking right.

However more precisely Protagoras wants to construe 'shame and justice', in his myth he has tied them very closely to life in political communities. He has emphasized the instrumental value of shame and justice in the preservation of human life, but has not cut himself off from a line of thought that sees in these features a source for a new way of life, and a certain new kind of *σωτηρία*, that has now, in consequence of Zeus' gift, become possible for human beings. When he turns to the more argumentative mode of discourse following the myth, Protagoras will say that those who do not partake of justice [and the rest of political virtue, see 323b 2] in any way at all are not 'among human beings' (323c 1–2). They do not, or ought not to, count as human. This sounds like something more than mere survival.

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Ancient Sophistry and Protagoras as Educator

In his first long speech in the dialogue (316c–317c) Protagoras invokes the famous wise men of old and claims that they were Sophists in disguise. There can be little doubt that he means to be legitimizing his own, sophistic, art. Socrates will later (in the excursus about Spartan and Cretan wisdom, at 342a 6–343b 3) parody this attempt. But Protagoras' claims about Sophists in disguise should not be seen as a mere ploy.[8] Given what we learn about Protagoras later in the dialogue, something other than sheer name-dropping seems to be going on in his self-introduction.

When Protagoras represents the various wise men of old as Sophists *in disguise*, he is going beyond the claim that they were intellectuals of one sort or another. While relying on the traditional connotations of the word 'Sophist', he also has in mind something more specific.

Poets, musicians and founders of mystery rites were generally regarded as wise, and often claimed wisdom for themselves. But not every kind of wisdom would create the sort of enmity Protagoras is speaking of. Why should these men in his view have had to 'take cover' under music, or mystery rites and oracles, professing admitted and acceptable forms of wisdom? In what way is this taking of cover to be understood? The common view was that to be a poet is to be a wise person of one kind, and that to be an expert in mystery rites is to have wisdom of another kind. Poetry and expertise in mystery rites so understood are no cover, but simply examples of wisdom. Protagoras, however, is presenting the situation differently. As he has it, Homer's, Hesiod's or Simonides' expertise in poetry, Orpheus' and Musaeus' in mystery rites and oracles, and even in some cases expertise in gymnastics, were a cover for some *other* kind of wisdom.

Protagoras sees the old 'Sophists' as more intimately sharing his own educational enterprise. To begin with, we should note that he claims, later on in the dialogue, that understanding poetry is the greatest part of a man's education (338e 6–339a 6). This is a preface to his proposal that he and Socrates should interpret a poem by the sixth century BC poet Simonides, the *Ode to Scopas*. Given what Protagoras had said about himself in the very beginning, that he admits openly to being a Sophist and educating people, the claim that understanding poetry is the greatest part of a man's education is likely to reveal something about his conception of the sophistic enterprise. He suggests that his expertise can be exhibited in a substantive way through evaluating, analyzing, and giving an account of, say, a poem by Simonides.

[8] This is so quite apart from the fact, stressed especially by George Grote, that in naming these wise men 'Sophists', he is not departing from traditional uses of this word.

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We don't get to hear Protagoras expound on the *Ode to Scopas*, since it is Socrates' turn to speak. However, Protagoras no doubt hopes, just as Hippias does (see 347a 6–b 2), that he will have a chance to show his own understanding of the poem he has selected for discussion. He alleges a contradiction in the poem as soon as he sets the task of interpreting it to Socrates (339b 9–d 9), clearly displaying an interest in having a chance to say some more about it. Protagoras takes himself to be on his own territory here; his expertise in part consists in interpreting ancient wisdom.

Protagoras imputes the *same* sort of wisdom to himself and to the poets and religious experts of old. What he must have in mind, in the first place, is that the men he mentions, Simonides and Orpheus included, were experts, like himself, in political or civic virtue. Poetry and expertise in mystery rites and oracles are the shape in which the old Sophists couched their thoughts about how to live a life, as a private person and as a citizen.

Some reports about the historical Protagoras square well with the assumption that his own approach to myth and poetry was rationalizing, and possibly allegorical. According to Eusebius and Diogenes Laertius, Protagoras wrote a treatise *On Gods* which started as follows: 'Concerning gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much preventing one's knowing: the non-evident nature of the subject (ἥ τ' ἀδηλότης), and the shortness of human life'. (Eus., *PE* XIV. 3.7, Diog. Laert. IX. 51, 54; alluded to at Pl. *Theaet*. 162d–e) Walter Burkert offers an interesting comment on this sentence: 'it is a mystery what else he could have written to fill a book on gods after this beginning'.[9] However, Protagoras could easily have gone on at great length after the sentence quoted. He could have described and interpreted a variety of myths about gods. The opening sentence would simply be a warning to his readers that he is not committing himself to the literal truth of the myths he reports on and interprets.

In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras himself ventures—in quasi-Orphic fashion—an anthropogonic myth. The myth, as he tells it, is strikingly allegorical in character. It is told in a way that invites us to cash out its meaning in non-mythical terms. When human beings are represented as being given one bunch of capacities and then a following bunch, the temporal succession can be readily understood as indicating the difference in kind among the capacities themselves. Protagoras will proceed to unpack the myth himself, following it with a discursive account of what he had set out to say in the myth.

[9] Burkert (1987), 466, n. 13, ad p. 313. Kurt von Fritz (1957, 920) had denied the existence of the treatise *On Gods* on the ground that there was nothing that Protagoras could have said about the topic of gods after this alleged first sentence. I suppose that Burkert's remark indicates his endorsement of von Fritz's puzzlement, even though he is not himself tempted by the conclusion that there was no such treatise.

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Before embarking on the myth, he even offers his audience the option of hearing what he has to say concerning the question whether virtue is teachable—his *ἐπίδειξις* that virtue is teachable—either in the form of a myth or in the form of a more discursive argument, *λόγος* (*Prot.* 320c 2–4). Protagoras appears to assume that he can make the same point equally well in either medium. To tell them a myth will be more graceful or pleasing (*χαριέστερον*, 320c 6–7).

Since Protagoras does not know whether the gods exist and what shape they have, he presumably does not know about their actions either. It makes sense to think that in telling his myth he is setting out a story which he does not take to be literally true. We can now understand his claim that Orpheus and Musaeus were really Sophists in disguise. Protagoras sought to interpret the meaning of the old myths about the gods told by poets and religious figures such as Orpheus and Musaeus in a way that presents these poets as speaking in code. Like Socrates in the *Phaedo* (69c), Protagoras would then be claiming that Orpheus (as one of the founders of mysteries) was speaking 'in riddles', namely, telling a story the meaning of which is not to be found on the surface, but has to be decoded. If Protagoras assumes that the 'Sophists of old' were, like himself, agnostic about the existence of the gods, we can readily see why their wisdom would be the same as his, and why it would be of the sort to invite *φθόνος*, envy and resentment. To express openly views of this sort could easily land a person in trouble.[10] In this way Protagoras would have provided the men he regards as ancient Sophists with something they might well have wanted to hide. It is also easy to see why Protagoras' strategy of coming out and openly declaring himself to be a Sophist who 'educates people' would be seen by him as an entirely new departure. Among the things that Protagoras presumably does not hide is his agnosticism about the gods.

Both Protagoras' imputation of a *secret* wisdom of some kind to the ancient wise men, and his claim that they were Sophists—engaged in the same project he is engaged in—make excellent sense if he assumed that these wise men, like him, were not committed to the literal truth of the stories they told about various gods and heroes, without however letting this on. By imputing a secret wisdom to them, Protagoras seems to be saying that the authors in question were deliberately presenting their insights about the human condition in allegorical garb. When Hesiod spoke, for instance, about Prometheus giving humans the gift of fire, he could have been using Prometheus merely as a symbol of powers that human beings at some point acquired for themselves. To speak of Prometheus' intentions for humanity would then be to express in a symbolic fashion the significance that the discovery and use of the technical arts had for human beings.

[10] Whether or not the stories about Protagoras' prosecution are true, his views apparently did earn him the nickname *ἄθεος*. The charge of *ἀσέβεια*, impiety, was a serious one.

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The suggestion that some of Protagoras' interpretive practices were rationalizing and allegorical[11] makes it easier to appreciate not only what he says about ancient sophistry, but also Socrates' parody of these practices later in the dialogue (342a 6 ff.). Socrates could reasonably complain that the views Protagoras imputes to the cultural heroes he associates himself with are quite unlikely to have been their own. When he rejects Protagoras' proposal to investigate virtue by looking into the poetry of, for instance, Simonides, Socrates need not have been dismissing every practice of interpreting poetry. He need not have thought that every such practice involved reading one's own thoughts into the verses of the poets. Rather, Socrates might have found Protagoras' way of interpreting poets and ancient religious authorities to be arbitrary and tendentious, and wanted to steer clear of it. Socrates' own approach to poetry in the *Protagoras* is strikingly different: he prefers to address the issue at hand in its own terms, philosophically, while making abundant use of contextually relevant poetic metaphors and allusions.[12]

When Protagoras at 323a 5 switches from his myth to a logos—namely, to a more discursive treatment of the issues discussed in the myth[13]—he strikingly abandons any mention of the gods. The talk is now explicitly about what *οἱ ἄνθρωποι*, human beings, think about issues to do with political virtue (see 323a 5–6). (Later on, the views and practices of Athenians, which Socrates has questioned, are given special attention.) In the myth itself, the gods are addressed from the point of view of the contribution they make to humanity; it is easy to think of these gods as simply mythical representatives of humans' own accomplishment. What the myth tells us about human beings is that two types of *δυνάμεις*, capacities, competences or powers, distinguish humanity from other animals.

First, human beings have the technical ingenuity that enables them to make for themselves precisely the things they perceive themselves as lacking (what Epimetheus 'forgot' to give them). This art embodies practical resourcefulness (*εὐπορία*), which enables humans to take care of themselves by themselves. It is humans' own *προμήθεια*, their forethought on their own behalf, that they celebrate as Prometheus' gift. The origin of articulated language belongs here (322a 6), since the original purpose of language is the communication of human needs. Zeus' gift stands for what makes human beings distinctively human:

[11] Allegorising interpretation of myth and poetry is at least as old as Theagenes of Rhegium (*fl.* C. 525 BC). And compare Hippias as an interpreter of Orpheus and Musaeus (DK 86B 6) or Prodicus' rationalizing of the gods (DK 84B 5).

[12] For illustration and discussion of some of these poetic allusions see my 'Homer in Plato's *Protagoras*', chap. 2 below.

[13] This happens earlier than Protagoras himself announces. The logos part of Protagoras' speech is 323a 5–328d 2; he announces leaving *μύθος* for *λόγος* at 324d 6–7.

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their morality, which enables them to live peacefully in cities. The gods as mythical givers are a symbol of humanity's own cultural achievement.

At this point we must remind ourselves of Protagoras' most famous pronouncement, that the human being is measure of all things. Plato in the *Theaetetus* presents Protagoras as applying his dictum to perceptual qualities, and—the case that interests us here—values. What he might be saying in his myth is in keeping with this: human beings construct their values. To say that human values are a construct is not to say that human beings can shed them. They can shed them no more than they can shed another human construct, language. Creation of values is unique to human beings, and is their highest cultural achievement (therefore, mythically, a gift from the highest god). It is what makes human beings fully human. (Recall *Prot.* 323b 7–c 2). Technical expertise expresses human forethought on behalf of themselves as individual members of the species, political virtue their forethought on behalf of their fellow citizens (recall the bonds of friendship that draw the citizens of a polis together: *δεσμοὶ φιλίας συναγωγοί*, 322c 3).[14]

If this is what Protagoras has in mind, what sense can we give to his claim that he is making his students better? In the first place, Protagoras could have pointed out that his view, according to which values are human constructs, empowers humanity. When he says that he goes to foreign cities and 'persuades the best among young men to abandon their associations with others, relatives and acquaintances, young and old alike, and to associate with him instead, on the grounds that they will become better through association with him' (316c 7–d 1), he has in mind something that goes beyond his role as principal educator of the young men in question. Judging from the first sentence of his treatise *On Gods*, Protagoras has something to teach his student that will indeed pull the student away from the way of thinking he has been raised in. The stories that the young man has heard about the gods will assume a new meaning. The set of values the young man has been brought up in will come to appear as one among many sets of different values that human beings guide their lives by. A study of a range of different cultural traditions, including interpretations of poets and religious experts, will prepare the student for embracing those values that seem to him upon critical examination to do best the job which morality is meant to serve in a human society.

Many views that the student has in the past accepted at face value will thus be shed. He will no longer believe that there is a single moral truth, and that his family and friends showed him the way to it. He will, however, take seriously the appearances of value he encounters. He stands to learn a lot from traditional beliefs, which embody insight concerning humanity. What he will

[14] Political art, however, comprises also the art of war, and thus a *τέχνη* concerned with the destruction of hostile human beings, or at least those the polis decides to regard as hostile.

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lose in the process of Protagorean education is the conviction that traditional moral and religious beliefs have the status of objective moral truth.

'Most Powerful in Word and Deed'

ποιήσαντες ἐκκλησίαν οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι γνώμας σφίσιν αὐτοῖς προυτίθεσαν . . .
καί παριόντες
ἄλλοι τε πολλοί ἔλεγον . . . καί παρελθὼν
Περικλῆς ὁ Ξανθίππου, ἀνὴρ κατ'
ἐκεῖνον χρόνον
πρῶτος Ἀθηναίων, λέγειν τε καί πράσσειν
δυνατώτατος, παρήνει τοιάδε.

Whereupon the Athenians called an assembly and gave their citizens an opportunity to express their opinions [. . .] And many others came forward and spoke [. . .] and finally Pericles son of Xanthippus came forward, the foremost man among the Athenians at the time, most powerful both in word and in deed, and advised them as follows. (Thucydides, *History* I. 139)

When Protagoras says, at *Prot.* 319a 1–2, that his teaching is how to become *δυνατώτατος* in word and in deed with regard to the affairs of the polis, he might not have in mind only becoming most capable of handling such affairs, or most competent in handling them. He might have in mind becoming very powerful in running them. 'Power' is a straightforward rendition of the Greek noun *δύναμις*, while 'powerful' and 'most [or very] powerful' likewise straightforwardly translate the adjective *δυνατός* and its superlative *δυνατώτατος*. To say that Protagoras aims at making people politically powerful adds a new dimension to the understanding of his educational goals; the two possible lines of interpretation sketched in the first section of this paper have not prepared us for this reading.

To talk of capacities alone is too tame to express the meaning of Protagoras' *μάθημα*. *Δυνάμεις* or powers in the sense of capacities or abilities, and competences, remain of course highly relevant to his expertise. On the proposal I am now making, Protagoras' promise to his students is that they will acquire new inner powers, and by employing them, will be able to attain positions of power in the polis. Among those present in Callias' house we find Critias, Charmides and Alcibiades. These men will play a considerable role in the political future of Athens. The lag of several decades between the dramatic date of the dialogue (the late 430s BC: 433 or 431 have been mentioned as the possible dates) and the date of its composition and publication (uncertain, but the dialogue most probably belongs to the early period of Plato's career) allowed Plato to depict people whose future—brilliant, problematic, and in some cases fateful—political (and other) careers were well known to his readers. The presence of

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future politicians in Callias' house is not an accident. The 'political virtue' that Protagoras professes to teach is, on this reading, something that qualifies a person to become above all a political leader.

When Socrates says at 316b 10–c 2 that Hippocrates would like to become *ἐλλόγιμος* in the city and believes that Protagoras is the best person to bring this about, he may have in mind not merely that the young man would like to become well-known or famous, but more specifically that he would like to become prominent in running the life of the polis. Socrates' formulation is not sufficiently specific to enable us to decide what it is that he takes Hippocrates to want, and Hippocrates himself is presented as not having too clear a conception of what he wants. Protagoras, however, promises to teach Hippocrates exactly what he came to learn; he might thus be imputing to Hippocrates a desire to become a person of influence in political affairs of the city.

A corresponding use of *δυνατώτατος*, and of *δύναμις*, is found in Thucydides. He in fact uses a phrase that is a nearly identical match to Protagoras' *δυνατώτατος καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν* in Plato's *Protagoras*, and he undoubtedly has in mind political power. Thucydides applies the phrase to the political leadership of Pericles, at a momentous point in his *History* (I. 139). The Athenian statesman is about to embark on a speech that will help precipitate the Peloponnesian war. Athenians have gathered in the assembly to discuss how to respond to the ultimatum that had been delivered to them by the Spartan ambassadors. Many had already spoken up in front of the assembly, some in favor of war, some against, when Pericles came forward to deliver a decisive speech in favor of plunging into war with the Spartans. In introducing the speech, Thucydides describes Pericles as 'the foremost (*πρῶτος*) among the Athenians of his time,' and *λέγειν τε καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος*, 'most powerful in word and deed'.

It is not Pericles' outstanding abilities as a speaker and man of action that Thucydides is directly referring to here, but the actual power he wields through his speech and action, underwritten of course by his outstanding abilities. The power of his speech is itself connected with power—it has to do with his ability to influence others. The speech which Thucydides will put into his mouth at I. 140–44, immediately following the words quoted, has great persuasive force.[15] At I. 145 we will learn how effective Pericles' speech

[15] The speeches Thucydides puts into the mouth of historical figures do not closely correspond to what the speakers probably said on the occasion in question. By his own account, Thucydides strove to provide the general purport of the actual speeches, although on occasion he supplied what in his view the speaker would have been most likely to say (I. 22). There is reason to think that from the very beginning of the war he took notes on speeches he was present at. Historians tend to be rather critical of Thucydides' practice of composing the speeches, although they play an important role in his account of the historical events he describes. See de Ste. Croix (1972), 7–16; Brunt (1993), 150–153.

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in fact was. But the effectiveness of this speech, its ability to influence action, hangs also on the statesman's own prior effectiveness in action. Much of his argument in the speech turns on Athens being a great naval power, which he claims gives it a decisive edge over Sparta in an eventual future war. Pericles' own proven successes in commanding the Athenian fleet, which Thucydides registers at I. 111, 114, and 116–117, conspire with his gifts as a speaker to help him persuade the audience that he is a competent judge of what he is speaking about, and that he can bring off the successes he predicts. Thus his reliably successful prior leadership underwrites the power he wields through his speech, and the power he will soon wield through his action.

As further support for this reading of *δυνατώτατος* in Thucydides, let me say a few words about a crucial role that *δύναμις* plays in his *History*. Power is one of the driving forces of historical events as Thucydides sees them. A telling sign of this is his conjecture that it was in fact Agamemnon's preeminence in power (he is described as *τῶν τότε δυνάμει προύχων*) that enabled him to assemble the Greek fleet and initiate the war against Troy, not the oath that Helen's suitors had supposedly made to Tindareus (I. 9). It is Agamemnon's actual power, backed by his wealth and conjoined with his ambition, that Thucydides sees as playing the decisive role in the outbreak of the legendary Trojan war. The putting down of the oath, which according to some ancient accounts played an important role in the outbreak of the war, is characteristic of Thucydides' way of seeing historical events. If Helen's suitors had made such an oath, this could have had a role to play in the events that followed. Yet the oath in Thucydides' view would hardly have been decisive. It is the ambitions of political leaders and the realities of power that, in his opinion, are far more likely than oaths to play a decisive role in precipitating a major war.

Thucydides speaks here (in I. 9) of long-past events, about which he cannot have had any direct evidence, or any testimony that by his lights would have been reliable. He is thus applying to these distant events his understanding of the forces at work in the events which he has in part himself witnessed, or for which he had sought as direct testimony as he could get. Pericles and other contemporary Greek politicians must be looming large in his mind, not Agamemnon. When Thucydides describes Agamemnon at I.9 as *τῶν τότε δυνάμει προύχων*, 'the most pre-eminent in power among the men of his day', he has in mind much the same thing as when he describes Pericles in I. 127 as *δυνατώτατος τῶν καθ' ἑαυτόν*, 'the most powerful man of his day'. The *δυνατώτατος* in I. 139, in the phrase that interests us, *λέγειν τε καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος*, reflects the same usage. These expressions all draw on the same conception of the role that power plays in historical events.

Now Plato is writing for an audience which is familiar with Thucydides, as his parody of Pericles' funeral oration in the *Menexenus* shows. We cannot be certain whether he wants his readers to recognize the phrase, as used by Thucydides of Pericles at a very memorable point in his presentation of the events

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that led to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war. However, in view of this connection, 'most powerful' as a meaning of *δυνατώτατος* has to be very seriously considered—along with the usual rendition of the word as 'most capable'—when we are looking at Protagoras' characterization of his teaching. Let me therefore pause briefly to explore the relationship between Plato's use of the phrase and the use of the closely matching phrase in Thucydides I. 139.[16]

The dramatic date of the *Protagoras* most probably falls somewhere between the years 433 and 431 BC. Pericles delivered the speech which Thucydides reports in 432 BC. The two 'dramatic dates' could well coincide. If Plato is referring to Thucydides' phrase and wants his readers to think of Thucydides' characterization of Pericles as 'most powerful in word and deed', he would show Protagoras on a visit to Athens promising to teach his students how to become most capable in political speech and action at almost exactly the same time as the most prominent Athenian statesman, 'most powerful in word and deed', was shaping the course of history by one of his speeches. The thought that Protagoras is promising to turn his student into a Pericles, his abilities permitting, would be very strong indeed.

Furthermore, it is after Protagoras has given the characterization of his teaching in terms of *δυνατώτατος* that Socrates raises his two *prima facie* objections to Protagoras' assumption that virtue can be taught. He himself brings up Pericles. Two issues, as we have seen, were raised: first, the practice Athenians follow, when deliberating in the assembly, of listening to everyone who wants to speak on a non-technical issue, and second, the fact, or presumed fact, that Pericles did not impart his own virtue to his sons. That he could not teach his sons the political excellence he himself possessed does raise a *prima facie* question whether one could transmit this kind of excellence through teaching. If Pericles could not do it himself, what qualifications does Protagoras have that would enable him to do so?[17] As for the practice of letting anyone speak in the assembly, Athenians may permit anyone to speak in the assembly, but the advice they followed on the particular occasion in Thucydides when they started the war came from someone they in fact believed had practical expertise in the conduct of war. If the Athenians are wise, and such advice is to be followed, are they wise in letting themselves be influenced by those who do not have knowledge about the issues discussed in the assembly? (Given the Athenian debacle in the war, known to Plato's original readers, a question arises also about the wisdom of Pericles' advice.)

[16] The affinities between some views of Thucydides and the views of the Sophists have prompted the opinion that Thucydides was himself influenced by the Sophists. This remains a speculation. I should point out, however, that it is not the question of direct influence I am primarily interested in here. It is the relationship between the ideas expressed in Plato and other writers of this time.

[17] Pericles' two sons are among the members of Protagoras' entourage at *Prot.* 315a (cf. 320a).

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The issue whether Plato wants the reader to have the Thucydidean phrase in mind cannot be decided with certainty.[18] Yet the fact remains that Plato represents Protagoras as using the phrase 'most capable/competent/powerful in word and deed with regard to political affairs' somewhere around 433 and 431 BC in Athens. The phrase is bound to call Pericles to mind. That Thucydides could use it to describe Pericles, in his characteristically apt and pregnant way, underscores this point. If Plato did want the reader to have in mind Thucydides' description of Pericles, Socrates' two objections, especially his reference to the way Athenians deliberate in an assembly, become far better motivated.

It would be wrong to think, however, that the possible reference to Thucydides' phrase gives any support for the view that Protagoras is a democratic thinker, an ideologue of Periclean Athens.[19] If Plato did make Protagoras employ the Thucydidean phrase, the meaning of that phrase in the original context—something Plato is very attuned to[20]—would have to be taken into account. When using his nearly identical phrase, Thucydides almost certainly had in mind the political influence Pericles enjoyed among the Athenians in 432 BC. Protagoras offers to teach his prospective student how to live a successful life, both privately and publicly. If Plato uses the Thucydidean phrase, political power would undoubtedly be a part of what Protagoras wants to convey by using the phrase *δυνατώτατος καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν* in the summary of his teaching.

Protagoras then, who is in Athens, and is considering taking on an Athenian Hippocrates as a student, promises to make him a man of Periclean influence, most powerful in word and deed in political matters, should his capacities permit it. This, however, tells us nothing about what promise he might make to a youth from an oligarchic city. Plato was undoubtedly preoccupied with the thought that the Sophists' conception of the good life gave pride of place to power. Socrates' overall argument in the *Gorgias*—directed against the Sophist Gorgias and two interlocutors who inherit his argument, Polus and Callicles—is intended as a challenge to the notion that power, including especially political power, is a central component of the good life.[21] It is power, not Pericles as such, that is at the center of his concern.

[18] Neil O'Sullivan (1995, 15–3) reports a *TLG* search which showed that Plato's phrase is uniquely matched to the Thucydidean original and votes for deliberate allusion.

[19] See, for example, Farrar (1988), 77 ff., opening with the claim that 'Protagoras was, so far as we know, the first democratic political theorist in the history of the world'.

[20] So I argue in chap. 2 below.

[21] See the first two sections of chap. 3 below. This is not to say that the exercise of unrestrained power of the sort advocated by Callicles is Protagoras' ideal. Rather, on this reading of his *μάθημα*, Protagoras sees human happiness in its full form as discharging the competence for ruling which he cultivates in his student.

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Protagoras believes that the principles of Athenian democratic political life—such as universal participation of citizens in the deliberations in the assembly—are sound, since every citizen of a law-governed state has the ability to form a judgement about the common good, and has a contribution to make to the consensus that defines the good of the community. Yet this consensus can take many forms. Nothing Protagoras says in our dialogue commits him to the view that a citizen of, say, an oligarchic polis cannot meaningfully contribute to the very different kind of consensus that governs their community. Protagoras' emphasis on the variety and plurality of human values might make him especially sympathetic to Athenian democracy; it does not, however, commit him to democracy as the correct political arrangement. However attractive it may be for us to construe him as an ideologue of Athenian democracy, to do so is to go well beyond what his speech in the *Protagoras* entitles us to.

The ambiguities in Protagoras' *δυνατώτατος* phrase may well provoke Socrates' suspicion. What does Protagoras have in mind by this phrase? Does he have in mind someone who has the competence to speak about things political, give advice and carry through with the relevant action, or does he have in mind someone who wields political influence? Pericles could be an instance of both.

Given the strikingly negative attitude Socrates has toward Protagoras' teaching, it is tempting to construe his view of Protagoras' teaching in the following way. Protagoras' wisdom is a ticket to power. When promising to make his students '*δυνατώτατο*[*ι*] in word and deed in the affairs of the polis', he is promising to help them attain political power. They will learn how to get on in life. Managing one's household well probably comes down to amassing wealth, whereas becoming *δυνατώτατος* in the affairs of the polis is a matter of acquiring power.[22] When Protagoras says that he will teach his students precisely what they have come to learn, this is what he really has in mind. He assumes that his students crave power to begin with, and he offers himself as the person uniquely suited to teach them how to satisfy their craving. Protagoras' 'political art' so understood would stand in sharp contrast with the political art as Socrates thinks of it, which is a matter of making people good citizens.

As understood by Socrates, *πολιτικὴ τέχνη* is best rendered as 'civic art'. When he says that what Protagoras promises to teach seems to him to be *πολιτικὴ τέχνη*, and glosses this as the art of 'making people good citizens', this is a bona fide characterization of *πολιτικὴ τέχνη* as Socrates himself understands it. But he clearly does not believe that Protagoras makes his pupils good people and good citizens. He pleads, as we know, with Hippocrates to consider with care the threat to which he might expose his soul if he became

[22] In the *Republic*, Adeimantus counts wealth as a form of power. He speaks of vicious people who have 'wealth and other forms of power' (*πλουσίους καὶ ἄλλας δυνάμεις*, 364a 6) and are generally thought to be living happily (*εὐδαιμονίζειν*, 364a 7).

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Protagoras' student. Now if Socrates thinks that Protagoras offers his students instruction on how to acquire political power while claiming to make them good citizens, then he could easily present Protagoras as engaged in a deceptive practice. 'Shame and justice', as Socrates would understand these virtues,[23] have nothing to do with the wielding of political power. Moreover, Protagoras' would be deceptive regardless of how Socrates thinks of these matters. Protagoras implicitly identified political virtue with 'shame and justice' and explicitly agreed that his goal is to teach his students how to become good citizens. If all he in fact aimed at was to help his students satisfy their naked political ambition, his description of his educational goals would be deceptive.

We do not have direct evidence that this is how Socrates understands Protagoras' account of his teaching. It is our task to unpack his assumptions and insinuations in order to examine them. We know that Socrates thinks the Sophist might well deceive the student in what he sells. The deceptive strategy I have made explicit above is *one* way in which Socrates' warning to Hippocrates can be fleshed out.[24]

Socrates' take on Protagoras is undoubtedly presented as strongly unfavourable. He appears throughout to be suspicious of Protagoras' motives. None the less, even as a view of what Socrates might think of Protagoras, I am not certain that this is the best reading. And it would certainly be wrong to think that Plato himself has portrayed the Sophist Protagoras in this dialogue as deceptive. The impression one gets from Protagoras' own words as represented by Plato points to a different picture of his intentions. The picture seems to me to be the following.

Protagoras wants to empower his students, and especially so in the political sphere. For all the emphasis he puts on the link between the traditional forms of wisdom and his own wisdom, he sees himself as providing a new and higher kind of education. His enterprise is intellectual. It aims at widening and enhancing his students' understanding of their own affairs and of public affairs. A broader cultural education, which involves a critical

[23] The terminology is not Socratic. If Socrates were to count 'shame and justice' as virtues, the terms he would use for them would be *σωφροσύνη* and *δικαιοσύνη*—the same as those used by Protagoras later in the more discursive part of his speech (323a 1–2).

[24] The interpretation I have sketched corresponds to a not uncommon understanding of what the Sophists were actually up to, an understanding that has undoubtedly emerged from the reading of Platonic dialogues. Since the *Protagoras* must be a prominent source, it is worth our while to consider how this picture arises. As an understanding of the actual practice of the Sophists, the view just outlined is extremely problematic. Socrates' take on Protagoras' *μάθημα* is not made explicit: he might well have had something of the sort in mind. However, I sketch below what seems to me a more interesting picture of what Socrates might see as deceptive in Protagoras' announcement to his student.

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examination of the views of the traditional bearers of wisdom, especially of poets, helps to provide such an understanding. But the ultimate goal of the education Protagoras offers is practice, including especially political practice. When he says that he will teach his students what they have come to learn, what he has in mind is that he will make them men of action, who will be qualified, if they so wish and if their capacities permit, to take high political office.

When Protagoras uses *δυνατώτατος* in the statement about the goals of his teaching, he appears to have in mind not power and influence alone, but power and influence backed by competence.[25] He thinks of himself as above all imparting virtue to his students. Like Socrates, he takes virtue to be competence of some sort. Virtue is what enables the person reliably to achieve success in the conduct of life. Where Protagoras seems to differ from Socrates is in his understanding of what success in life amounts to. We have no reason to attribute to him a crassly materialistic conception of a successful life. Likewise, his view need not be that successful participation in the life of the polis simply boils down to acquiring power. Although his conception of the good life is not fully fleshed out, his speech indicates that his understanding of success in life accords more with traditional Greek ways of thinking about these matters than the Socratic conception does.

Social recognition plays an important role in the Protagorean conception of the good life. To do well in life is to achieve the sort of success that is acknowledged by one's fellow citizens. Protagoras sees himself as someone who has run his life well. He is highly regarded, tends to fascinate people and attract followers. It is clear from his self-introduction, as well as from the way he presents himself in the rest of the dialogue, that he thinks he deserves the respect he gets. He wants to make his students outstanding people, who will, like Protagoras himself, deserve the recognition and reputation they are aspiring to, and the office they will fill. Someone who is highly competent in political affairs and who has achieved the success he aims for has *δύναμις* in the full sense of the word. A pinnacle of success for a young man who wants to play a prominent role in the life of the polis and who has the abilities to match would be to become a statesman of Pericles' stature.

Socrates might well see this as a dangerous playing with the different senses of *δυνατώτατος*. Yet to accuse Protagoras of equivocation on this score, and of deceptiveness in his approach to the objectives of his teaching, would not be fair. Protagoras wants to cultivate the abilities of his students, and help them become good deliberators in private and public life. The goal of his education, however, is competence that discharges itself in practice. The field in which the relevant practical competence plays itself out is ex-

[25] As I use the word 'competence', it is significantly stronger than 'capacity'. The term 'success' is here used very broadly, not to refer to whatever may pass as successful in a given community.

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plicitly conceived as social and political; moreover, the standards for the successful discharge of the practice are social as well. Social recognition is in part constitutive of the successful discharge of the deliberative and decision-making competence that Protagoras aims to impart. Having a position of influence in the polis provides room for a broad exercise of this competence. To suspect Protagoras of disregarding everything but recognition and external forms of success is not warranted by what we find him saying in the dialogue. It is likely, however, judging by the formulation he gives of his teaching here, that being in a position to shape the social and political life of one's time is the highest achievement Protagoras had in mind for his student.

Protagoras' approach could be seen as trusting. Provided that the polis is set up in a right way, there does not seem to be anything wrong with a person of abilities seeking a position of influence. Socrates' basic assumptions are, however, entirely different. He appears to be suspicious of the very thing Protagoras regards as a hallmark of a successful life—one's social standing and reputation, *δόξα*, as well as power, *δύναμις*, when this is understood as the ability to do whatever one may wish to do. At any rate, if these are set as the goals of life, Socrates would see them as not only hollow but potentially dangerous. If Athens is in fact not run well—if it is corrupt, or if its political institutions are seriously flawed—following the Protagorean goals of playing a prominent role in the affairs of the city will lead the person to do harm rather than good, and to harm himself as well as others. If the art of living is one's professed expertise, Socrates would probably argue, one cannot afford to have Protagoras' trusting attitude. One of the first things a person who possesses this expertise should be able to judge is whether the polis is run well or not. To have standards by which to judge such issues is essential to having the deliberative excellence Protagoras speaks of.

Εὐβουλία is the disposition to deliberate well. For Socrates, to deliberate well is to do so in a way that is conducive to making correct choices. But Protagoras' eyes, in Socrates' view, are not turned in the direction of ethical correctness. Protagoras makes it look as if he is in possession of the standards of ethical evaluation and judgment, yet there is no evidence that he has any concern for ethical correctness. If one thinks, as Socrates does, that living well is a matter of doing what is right, and deliberative excellence is specifically an ability to reach correct choices, someone who claims to be able to impart this excellence to others, but shows no concern with ethical correctness, would be, in his view, engaged in a practice that is inherently deceptive.

Socrates' stance toward Protagoras—his worry about the risk Hippocrates runs in studying with the Sophist—might be closely linked to Protagoras' being an ethical relativist. If Protagoras believes that what appears to the citizens

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of Athens is generally speaking so for the citizens of Athens,[26] he would not be in a position to exercise the sort of critical judgement that Socrates thinks is fundamental to Protogoras' professed expertise. If relativism is at stake here as I believe, Socrates would not be seeing Protagoras as merely oblivious to the critical judgment on which the ability to make correct decisions hangs. He would see him as not entitled to critical judgment at all.

Socrates would, of course, need to support this charge by argument. He would have to show that the view according to which there is a plurality of correct standards, where the standard is relative to a given community, is untenable. In the *Theaetetus*, we find Socrates developing an argument to the effect that Protagorean relativism is a self-defeating position. We know enough about Socrates' view on these matters to make sense of his negative attitude toward Protagoras' professed expertise, and to understand why he considers it dangerous.

If Socrates has this in mind, he does not disclose it in the *Protagoras*. I have proposed that his dissatisfaction with Protagoras' position is likely to turn upon Protagoras' uncritical attitude toward 'appearances', and especially upon the received or socially accepted standards of goodness. Knowing what we do about Plato's portrayal of Socrates' attitude toward this Sophist in other Platonic dialogues, the possibility that Protagoras' relativism is lurking behind the views he expresses in the *Protagoras*, and that it is the underlying source of Socrates' strikingly agonistic stance toward the Sophist, must be taken very seriously.

What this part of the dialogue does reveal is that the interpretation of Protagoras' educational goals which I earlier labelled, roughly, 'pragmatic' does not seem to capture adequately what he stands for. It is not, moreover, my impression that the Socrates of the *Protagoras* regards Protagoras' educational practices as just a smoke screen for unscrupulous money and power grabbing. What seems far more certain is that even if that is how we want to interpret Socrates' attitude toward Protagoras, Plato writes the dialogue in a way that gives the reader plenty of opportunity not to concur with this understanding of the Sophist.

If we attend to Protagoras' own characterization of his own teaching, as given by Plato, this Sophist is most reasonably seen as the advocate of an art of living. His notions about what the good life for a human being is, and how one can be guided toward it, are quite different from Socrates'. Socrates has put a question mark over Protagoras' ability to deal with the fundamental ethical

[26] 'Generally speaking', because the exact purport of this kind of relativism would have to be specified more precisely if the position were to be properly examined. Not every belief by every Athenian citizen need count; some kind of consensus may be what would matter to Protagoras. We do not have the details of the picture. What we can be sure of is that any variant of relativism would be unacceptable to Socrates.

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issues which he ought to be capable of handling if he is to be credited with the expertise which he claims for himself. However, Socrates does not show in the remainder of the dialogue that Protagoras' substantive assumptions about the good life are unwarranted. The importance Protagoras attaches to social recognition remains unexamined and unchallenged by Socrates.

Protagoras emerges as a serious contender to Socrates, and a genuine intellectual rival. By the end of the dialogue we shall find Socrates committed to the view that virtue is knowledge, and that it can be taught. Protagoras' own claim that virtue can be taught has been defeated, and he is now—dialectically speaking—committed to the view that virtue cannot be taught. But Protagoras' position has not been fully examined by Socrates, or conclusively defeated. Protagoras has a rival conception of moral learning, and of the sort of teaching and training which helps bring about political and civic virtue. Some elements of this rival conception will emerge in Plato's *Republic*. Protagoras' conception of the good life, and of the path to it, has also left a deep trace on Aristotle, whose views on these matters were shaped by the dispute between Socrates and the Sophists, especially Protagoras.[27] It was for good reasons that the dialectical outcome of the *Protagoras* did not put an end to that dispute.

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[27] I discuss this in chap. 4 below. We have evidence that Aristotle read, and was engaged with, Plato's *Protagoras*.

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