

**CHEATERS WIN WHEN THEY MAKE THE RULES:
SOPHISTIC ETHICS IN PROTAGORAS' PROMETHEUS MYTH**

Despite Protagoras' infamous reputation for corrupting his students, his "Great Speech" (Plato, *Protagoras* 320c-328d) presents one of the most important arguments in the history of ethics.¹ Refuting Socrates' contention that virtue must be unteachable since even the best of men cannot raise good children, Protagoras argues that everyone is capable of learning the difference between right and wrong.² He supports this conviction by appealing to both traditional myth and logical reasoning. In his famous appropriation of the Prometheus myth, Protagoras establishes the divine origin of political wisdom and its possession by all humanity as a gift of the gods. He follows his retelling of the myth with a logical argument that directly addresses Socrates' concern by demonstrating that the variability of success rates substantiates the teachability of virtue rather than undermines it. Protagoras' vigorous defense of moral instruction is so persuasive that many classical scholars are led to question the longstanding belief that he was in any way corrupt. In spite of this, at least a few scholars have noted contradictions within Protagoras' argument that suggest he has a more sinister agenda. There should be no surprise that the thinker most famous for practicing deceptive rhetoric has deceived us. I argue that the "Great Speech" is a masterful work of rhetoric that explicitly promotes morality while subtly promoting an immoralist understanding of ethics consistent with the view articulated by Thrasymachus and other sophists: justice is, according to the sophist, not an inherent good, but rather serves the interest of those who wield political power and stand beyond the law that they impose upon others.

¹ Since none of Protagoras' works survive, it is impossible to establish with certainty to what extent the "Great Speech" represents his actual ideas rather than Plato's invention. That said, there is a case to be made for its authenticity. Diogenes Laerteus (9.8.55) includes in his list of Protagoras' works, *Of the Ancient Order of Things*, whose title suggests it may have served as Plato's source. For a defense of the "Great Speech" as a faithful account of Protagoras' views, see Jaeger (1967) 189-190; Guthrie (1971) 63; Romilly (1992) 162; Schiappa (2003) 146-148; Beresford (2013) 143.

² Socrates is skeptical of Protagoras' claim to teach good judgment (Plato, *Protagoras* 319a-b) in light of his broader suspicions regarding the teachability of virtue by various noble Athenians (319b-320c). Also see *Meno* 89d-96c where Socrates raises similar suspicions regarding the teachability of virtue.

Let us begin by reviewing the central points of Protagoras' version of the Prometheus myth. Protagoras begins by imagining a time prior to the creation of mortal creatures when only the gods existed (320c). After molding the bodily form of each of the creatures, the Olympians entrusted Epimetheus and Prometheus with the task of ensuring each creature's survival. The brothers agreed that Epimetheus would be responsible for making the distribution of various faculties while Prometheus would assess the effectiveness of his brother's work after all of the faculties had been distributed (320e). Protagoras recounts how Epimetheus provided each creature with a physical trait that would allow it some advantage over other species: "he dealt; and in dealing he attached strength without speed; to some, while the weaker he equipped with speed; and some he armed, while devising for others, along with an unarmed condition, some different faculty for preservation" (320e). In addition to providing a physical advantage to each species, Epimetheus considered how the various species relate to each other as part of a symbiotic ecosystem, ensuring the overall survival of the species by granting greater fecundity to prey animals than their predators (321b).³

Despite Epimetheus' apparent thoughtfulness in ensuring both individual and species survival, his good intentions were all for naught since he was left without any physical capacity that would ensure the survival of human beings. Assessing his brother's work, Prometheus remarks,

whereas the other creatures were fully and suitably provided, man was naked, unshod, unbedded, unarmed; and already the destined day was come, whereon man like the rest should emerge from earth to light. (321c)

The trickster god Prometheus comes to the rescue and, without hesitation, concocts a subtle stratagem to ensure humanity's survival. Entering the palace of Athena and Hephaestus without being noticed, Prometheus stole knowledge of the technical arts and fire from the Olympian deities and bestowed his ill-gotten gain on human beings (321c-d). As in previous versions of the myth, Prometheus initially appears to be the patron

³ Zaslavsky (1982) 80 notes that Epimetheus does not grant any mental faculty to the creatures. McCoy (1998) 25 goes even further by arguing "Protagoras never mentions the idea of a soul or nonmaterial component."

deity for humans, whose unique mental ability to apply technical knowledge more than compensates for their physical deficiencies. Even before tending to their own interests, Protagoras reports that the first instinct of the primal individuals was to employ their newly acquired wisdom to worship the gods, with whom they now shared a unique kinship as the only mortal creature possessing this sort of mental faculty. Having first fashioned idols and sacrificial alters, the primal individuals proceeded to apply their knowledge to preserve their wellbeing:

He soon was enabled by his skill to articulate speech and words, and to invent dwellings, clothes, sandals, beds, and the foods that are of the earth. (322a)

Unfortunately, Prometheus' labors were just as futile as his brother's since he was unable to procure Zeus' knowledge of justice, which would allow individuals to act collectively and to live together peacefully. The first individuals thus lived isolated from each other, only forging temporary alliances for the sake of waging war against a pack of wild animals. Protagoras notes the fragility of these alliances in the absence of ethical precepts:

Now as often as they were banded together they did wrong to one another through the lack of civic art, and thus they began to be scattered again and to perish. (322b-c)

Having previously given over responsibility of creation to the Titan deities, Zeus could no longer sit idly by and witness the destruction of the human race. Protagoras thus proclaims Zeus as the hero of his tale for having intervened in human affairs in order to bestow humanity with knowledge of the political art:

*So Zeus, fearing that our race was in danger of utter destruction, sent Hermes to bring respect and right (*aidō te kai dikēn*) among men, to the end that there should be regulation of cities and friendly ties to draw them together. (322c)*

Since there is no need for everyone in a community to possess expertise in a technical field like medicine, Hermes asks Zeus if he should distribute political knowledge to a select group of individuals or to the entire human race. Zeus responds by insisting that political knowledge is different than the productive arts since civic life depends upon everyone possessing this expertise:

Let all have their share: for cities cannot be formed if only a few have a share of these as of other arts. And make thereto a law of my ordaining, that he who cannot partake of respect and right shall die the death as a public pest. (322d)

Zeus is the apparent hero of Protagoras' Promethean myth since the political art allows individuals to form communities bound by mutual respect for right conduct under the law. Protagoras concludes the myth noting its significance as providing legitimacy for democratic regimes – such as Athens – that engage their entire citizenry in deliberating political affairs (322d-323c).

Before even considering the contents of Protagoras' myth, one should be immediately suspicious of his appeal to traditional Greek religion in light of his infamous skepticism about the existence of the gods. Protagoras' agnosticism is preserved in one of the few surviving fragments to come from his written works rather than from a secondary source. Diogenes Laertius reports that Protagoras began his work *Peri Theon* (Concerning the Gods) as follows:

About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life. (DK80b4).⁴

It also appears that Protagoras' reputation for holding sacrilegious views was widespread in the ancient world. Diogenes reports that Athens not only condemned Protagoras and exiled him from the city, but also burnt all copies of his book to ensure that nobody

⁴ This and all subsequent Presocratic fragments are quoted from Freeman (1948). Schiappa (2003) 158 speculates that the oral transmission of the fragment may have altered it somewhat from the original version written by Protagoras.

would be further corrupted by his heretical teaching (D.L. 9.8.52). Beyond his personal religious views, Plato informs us in the *Theaetetus* that Protagoras did not as a rule appeal to the gods in his philosophical arguments. In the course of his scrutinizing examination of the human-measure fragment, Socrates suggests that to equate knowledge with perception is to regard humans as no better than the beast, on the one hand, and no worse than the gods, on the other (*Theaetetus* 161c-162c). Socrates then imagines how Protagoras, or someone speaking on his behalf, would ridicule such a flight of fancy as to ponder the perceptions of the gods, let alone to grant them any credence in the course of a serious philosophic argument:

You bring in the gods, the question of whose existence or non-existence I exclude from oral and written discussion. (Theaetetus 162d-e)

Although there is considerable debate whether one should regard Protagoras as an outright atheist or merely an agnostic on the basis of the *Peri Theon* fragment, the human-measure fragment would seem to suggest that the gods have no bearing on our lives even if they do exist.⁵ How are we then to understand Protagoras' use of myth in the "Great Speech" when we are told that he excludes any mention of the gods in both his written and oral discourses? Moreover, how are we to reconcile the divine origin of ethical precepts when Protagoras affirms that "Of all things the measure is Man" (DK80B1).

Protagoras explains his decision to present his argument in the form of a fable simply because it would be more pleasing (*khariesteron*) than a philosophic argument, especially as an older man speaking to his much younger audience (320c).⁶ His rationale anticipates his discussion of the pedagogic role of poetry for moral instruction:

⁵ For discussion, see de Romilly (1992) 102. Compare Thrasymachus DK85b8.

⁶ For discussion, see Bartlett (2016) 29. Most (2012) 16 identifies that myths found in the Platonic dialogues are generally spoken by an older man to a younger audience. Compare *Protagoras* 309b where Socrates refers to Alcibiades' facial hair as *khariesteron*; Plato's use of the same word suggests that Protagoras hides behind his myth as someone hides behind his beard.

here they meet with many admonitions, many descriptions and praises and eulogies of good men in times past, that the boy in envy may imitate them and yearn to become even as they. (326a)

Regardless if Protagoras actually believes in the gods or the stories told about them, he apparently recognizes the pedagogic value of myth as a noble lie for educating the young. Since virtue requires self-sacrifice and appears to run contrary to one's own best interest, it is not easy to convince individuals of its desirability through a logical demonstration.⁷ In contrast, poetry is able to inculcate virtue while entertaining its audience with the fantastic exploits of gods and heroes. That being said, poetry is morally ambiguous, and the poet could just as easily employ his powers to encourage individuals to overcome their fear of reprisal and act unjustly.

Protagoras not only claims to be a valid instructor of ethics, but promotes himself at the conclusion of his speech with the claim that he surpasses all others in his ability to teach this subject (328b). Despite Protagoras' boastful self-promotion, it is difficult to reproach him when he alleges to have devoted his life to making others better. George Grote famously challenges the longstanding condemnation of Protagoras in light of Plato's depiction of his uprightness: "That the dialogue is itself enough to prove that Plato did not conceive Protagoras either as a corrupt, or unworthy, or incompetent teacher" (Grote 1861: 376). Jacqueline de Romilly (1992: 176), similarly recognizes that there were immoral sophists, but believes that Protagoras was not one of them. De Romilly contends that Protagoras was merely promoting the human – rather than divine – basis of ethical precepts, which leaves us with the question of how to understand his seeming attempt to establish the divine basis of ethics in the myth.

In his discussion with Socrates following the "Great Speech", Protagoras himself tells us of the necessity for analyzing the truth claims presented in a poetic work. After clarifying the role of poetry in providing moral exemplars, Protagoras now tells us (some thirteen Stephanus pages later) that the most important part of education is to assess whether or not these stories are true:

⁷ For the role of rhetoric in sugar coating the medicine, see *Gorgias* 456b.

I consider, Socrates, that the greatest part of a man's education is to be skilled in the matter of verses; that is, to be able to apprehend, in the utterances of the poets, what has been rightly and what wrongly composed, and to know how to distinguish them and account for them when questioned. (338e-9a)

Are we to believe that Protagoras simply forgot about the most important part of one's education when providing his detailed description of the educational process? Moreover, how does one reconcile poetry's ability to inculcate virtue if its claims are found to be inconsistent or untrue? Regardless if Protagoras was simply absentminded or, more likely, failed to mention the need for this form of literary criticism since only a select few make it to the highest level of education, let us follow his directive by scrutinizing the truth claims within his Promethean myth.

Protagoras claimed at the outset to teach his students good judgment (*euboulia*) in managing their households (318e), but that is not what he explicitly teaches in the "Great Speech." On the contrary, the traditional ethical and civic education described by Protagoras at 325c-326e only serves to hinder the individual's ability to realize his own advantage. From the moment of the child's birth, there begins a lifelong process of indoctrination regarding what should be regarded as just and unjust, noble and base, holy and unholy, lawful and unlawful. Contrary to the mythic section of the speech, Protagoras acknowledges at 323d that morality is not given to all humanity as a God-given trait, but rather only acquired through the socialization process. Not only is morality not innate, it is apparent that Protagoras believes that it is opposed to human nature. Although the myth indicates that humanity required Prometheus' gifts to bring knowledge of the technical arts, the truth is that humans develop this knowledge solely by the application of their natural reasoning powers. The innate capacity to develop the arts by calculating one's own self-interest must inevitably put individuals in conflict with one another. This explains why individuals in the myth were smart enough to invent the arts to produce food, clothing, and shelter, but not intelligent enough to live together (322b).

The reality is that man's natural intelligence – rather than his lack thereof – leads him to “wrong others” in pursuit of his own self-interest.⁸ As a number of the sophists argue, justice is “another's advantage” and thus must be imposed upon the individual contrary to his instinctual nature.⁹ Protagoras' supposed defense of the teachability of virtue amounts to nothing more than a lifelong process of beating ethics into recalcitrant individuals:

If he readily obeys – so; but if not, they treat him as a bent and twisted piece of wood and straighten him with threats and blows. (325d)

The logical section of the “Great Speech” not only completely contradicts the myth's central claim that morality is innate, but also reveals the irrationality of moral precepts that can only be transmitted through the use of threats and physical force.

Teaching ethics through a system of rewards and punishments simply conditions individuals to seek pleasure and avoid pain without instilling any appreciation for the inherent value of the associated moral precept. As Glaucon points out in his famous thought experiment regarding a magic ring of invisibility, all individuals would transgress the law if they believed they could do so with impunity:

If we grant to each, the just and the unjust, licence and power to do whatever he pleases, and then accompany them in imagination and see whither his desire will conduct each. We should then catch the just man in the very act of resorting to the same conduct as the unjust man because of the self-advantage which every creature by its nature pursues as a good, while by the convention of law it is forcibly diverted to paying honor to equality. (Republic 359c)

Realizing that morality is both arbitrary and opposed to one's self-interest, the sophists devoted themselves to the question of how to transgress the law with impunity.

⁸ The chorus in *Antigone* similarly argue that man is able to teach himself all of the productive arts without divine assistance with the exception of justice (Sophocles, *Antigone* 332-370).

⁹ This argument is advanced by Callicles at *Gorgias* 482e-486c, by Thrasymachus beginning at *Republic* 338c and by Glaucon 359c-360d.

Their claim to teach virtue is disingenuous only if we regard virtue as synonymous with morality. This explains why Gorgias ridiculed others who claimed to teach virtue rather than more practical skills for acquiring power and money such as the arts of disputation and persuasion (*Meno* 95c).

If Protagoras agrees with the other sophists that good judgment requires one to transgress the law, then why would he devote his speech to such a rigorous defense of the traditional civic and moral education? In an extremely provocative passage, Socrates suggests that Protagoras may have had a salutary public teaching and a more sinister private teaching:

I wonder if Protagoras, who was a very wise man, did not utter this dark saying to the common herd like ourselves, and tell the truth in secret to his pupils. (Theaetetus 152a)¹⁰

If Socrates' claim about Protagoras is true, then we must determine whether the "Great Speech" represents his public or private teaching about ethics. Protagoras concludes the "Great Speech" by reminding his audience that he charges for his instruction. Since no money changed hands prior to the "Great Speech", it is safe to conclude that this is his public teaching about morality and not what he taught paying students.

Notwithstanding Protagoras' attempt to distance himself from other sophists on account of his supposed transparency, it is difficult not to consider that he may be employing the same sort of deceptive rhetoric that he warned us about prior to delivering the "Great Speech." Protagoras informs us that sophists throughout history have employed various masquerades (including poetry) to disguise their immoralist ideas in a "decent dress" (*prokaluptesthai*) (316d). If this cautionary warning were not enough to put us on our guard, he tells us in the midst of his speech that he would have to be insane to declare his injustice publically:

¹⁰ For the view that Protagoras had both a public and a private teaching on ethics, see Hemminway (1996); Lampert (2012) 60; Silvermintz (2015) 47–76.

Everyone, they say, should profess to be just, whether he is so or not, and whoever does not make some pretension to justice is mad... (323b)

Although we might then be led to dismiss the “Great Speech” as nothing more than Protagoras’ attempt to promote himself as a man of piety, decency, and moral fortitude, I argue that he has concealed his immoralist private teaching within his Promethean myth. Although we noted that Protagoras was not paid before he delivered the “Great Speech”, this is not completely accurate. When first encountering Protagoras in the house of Callias, Socrates describes a large crowd of individuals who follow him around entranced by his words. Socrates makes a point to identify one individual amidst the crowd, Antimoerus of Mende, who has paid Protagoras’ tuition fees with the hope of becoming a professional sophist himself (315a). We might presume that Antimoerus, who Socrates acknowledges as Protagoras’ greatest pupil, understands the “Great Speech” on a different level than those who have not paid his tuition fees and received his private instruction. We might then conclude that Protagoras has hidden his more subversive understanding of morality for his paying students within the public teaching of the “Great Speech.”

Although many individuals might be deceived by Protagoras, Socrates clearly heeded his warning about how sophists throughout history have employed esoteric rhetoric to disguise their scandalous ideas. Referencing Protagoras’ metaphor much later in the dialogue, Socrates pleads with him:

Come, my good Protagoras, uncover (apokalupson) some more of your thoughts. (352a)

As Socrates beckons Protagoras, let us strip away the public teaching of the “Great Speech” in order to reveal his true teaching about how one achieves good judgment in his personal affairs.

Since Protagoras had identified poetry as one of the disguises that have been used by sophists to conceal their subversive teaching, we might expect to find his true teaching about good judgment in the mythic rather than the logical section of the “Great Speech.”

Moreover, he hints at where to find this in the myth. In the course of his discussion of the traditional moral education, Protagoras identifies how poetry provides the young with role models to imitate. We might then consider the significance of the myth's gods as moral exemplars for revealing his true teaching regarding good judgment. If one carefully examines the myth that is meant to promote ethics, one sees that the gods that take an active role in the story all transgress the laws that they are promulgating. Although the Titan deities both win initial victories in their deception, they are ultimately revealed as failed heroes. Zeus is the only one amongst the myth's heroes who is able to reap the benefits of transgressing the law without any repercussions.

Although discussions of the myth often dismiss Epimetheus as mentally incompetent, he demonstrated great ingenuity in establishing a symbiotic ecosystem that preserved both individual and species survival.¹¹ Epimetheus' failure was thus not his lack of reasoning, but rather his application of his reasoning ability solely in the service of his bestial desire. Protagoras tells us,

Now Epimetheus, being not so wise as he might be, heedlessly squandered his stock of properties on the brutes. (321b-c)

Epimetheus symbolizes the appetitive man who similarly employs his reason for the sake of satisfying his unbridled desire for bodily pleasure. Joe Sachs writes, "An immoderate or self-indulgent human being who always knows better, but never learns his lesson, would be like the mythical Epimetheus" (2011: 20). The appetitive man believes he is victorious over others when he pursues pleasure without limit, but he ends up only cheating himself when his immoderation results in exhausting his resources.

Although Prometheus is commonly associated with his transgressive act, we tend to excuse his indiscretion since this was done out of concern for man's welfare. Protagoras reminds us that he was later punished for his crimes (322a). Prometheus' casualness in stealing from the other gods reveals him to be not only unlawful and unjust, but also to have no reverence for sacred matters. Moreover, Prometheus reveals that he had no

¹¹ Cf. Balaban (1987) 313 who argues that Epimetheus carelessly distributed the various attributes without any masterplan.

intention of discontinuing his criminal behavior once his mission to help human beings was accomplished. Even before knowing that humans would need the civic art, Prometheus had attempted to steal from Zeus and was only thwarted in his plan due to his well-guarded citadel (321d). Prometheus represents the petty criminal, whose lack of respect for the law leads him to commit any and all crimes when he believes his indiscretion will go undetected. Although one might think the sophist would laud Prometheus, Thrasymachus dismisses the petty thief since it is only a matter of time before his crimes are detected and punished:

For each several part of such wrongdoing the malefactor who fails to escape detection is fined and incurs the extreme of contumely; for temple-robbers, kidnappers, burglars, swindlers, and thieves the appellations of those who commit these partial forms of injustice. (Republic 344b)

Just as Epimetheus failed in his attempt to cheat himself, Prometheus has failed in his attempt to swindle others.

Although both Titan deities initially appear victorious in their injustice, they are ultimately shown to be tragic heroes, whose fatal flaws reveal their lack of good judgment. Olympian Zeus emerges as the victor over the Titan deities and the true role model to be imitated. Zeus was, of course, the hero of the myth's public teaching for having brought justice to mankind. Although every retelling of a myth makes modifications, Protagoras' appropriation of the Prometheus' myth constitutes nothing short of a revaluation of all traditional values.¹² Protagoras establishes the theological support for this political and social upheaval by redefining the role Zeus plays in human affairs. Rather than punishing humans on account of Prometheus' injustice, Zeus demonstrates his concern for humanity and acts as a co-creator with the Titan deity. Commenting upon the innovative role Zeus plays in Protagoras' version of the myth as compared with earlier versions, McCoy writes, "Zeus' gifts compensate for others'

¹² The Prometheus' myth has provided a continuous source for poets and philosophers to contemplate the human situation throughout history including recent discussions about transhumanism. For an exhaustive study of the shifting way the myth has been appropriated and interpreted through history, see Franssen (2014).

mistakes; he relieves, rather than inflicts, suffering upon humans” (1994: 24).¹³ Although Zeus’ concern for human beings may, initially, seem like just another example of a capricious king whose favor easily shift, his decision to distribute justice to all humanity in Protagoras’ story represents his relinquishment of power. Having formally safeguarded political knowledge in his citadel, he now empowers all people with both knowledge of right and wrong and the responsibility for ensuring that others engage in right conduct.

Protagoras’ minor revision to the Prometheus myth lays the foundation for an entirely new political and social order. Prior to the invention of democracy in the sixth century BC, Greek societies were either under the rule of a single monarch or an elite group of select individuals who were deemed noble. Aristotle notes how theological beliefs are used to legitimate political practices:

All races speak of the gods as ruled by a king, because they themselves too are some of them actually now so ruled and in other cases used to be of old; and as men imagine the gods in human form, so also they suppose their manner of life to be like their own. (Politics 1252b)

Aristotle speculates that government by a single individual derived from the natural hierarchy found within the household:

It is owing to this that our cities were at first under royal sway and that foreign races are so still, because they were made up of parts that were under royal rule; for every household is under the royal rule of its eldest member. (Politics 1252b)

The apparent assumption is that just as parents must rule over their children since they lack the intellectual capacity for prudential judgment, so too does the monarch rule over his subjects who similarly lack this sort of capacity.

The transition from rule by a single individual to the rule by several elites maintains the foundational notion that virtue is innately possessed by some and not by others. The

¹³ Also see Franssen (2014) 42.

sixth century lyric poet Theognis expresses the traditional views regarding the differing capacities of the *agathoi* and *kakoi* for sound judgment:

A good man (agathos), Kurnos, keeps his character in bad times and good; but if the God gives money and a good life to a bad man (kako andri), the fool cannot hold back his evilness. (Theognis, 319-322)

Theognis further indicates that the ability of the *kakoi* for sound judgment is so impaired that no amount of teaching is able to rehabilitate them:

No one has ever found a way to make a fool wise or a bad man (kakou) good. (Theognis, 430-432).

Protagoras' myth challenges the fundamental assumption that virtue is only the possession of a select group of individuals. Moreover, he draws on educational practices to demonstrate the process that attempts both to instill notions of right and wrong and to correct the behavior of recalcitrant individuals who stray from what the society deems to be proper conduct.

The most remarkable aspect of Protagoras' myth concerns how Zeus, who had previously provided theological support for monarchy, has now empowered the masses with the same mental capacity that was previously believed to be possessed by a select few. Zeus, the king over both gods and men, effectively delegitimizes monarchic rule and sanctions democracy in its place. In an often cited passage, Cynthia Farrar notes the monumental significance of the "Great Speech": "Protagoras was, so far as we know, the first democratic political theorist in the history of the world" (1988: 77).¹⁴ In addition to providing a theoretical defense of democracy, Protagoras was involved in democratic regime building as the author of the political constitution of the newly formed colony of Thurii (D. L. 9.8.50).

¹⁴ For discussion of Protagoras' contribution to democratic thinking, see Kerferd (1981) 144; Farrar (1988) 44-98; Balot (2006) 74-78; Silvermintz (2015) 21-46, 201.

Protagoras' political endorsement of democracy goes hand-in-hand with his epistemological stance affirming that the human being is the measure of all things. As previously mentioned, the human-measure fragment seems to dismiss the gods as either nonexistent or irrelevant. De Romilly writes, "Man is what matters. What this means is that Protagoras jettisons all notions of being and truth that are in any way connected with the gods. In other words, at a single stroke he sets up a new universe in which the gods have no part to play" (1992: 102). If de Romilly's assessment that the gods are inconsequential in Protagoras' understanding of politics, ethics, or anything else for that matter, why would Zeus play such an important role in legitimating democracy?

While the ennoblement of the individual in democratic regimes seems to render the gods insignificant, there remains a need for a godlike man to steer the ship of state. As Socrates notes at 319c, democracy considers all citizens to be experts in the administration of public affairs. There is an obvious problem with validating all opinions as equally true. As Protagoras makes clear in the myth, individuals seeking their own personal advantage will not of their own volition relinquish their freedom. Democracy without some sort of rational leadership is nothing more than mob rule – a tenuous collective of individuals that only forge alliances when it serves their own advantage. Keenly aware of this problem, Protagoras recognizes the need for the statesman to provide leadership and direction to the rabble:

The wise and good orators make the good, instead of the evil, seem to be right to their states. For I claim that whatever seems right and honorable to a state is really right and honorable to it, so long as it believes it to be so... (Theaetetus 167c)

Having recognized the inherent problem plaguing democratic governance, Protagoras identifies the role of the orator in reconciling the internal strife of the citizens by making them believe that their self-interest aligns with the common good. Just as Zeus manages to empower humanity with the ability to rule themselves while at the same time imposing rule over them, so too does the democratic statesman exert his will over the people by persuading them to enact his policies.

Having considered Zeus' beneficence as a representation of the statesman's comparable role in bringing order to a democratic regime, we cannot ignore his blatant injustice in the myth. Knowing all along that humanity would need justice to survive, Zeus demonstrates grave indifference to human suffering by depriving human beings of this lifesaving knowledge for the period prior to his intervention in human affairs. While we might want to excuse Zeus' culpability for having merely failed to act, Protagoras indicates that the Olympian was not so innocent as he actively withheld the knowledge of political art behind the walls of his well-guarded citadel (321d). Moreover, Protagoras does not state whether Zeus' inactivity lasted for days, years, or millennia. How do we reconcile that the god who demands that human beings act with justice does not himself act justly by rendering to each what is owed?

Zeus' double standard of justice reveals Protagoras' true teaching about virtue. As Thrasymachus keenly observes, crime does not pay unless one has the political power to stand beyond the law that one imposes upon others. He thus famously declares,

I affirm that the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger.
(*Republic* 338c)

Regardless of the form of government, political power allows one to impose laws on others that serve one's own interest.

As Protagoras had indicated at the outset, one is best able to manage his personal affairs through political engagement,

showing how he may have most influence on public affairs both in speech and in action. (319a)

As a number of scholars have recognized, the skill that Protagoras purports to teach his students is the same phrase that Thucydides used to describe Pericles: "prōtos Athēnaiōn, legein te kai prassein dunatōtatos" (1.139.4).¹⁵ One should further note that Socrates had provoked Protagoras' argument by questioning whether someone as good and wise as

¹⁵ See Segvic (2009) 17-20; O'Sullivan (1995) 20; Corradi (2013) 77.

Pericles could transmit his virtue to his sons (319e). Socrates again references Pericles after the conclusion of the “Great Speech” comparing Protagoras’ rhetoric to one of Pericles’ orations (329a).

Although never holding any public office besides that of military commander, Pericles emerged as the de facto ruler of Athens in the mid fifth century. Thucydides notes Pericles’ role in leading Athens:

Pericles indeed, by his rank, ability, and known integrity, was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude – in short, to lead them instead of being led by them. (2.65.1)

One cannot overstate Pericles’ role in shaping the course of Athens’ development during its golden age. In addition to the great cultural achievements of the period, Pericles’ singlehandedly revolutionized Athens’ social and political order by enfranchising all citizens as equal participants in the deliberative process. The remarkable fact about these dramatic changes is that Pericles’ effected such dramatic changes merely through the power of persuasion. Pericles’ godlike ability to sway public opinion was not lost on his contemporaries, who compared him to none other than Zeus himself:

For then the Olympian Pericles in ire Fulmined and lightened with vindictive fire, And shook all Hellas with his armed throngs, And laid down laws that read like drinking-songs... (Aristophanes, Acharnians 528-530)

Just as Zeus’ beneficence concealed his blatant injustice, we should not let Pericles’ championing of civil rights render him beyond reproach. Plutarch informs us that there were suspicions concerning Pericles tyrannical intentions when he was young and that these suspicions continued to surround him throughout his life. Moreover, Plutarch informs us that after many years of avoiding involvement in political affairs, Pericles curiously switched his political allegiance in seeming contradiction to his own self-interest:

Then at last Pericles decided to devote himself to the people, espousing the cause of the poor and the many instead of the few and the rich, contrary to his own nature, which was anything but popular. (Pericles 7.2)

One has to wonder what in the world led the aristocratic Pericles to take up the cause of the impoverished masses. Could it be that he realized the best means for protecting his own interests was to garner a reputation as a spokesman for the downtrodden?

Pericles' interest in philosophy is well known; the extent to which these studies influenced his political conversion and subsequent rise to power has been less developed. Plutarch, at least, seems to be sensitive to the sophistic orientation of many of the intellectuals with whom Pericles studied.¹⁶ Validating Protagoras' claim regarding how various teachers concealed their subversive ideas behind respectable academic studies, Plutarch informs us that Pericles' musical training under Damon was actually an education in tyrannical rule:

Now Damon seems to have been a consummate sophist, but to have taken refuge behind the name of music in order to conceal from the multitude his real power, and he associated with Pericles, that political athlete, as it were, in the capacity of rubber and trainer. (Pericles 4.1)

Pericles has long been celebrated for his masterful oratory without consideration of what he concealed behind his rhetoric.

While Thrasymachus upholds the tyrant as the individual who is most able to realize his own self-interest (*Republic* 344b), Protagoras' myth offers an even more seductive role model to emulate. As Glaucon notes, the devil in the saint's garb is more powerful than any obvious villain:

For the height of injustice is to seem just without being so. (Republic 361a)

¹⁶ For discussion of Pericles relationship with Protagoras, see Stadter (1991); O'Sullivan (1995); Silvermintz (2015) 21-46.

Thucydides thus observes how Pericles realized his tyrannical aspirations as a champion of the plight of the masses:

In short, what was nominally a democracy was becoming in his hands government by the first citizen. (2.65.9).

Protagoras' private ethical teaching empowered young ambitious men with the ability to rise the political ranks so that they too can win good reputations for bringing justice to the people while committing injustice with impunity. In similar fashion, the individual who is remembered for having corrupted his students with his immoralist teaching is also remembered for his argument defending the teachability of ethics.

Daniel Silvermintz, Ph.D.

University Faculty Fellow

Associate Professor of Philosophy

Director of Humanities

University of Houston-Clear Lake

Houston, TX 77058

Silvermintz@uhcl.edu

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