

THE PLATONIC GODFATHER: A NOTE ON THE *PROTAGORAS* MYTH

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Is virtue teachable? This perennial question is addressed many times in the Platonic dialogues, but the Platonic answer is by no means clear. The paradoxical Socratic assertion that virtue (*aretē*) is knowledge (*epistēmē*), which would seem to ensure its teachability, instead entails its nonteachability.¹ Or rather it presents a virtue which is so difficult to achieve—as difficult to achieve as fluency in a foreign tongue—that it would be available only to the few, while the many would be left to stumble in virtueless confusion. On the other hand, the Protagorean assertion that virtue is something other than knowledge (*allo ti ēn ē epistēmē hē aretē*),² which would seem to render the teaching of virtue impossible, instead ensures its teachability. Or rather it presents a virtue which is so difficult to resist—as difficult as fluency in one's native tongue³—that virtually no one will fail to acquire and exhibit it. The root of the dilemma seems to be the resistance on the part of the Platonic interlocutors to abandon a unitary view of virtue. In other words, the Aristotelian distinction between ethical virtue⁴ and theoretical virtue is never maintained explicitly in the Platonic corpus. And yet the choice between Protagoras and Socrates in the *Protagoras* seems to be a clear adumbration of that distinction. Why, then, does Socrates argue against the account of virtue (ethical virtue) which Protagoras presents?

Protagoras' account is given in two parts, a *mythos* (320c8-324d1) and a *logos* (324d1-328d4). In other words, a descriptive account (a *logos*) of virtue and its teachability in cities follows a genetic account (a *mythos*) of virtue's coming to be. And throughout his account, Protagoras⁵ equates virtue with justice, which arose out of the interaction of nature (Epimetheus and the subterranean gods), art (Prometheus), and convention (Zeus and Hermes).⁶

According to Protagoras, nature (Epimetheus in particular) is both thoughtless and persuasive of its own thoughtfulness (320d3-8):

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And when [the gods] were about to lead [the mortal races] to light, they ordered Prometheus and Epimetheus⁷ to adorn and to apportion powers to each severally as is proper. And Epimetheus asks Prometheus for he himself [to be the one] to apportion [the powers], "and when I have apportioned [them]," he asserted, "you inspect;"⁸ and so [Epimetheus], having persuaded [Prometheus], apportions.

Yet Epimetheus provides well for the beasts, balancing their powers appropriately, but using up all powers in the process. Thus, the only mortals to suffer from his (nature's) thoughtlessness are humans, who are left physically naked and defenseless (*gymnon . . . kai aoplon*: 321c5-6). Yet they implicitly at least have speech,⁹ although it must have been inarticulate speech, atomistic speech.¹⁰ Only the intervention of art (Prometheus) can alter their situation, yet it can only alter it from hopeless to merely precarious, because although art enables them to provide for themselves, it still leaves them unable to defend themselves against the stronger beasts and against their own propensity to injure each other (322a8-b8). In other words, the natural condition of living things is a battle of every living thing against every living thing, but with no war, for there is no polemics without politics.¹¹

Only convention (Zeus and Hermes) can secure humans by imposing cities and bonds of friendship on all humans and by making available to all—but not imposing on all¹²—modesty and justice (*aidō te kai dikēn*: 322c2) in the form of law, convention, *nomos* (cf. 322c1-d5, esp. d4). And without justice and moderation, there would be no cities, no political virtue; and without cities and political virtue, the human condition would be precarious at best (cf. 323a1-4). But the justice which binds humans together and saves them from destruction is merely a pretense, a façade, which one must employ whether one possesses it or not (cf. 323a5-c2).

At this point in his *mythos*, Protagoras begins to move toward his *logos* that virtue is teachable.¹³ But since justice is nothing more than a conditioned set of behavioral responses, teaching is equated with punishment.¹⁴ Instead, then, of the natural battle of all against all, politics produces a conventional punishment of all by all (cf. 324a2, 325a6-7). And if this is what teaching virtue means, then clearly virtue is teachable, because virtue is an offer which no one can refuse, and cities are gangsterism incarnate.¹⁵ This is Protagoras' *mythos*. And the *logos* which follows (cf. 324d6-7) is fundamentally a description of the punishing toward virtue which is the teaching of virtue.¹⁶

The choice, then, which the dialogue offers is the choice between virtue as exact knowledge and virtue as gangsterish coercion. The difficulty is that we can live with neither alternative as stated, and hence the dialogue ends, as it began, in *aporia* (perplexity). Can we formulate a viable third alternative which will dissolve the perplexity? The dialogue is an invitation to do precisely that.

NOTES

¹ Cf. *Protagoras* 361a3-c2. All references are to the Oxford Classical Text, ed. Burnet; all translations are mine

² *Protagoras* 361b4.

³ Cf. *Protagoras* 327e1-328a1.

⁴ And its more sophisticated sibling, dianoetic virtue.

⁵ The name "Protagoras" means "first of the marketplace."

⁶ Cf. Leo Strauss, *Natural right and history* (Chicago, 1953), p. 117: "As regards the most famous sophist, Protagoras, Plato imputes to him a myth which adumbrates the conventionalist thesis. The myth of the *Protagoras* is based on the distinction between nature, art, and convention. Nature is represented by the subterranean work of certain gods and by the work of Epimetheus. Epimetheus, the being in whom thought follows production, represents nature in the sense of materialism, according to which thought comes later than thoughtless bodies and their thoughtless motions. The subterranean work of the gods is work without light, without understanding, and has therefore fundamentally the same meaning as the work of Epimetheus. Art is represented by Prometheus, by Prometheus' theft, by his rebellion against the will of the gods above. Convention is represented by Zeus' gift of justice to "all": that "gift" becomes effective only through the punitive activity of civil society, and its requirements are perfectly fulfilled by the mere semblance of justice."

⁷ The meanings of the names "Prometheus" and "Epimetheus" are respectively "prospect" and "retrospect." Neither one of them lives up to his name very well in this account.

⁸ The word here is "*episkepsai*," which has the same prepositional prefix as the name "*Epimetheus*," and hence signals a potentially dangerous role reversal.

⁹ Cf. 321b6-c3, where humans are contrasted with *ta aloga* (c1).

¹⁰ Only later do they develop articulate speech: "then quickly [the human] articulated sound and names by art" (322a5-6).

¹¹ Cf. 322b4-6: "and in regard to their war against the beasts, [the demiurgic art] was lacking—for they did not yet have the political art, of which war-skill is a part."

¹² Cf. 322d4-5: anyone who is not capable of partaking of modesty and justice will be killed as a disease of the city.

¹³ Cf. *logou* at 324b1, and *kata touton ton logon* at 324c3-4.

¹⁴ Cf. 323d1-2 (*oudeis thymoutai oude nouthetei oude didaskei oude koladzei*), e2-3 (*hoi te thymoi . . . kai hai kolaseis kai hai nouthetēseis*), 324a2 (*thymoutai kai nouthetei*), 3-4 (*to koladzein*), 6 (*koladzei*), b1 (*timōreitai*), 2 (*koladzein*), 3 (*timōreitai*), 5 (*kolasthenta*), 7 (*koladzei*), c1 (*timōrountai*), c1-2 (*timōrountai . . . kai koladzontai*), 325a5-6 (*kai didaskein kai koladzein*), 7 (*koladzomenos*), 8 (*koladzomenos kai didaskoumenos*), c5-6 (*kai didaskousi kai nouthetousin*), d5-7 (*kai ean men hekōn peithētai• ei de mē, hōsper ksylon diastrephomenon kai kamptomenon euthynousin apeilais kai plēgais*), 8 (*entellontai*), e5-326a1 (*ekmanthanein anagkadzousin . . . nouthetēseis*), b2 (*anagkadzousin*), c1 (*anagkadzōntai*), 7-8 (*anagkadzei manthanein*), d4 (*anagkadzousi graphein*), 7 (*anagkadzei*), 8-e1 (*koladzei• kai onoma tē kolasei tautē . . . hōs euthynousēs tēs dikēs, euthynai*), 327a6-7 (*kai edidaske kai epeplēte*), d2 (*anagkē . . . anagkadzousa*).

¹⁵ Cf. Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (New York, 1969), Book I, p. 39: "'He's a businessman,' the Don said blandly, 'I'll make him an offer he can't refuse.'" The offer is described in detail on pp. 41-42, but its core is this (p. 42): "With no other witnesses Don Corleone persuaded Les Halley to sign a document . . . Don Corleone did this by putting a pistol to [his] forehead . . . and assuring him with the utmost seriousness that either his signature or his brains would rest on that document in exactly one minute. Les [82] Halley signed." Also cf. Book V, p. 294: "The other Dons in the room applauded and rose to shake hands with everybody in sight and to congratulate Don Corleone and Don Tattaglia on their new friendship. It was not perhaps the warmest friendship in the world, they would not send each other Christmas gift greetings, but they would not murder each other. That was friendship enough in this world, all that was needed." Finally, cf. Book VII, p. 385: "Michael [Corleone, the Don's son,] said quietly, 'I'll make him an offer he can't refuse.'" This is a striking example of the Protagorean notion of justice and the teachability of virtue.

¹⁶ In the *Theaetetus*, the Protagorean conventionalist epistemological position is presented in a way which is analogous to the presentation of the Protagorean conventionalist political position in the *Protagoras*, namely a Protagorean *mythos* (*Theaetetus* 155e3-164e4) followed by a Protagorean *logos* (*Theaetetus* 164e4-168c2). The *mythos* of which Protagoras is the father (cf. 164e2-3) describes the genesis of the Protagorean account of the sensing which is exact knowledge out of the Herakleitean *archē* (cf. 156a3, 152e2-4, 160d5-e2) that “the all was moving and nothing other besides this” (156a5), i.e., it is about the generation of sensing out of motion (156a3-c3). And since the *mythos* is, in a way, a genetic account of genesis, a generative account of generation, it not only contains but is imbedded among discussions of generation: Socrates’ earlier discussion of his midwifery (148e6-151d6; cf. 187a8-b2, 210b4-d1), the immediately preceding genealogy of philosophy and of Iris (155d2-5), the internal reference back to Socratic midwifery (157c7-d3), and the subsequent description of the account as a generated infant (160e5-161a4, 164d8-e6) and as susceptible of perishing (164d8-9; cf. *Republic* 10.621b8). So, not only does motion generate sensing, but humans generate accounts, and indeed the whole question of generation, preservation, and perishing of *logoi* is an undertone of the *Theaetetus* from the introductory conversation between Euclides and Terpsion. And one could even conjecture that if there is any notion of the literal transmigration of souls in the Platonic corpus, it would be the transmigration not of the souls of humans or beasts but of account souls (cf. *Phaedo* 89a9-c4). [For a fuller discussion of the distinction between *mythos* and *logos* in Plato, see my *Platonic Myth and Platonic Writing* (Washington, DC, 1980).]

Protagoras, thinker and teacher, the first and most famous of the Greek Sophists. Protagoras spent most of his life at Athens, where he considerably influenced contemporary thought on moral and political questions. Plato named one of his dialogues after him. Protagoras taught as a Sophist for more.