

Gentlemen and Players **H. S. Harris**

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When I was an adolescent, clumsy and physically incompetent in all directions (and for that reason already enamored of the academic life as my own way of salvation), I fell in love with "first-class cricket" as a spectacle to watch. In those days a regular first-class match went on for three days (six hours a day). Even when not interrupted by the vagaries of the English climate, the matches were often (more often than not) unfinished even in this time; and the "season" extends only over about four and a half months of the year. Even in those far-off days before the Second World War, watching soccer was the sporting entertainment of the masses. The weekday audience for cricket was generally small, and no one made a very good living playing the game. Nevertheless the majority of first-class players were "professionals." The team captains, however, were always "amateurs"; and it was normal for two or three of the playing members of each first-class "eleven" to be amateurs likewise. Every year, at the height of the season, there was a match between the best "Gentlemen and Players"; if the match was completed, the Players usually (but by no means always) won.

A few years later (as an undergraduate student of philosophy) I developed a theoretical rationalization for my enjoyment of watching cricket. I came to view it as an image of human life itself, as it ideally could be, and as it always ought to be. Beginning with the common requirement that everyone should become as good a "fielder" as possible, cricket led to the development of a great variety of specialized talents. The rules of the game were absolutely sacrosanct; and to play in what we may call "the spirit of the rules" was the ideal of sportsmanship. Everyone agreed (at least verbally) that it was more important to "play the game" than to win; and no one **ever** disputed (or queried) the decision of the umpire.

When I began to study Greek philosophy at this stage of my career, I could understand at once why Socrates, the ideal amateur, was radically different from the Sophists, who were the first recognizable "professionals" of my own chosen discipline. For a long time I shared Plato's prejudice against the great Sophists who appeared in his dialogues, because they *needed* to make money by their profession, and they evidently *wanted* to make a lot of it, counting this as the most significant measure of their social success and importance. The understanding that I must distinguish between the first generation of Sophists, who were professional educators, and some of their successors who were linguistic tricksters (and professional entertainers, who contributed to philosophy only by showing that linguistic distinctions were necessary, in

order to outlaw "fallacies") came later. But one of the reasons why I had to grasp this point was that Plato's "Socrates" played linguistic tricks on his victims that were almost as disagreeable as the antics of Euthydemus, and in sharp contrast with the professorial seriousness which Prodicos (for example) displayed in distinguishing the precise meaning of words.¹

It was always clear enough that although "Socrates" wanted to produce confusion and uncertainty of mind, he was not, like the great Sophists, interested in *winning* arguments. His purpose (like theirs) was educational; but he did not want to teach in their fashion. Aristophanes could use Socrates to represent to his fellow-Athenians just what the natural philosophers and Sophists were doing to the traditional piety and ethics of their community; and then after Socrates had suffered for that, Plato could respond by presenting Socrates as a man with a philosophical mission, conceived in obedience to Apollo's oracle at Delphi, the focal institution of the traditional religion. Plato's "Socrates" did not want to teach us the art of social success, which was what the educational Sophists promised, but to make us see that our **essential** task was to "know ourselves" just as the God of Delphi enjoined.

Plato agreed with Aristophanes that the new professional rhetoricians were socially dangerous. Gorgias was a professional teacher of political and legal oratory, who was remarkably successful, rich, universally respected, and eminently respectable. He accepted all of the conventional ethical standards of human goodness, and laughed at the claims of other professionals, like Protagoras, to teach "virtue" or "political wisdom." He lived long enough to read Plato's portrait of him, and to approve it. But what he thought of "Callicles," who occupies the last half of Plato's dialogue with an account of what politics as a purely rhetorical struggle for political power does to the soul that has no objective goals beyond those furnished by the subrational living organism, is not recorded.

Protagoras was another matter. Like Gorgias, he thought of political life as a verbal wrestling match; but he saw the necessity of a philosophical conception of the human community. We can only distantly descry the outlines of his political philosophy now, through the "myth" that Plato borrowed from one of his essays to provide "Socrates" with matter to dispute about. But I shall interpret that myth here in the way that seems to me most consistent with the principle that "Man is the measure"; and we need not worry about whether the historical results are "true," because my interpretations are meant only to be *enlightening* for us in our own modern context.

Against Protagoras, Plato set the dictum "God, not man, is the measure"; and he was saying the same thing (in essence) as Lawrence Haworth claims in our time, when

¹I write "Socrates" because I want to avoid the problem of how far the behavior of the historical Socrates was actually like that of Euthydemus.

he maintains that "objectivity" and "responsibility" should be the "dominant themes" of a truly human lifestyle. Plato expressed his ideal by saying that we must "play for the Gods."² Mortal, human life is perhaps not a serious matter, and human beings are only playthings for the Gods; but we must recognize this, and "play the game" of human life as rationally as we can. This agrees with my view of cricket as an image of the ideal life; but it seems also to support the view that the "gentleman" not the "player," the amateur not the professional, is the right model for that life. Socrates, not Protagoras, is the model of the educator. But then, of course, as we have already noted, Socrates does not behave like a "gentleman" at all; and I am going to maintain that Protagoras, the undoubted professional, is actually wiser than Plato, the absolute amateur, about human social existence.

Thus, by dragging in the Greeks, I have so far created a situation of Socratic confusion in Haworth's categories. He sets up a different contrast between the "professional" and the "amateur" according to which the "professional" follows a pursuit to which (s)he is sincerely and steadily devoted, while the "amateur" only follows it as a sideline, or a hobby. It may appear that the conflict between us is only verbal. Haworth wants to associate the "professions" with two other concepts: "responsibility" and "leisure." Both of these associated concepts are Platonic. Plato uses the metaphor of "playing" to express the fact that the good life is a leisured activity, and the metaphor of the Gods as our audience to express the responsibility upon us to make human life into a beautiful object of contemplation. Like Socrates, however, I am not just playing verbal games. I don't just want to draw attention to the fact that Haworth's image of professional life is oversimplified and biased. Anyone who studies the history of the oldest professions (medicine and law), or the careers of the first "professors" in our tradition, can see that; and the distortion is not really harmless.³ What interests me is the fact that (in spite of my agreement with the first great professor of education) there are powerful reasons why "education" should **not** be regarded simply as a profession. Protagoras was unfortunate in having to be a "professional"; and Socrates was lucky (as well as insightful) in avoiding that fate. That is what emerges from the proper appreciation both of Protagoras' humanist principle, and of Socrates' human mission.

Let us begin, then, with the "myth" told by "Protagoras." According to his story, the first humans were on the verge of extinction because Epimetheus (Afterthought) had not provided them with the means to survive. Learning the lessons of experience, in the way that other animals do, would never have saved us from extinction; so Prometheus

²L. Haworth, *Decadence and Objectivity*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977, p. x; Plato, *Laws* 644d-645b.

³One might think that I am only playing verbal games like Euthydemus if I point out (further) that "the oldest profession" is an expression that proverbially refers to a pursuit which is conventionally regarded as not appropriate for professionalization at all. I shall leave that question open; but I think that reflection upon "the oldest profession" will lead us to see that the relation between "devotion" and "profession" (or again between "professional" and "leisured" activities) is more complex than Haworth's thesis seems to imply.

(Forethought) stole fire and the crafts from Hephaestos and Athena. Just what Protagoras meant by this is not easy to decide, because we know that he was highly sceptical about the existence of any "divine" powers at all. But what directly follows this in his story is the establishment of religion and the beginning of human social life in families and tribes. Fire is "stolen" from the order of Nature; and "forethought" reduces it from a terrifying destructive force to a human tool. My interpretation is that we do not copy (or learn from) Hephaestos (the divine Smith); we **invent** him as we learn to use the power of fire; and we invent Athena, likewise, as we discover her arts of spinning and weaving.

Protagoras now says that Prometheus could not steal "political wisdom" from the citadel of Zeus. Something more than "forethought" was involved in the development of political wisdom. Humans are the only animals that share in the "portion of the Gods." The invention of Zeus involved both the invention of religion (as the service of the Gods) and the development of language.

All of this was involved in the establishment of a tribal kind of society, that was not yet properly political. Obviously, Protagoras thought that religion and language were more primitive logical requirements of human culture than the conquest of fire, and the discovery of advanced survival skills such as spinning and weaving. His use of the Prometheus story obliges him to put fire at the head of his list; and he associates it with Athena's gifts, partly because he wants to generalize the concept of "forethought" to cover "survival skills" generally. (Probably he intends to point to the sexual division of labor in the primitive community also.) But there cannot be an actual "theft" from "Hephaestos and Athena" until Zeus, their divine Father, is in his place, together with "altars and images." (What the "theft" motif, along with the ensuing punishment of Prometheus, signified in the mind of Protagoras, we shall see in a moment. But for the application of his view to **our** situation, this motif is crucially important in a way that Protagoras could scarcely have foreseen.)

The willingness of Protagoras to **begin** from the Prometheus story indicates that he did not believe that religion and language developed **earlier in time** than the survival skills that fire and weaving represent. They all evolved together. Protagoras wants to distinguish a **pre-political** social condition; and to show how "cities" evolved out of it. The evolution is a military and religious one. Protagoras does not refer directly to the fact that the human tribes preyed upon one another. But this aspect of his story is evident enough in the relation of the Cities themselves; and his remark that the "art of war" is one part of the "art of politics," shows that he was well aware of its importance. The tribes came together into communities that could defend themselves effectively; and for this to happen, their religion had to develop a new dimension. The Divine Father had to become a King; and the tribes had to become both "reverent" , i.e., they had to restrict their behavior towards other tribes within religiously authorized boundaries , and "just" , i.e. all individuals had to live according to a set of agreed norms about what is "right" or "fair" and to accept socially authorized decisions about the interpretation and application of the norms.

"Reverence" and "justice" are the essential concerns of the Pythagorean education system. Every adult member of the community is presumed to have both habits (and is subject to criminal justice if their habits fail).⁴ Everyone inculcates "reverence" and "justice" as well as they can all the time in those who are not adult (just as we teach the natural language to the immature by talking to them). Protagoras himself is a "professional" educator; but education is not a profession; it is the universal vocation of humanity as such. That is what Plato himself believes; and it is what the myth as a whole both claims and demonstrates. As far as the Myth is concerned, it is an accident that there is already a professional class of elementary school-teachers, and the beginnings (in Protagoras himself) of a new profession of higher educators. The Myth is **democratic**; and it teaches us the right way to conceive of education in a democracy.

The Myth (quite correctly) ascribes the sexual division of labor to the primitive (or "natural") community. But what happens to "stealing" (the original act of foresight) in the political community (where it becomes a crime to raid those who would have been one's natural victims in the old tribal times) shows that implicitly this division of labor is subject to review in the rational community. The society projected by Protagoras' Myth is, in principle, a world of equal opportunity to practise the crafts. Everyone must either follow a craft that is already established, or invent a new one; and from the point of view of the community, every craft recognized as socially valuable is a gift from some lesser God. Only the craft of political life is different, because everyone must practise it; the political capacities are the gift of the supreme God to each of us; and these capacities must be conceived as a "gift," because the natural (or instinctive) development of our abilities would make successful theft into the goal of human existence. But, in fact, the Gods (including the supreme God) are social inventions designed to outlaw this development.

This *social* utilitarianism provides the proper conceptual context in which to view Haworth's ideal of a "professionalized society." He may not like to be told that he is an "ideal utilitarian." But that is the inevitable fate of one who chooses to emphasize the "professional" rather than the "amateur" ideal of human life. A "profession" must be **useful**; it must provide a **service**; as Socrates argued against Thrasymachos long ago, it must seek the "good" of its "objects." Plato pretended, on this basis to project an ideal society in which politics became the "profession" of the Socratic philosopher. But the upshot of that ideal experiment was to show why neither politics nor philosophy can be

⁴This is where the punishment of Prometheus receives its interpretation in the theory of Protagoras himself. Prometheus "had to stand trial for theft later on," because social authority completely absorbs "natural right." Once Zeus is established as Father and King, we cannot just do as we like with natural resources in the interest of self, family or tribal clan. The "punishment of Prometheus" is a reaction of political society upon the natural order. Human culture and the human world was originally "stolen" from that order. (In our world, we have learned that justice and punishment belong to the natural order itself. We cannot steal from Nature at all; we must always pay for what we take.)

a specialized profession. The philosopher **cannot** be a king in any **real** (or ordinary) sense. The Platonic "King" must do what is best for her subjects; and this implies that the starting-condition for the philosophically organized society (the sending away of everyone over twelve years old) cannot be **philosophically** fulfilled. If it could be fulfilled in a professionally acceptable way, it would cease to be a necessary condition for the ideal society. (If every adult could be **rationally persuaded** that it was best for them to go, they would not need to go away at all.) This is how Plato exhibits the Protagorean truth that education is not (and cannot be) a "profession" like the others.

Plato states the ideal in its "gentlemanly" (or *leisured*) perspective; and we shall see in the end, why that is the right one. But for the moment, we must pursue the task of reviewing Haworth's ideal in the Protagorean perspective. This is a much more comfortable procedure, because they are both democrats. Haworth would not, I suppose, object very strenuously to the Protagorean view of the educational profession; for although Protagoras insists that civic education is a **universal** task (and one that achieves its ideal shape in a political democracy) he allows also that it can be (and needs to be) cultivated as a **professional** pursuit; and the way that this profession has been institutionalized in our modern democracies (as a recognized universal need) has brought its "objective" concern clearly to light. In the society of Protagoras himself, the objective concern was obscured by the economic principle of "fee for service" (which still distorts the Platonic character of the other ancient professions of medicine and law in a Thrasymachean direction).⁵

What Haworth disagrees with Protagoras about is "the Gods." It appears that he wants to agree with Plato that values (the good, the true, the beautiful) are "objective." We are part of nature, and we must be "responsible" for it as a whole. "Responsibility involves identifying with that whole, attributing value to it, and grasping the significance of one's life in terms of one's manner of relating to it. To be responsible is to hold fast to the sense that the important feature of one's activity in relation with the natural surroundings is the state they are left in as a result, not the state one brings oneself into."⁶ What the thoughtful student of Protagoras' myth has to say about this is that "the important feature" is **not** the state in which "the natural surroundings" are left, but the state in which one's society is left in its "relation with the natural surroundings." After the establishment of political society, Prometheus has to be brought to trial, because "reverence and justice" impose on us the recognition that **social** survival and prosperity, not individual advantage, are what matters. The idea that "God" is there in Nature, and that we can revere him and follow his laws by maintaining the natural balance as we

⁵Plato records that Protagoras allowed those who believed, after their course with him, that his fee was too high, to pay what they were prepared to swear (in the presence of a God) they considered to be right [*Protagoras* 328bc]. This did not stop him from getting rich, or from regarding his riches as the measure of his personal success. But it shows that he was a "professional" in Haworth's idealized sense; and it prefigures the best that our own democracy has been able to do with the economic institution of "fee for service."

⁶*Decadence and Objectivity*, p. 26.

find it, is a delusion. We do not **know** that there is a stable balance of nature (indeed, we are empirically almost certain that there is no such thing); and we are **logically** certain that we could not responsibly and securely maintain it, even if it were really there to begin with. This was Protagoras' view about the Gods (the supposed absolute "objects" of "reverence" and arbiters of "justice"): We do not know whether they exist or not, and because of "the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life" it is quite clear that we are not going to find out.⁷

Nothing can affect "the obscurity of the subject"; but the professional institution of scientific inquiry has overcome "the shortness of human life." So we are now fairly certain that the balance of Nature is unstable, and that continual change in the environment is inevitable. The extinction of species, and the appearance of new ones, is part of the normal process of evolutionary life, and we cannot expect it to stop. Since human culture itself is a major force in the transformation of the environment, we are bound to be one of the major forces that influence it.

No matter how "objective" our search for truth may be, it will never be entirely Promethean; we shall always learn much through Epimetheus (i.e. by reflection on what has already happened). Thus, we may now regret the disappearance of the Dodo; it could probably have been saved only at the level of zoo-preservation and not in the wild. Even as a zoo-exhibit, we probably shall not be able to save the coelacanth, because this living relic of the dinosaur age survived only by adapting to the ocean depths. Whenever it gets into a fishing net it is doomed, by the simple process of being brought to the surface. I do not know why fishing is carried on at that depth; but if human livelihoods depend on it, it is unlikely to be stopped in order to avoid this casualty. Should logging be stopped in a certain area, because it is the habitat of the spotted owl? This is a creature that can be observed; and even those who do not care to observe it, can sympathize with it as a part of the ecological balance. So it may be preserved for a time, because it poses no threat to human life. But no one thinks that the anopheles mosquito or the tsetse fly should be preserved; and if we do not learn to satisfy our timber requirements more moderately, the spotted owl will certainly perish eventually.

In this case we can see what "ought" to happen; if we were properly "responsible" we should farm our timber resources, and recycle them in use, in such a way as to meet our needs without being driven to destroy the spotted owl. But (unless and until we can **foresee** that its disappearance would upset the ecological balance in some way that would be **materially** harmful for us humans) the reason for preserving the spotted owl's corner of the forest, is the human **spiritual** interest in the natural

⁷Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 80 B 4; English translation in R.K. Sprague (ed.), *The Older Sophists*, Columbia S.C., University of South Carolina Press, 1972, or K. Freeman, *Ancilla to the Presocratics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962.

wilderness. We can disguise this from ourselves, by talking of "natural rights"; but in any critical situation the supposed "natural rights" of the rest of our environment, will certainly give way to the pressure of our own natural needs; and one of the facts that we can foresee with perfect clarity is that our human situation is becoming ever more critical. If we do not become "responsible" about our own population-increase, all other "responsibility" will sooner or later go by the board.

If we try to maintain the objectivity of "natural rights," by claiming that the probable destruction of the coelacanth (or perhaps eventually of the spotted owl) does not make it "right," then we must say where we stand on the preservation of the mosquito or the tsetse fly. Since Roman Imperial times (and probably before that) the Sahara Desert has been on the march. Its oases are the relics of what was once fertile agricultural territory. The **humanly** responsible policy would be to reverse the southward advance of the desert. But if we could organize ourselves well enough to do that, the **whole** ecology of the desert itself would eventually be threatened. Does it have a "natural right" to exist?

Our **feelings** (of "reverence") are no more "natural" than our procedures of "justice." They are socially inculcated and directed; and in a political democracy they become all-powerful where they are effectively general. But they are rationally quite unreliable; so we should be profoundly thankful that they can be educationally influenced. Some years ago, three whales were trapped under the ice in the Canadian Arctic. Through the mass media their mortal peril was relayed to a vast public, and an enormous furore was generated. Eventually they were released by an ice-breaker sent from Russia. In the course of nature, they would simply have died. In the rationally utilitarian world of two centuries ago, they would have been harpooned, hauled onto the ice and slaughtered to feed the local community. But in our world (which surely numbers more **starving** humans now than there were **living** humans then) immense economic resources were expended to prevent natural selection from operating; and the utilitarian solution was politically ignored because it would have offended the sensibilities of millions who ate beef, lamb, pork and fish every day, but related to the whales through their feelings for their household pets rather than as distant cousins of the farmer's sheep and pigs.

In a time of famine we have to keep our domestic pets from running loose; and we regard the feelings of those who do not want their own domestic animals to be slaughtered for the table as "humane." But we must not confuse an ideal **norm** of "life-reverence" with what is "natural." It is perfectly possible to live on vegetables, and to **cultivate** feelings of "identity" with the whole animal kingdom. But even a general and categorical refusal to shed blood, may make one a dangerous threat to those whose livelihood depends on shedding it. Alberta cattle-ranchers cannot be cheerful fans of k.d. lang. They may love her music, and wish to identify with her as a local cultural heroine; but she is a militant vegetarian, and her cultural prominence makes her

influential. It is doubtful that she is a good social philosopher.

Haworth probably thinks of ***Decadence and Objectivity*** as a contribution to social and political thought. In its own modern context, it is vastly preferable to the thoroughly decadent utilitarianism that has its origins in Bentham, and takes "happiness" to be reducible to individual sensations of "pleasure." But its own weaknesses are revealed when we test it against a properly social (or communal) utilitarianism, like that of Protagoras. Haworth does not have a "divine" standard of "objectivity" (and I don't believe that he really wants one). Certainly he does not nourish the illusion (as Plato did) that mathematical reason will provide him with one.

Regarded as a social ideal to be propagated through education, Haworth's programme might have consequences that are unintended, but not unforeseeable. He admits that there is a considerable residuum of economic activity that cannot be experienced "professionally" (or as self-rewarding). To me it appears that he may be showing the successful (but still "unhappy") bourgeoisie the route by which they can become really happy. I think that what he is telling them is true, but as a convinced social democrat, I hope they will not learn his lesson. If the organized trade unions turned their energies and efforts in the directions to which he points, the plight of the unorganized poor would become worse; and quite apart from the unorganized masses in our own (North American or European) communities, most of humanity belongs to the materially impoverished category. As social philosophers we ought not to want those who are materially well-off to be "happy" (just as we cannot want them to think of wild nature as an extension of their pets and their gardens. The wolf will never be the lamb's friend; and seals, protected and driven out of the market, can rapidly become a serious pest).

But I need not be alarmed. Haworth's ideal is a philosophical Utopia, not an effective political action program. Philosophers, those who think systematically and carefully, do not have much direct political influence now, any more than they did in Plato's time; and Plato himself showed us long ago what the real point of a Utopian vision is. The ***Republic*** is not the image of an ideal society; as a social theory it is visibly impossible. It is an image of Socratic self-knowledge, and a pattern for the "examined life." And that is just what Haworth has given us. He has shown us how to relate work and play, how to conceive of our profession and our leisure *for ourselves*. From a strictly philosophical point of view, I may wish that the "gentlemanly" ideal, the ideal of life as a game to be played for the love of it, had not been down-graded by his suggestion that amateurs are not serious. Plato's claim that the **best** we can do with life is to "play it for the Gods" still appears to me to be the lesson of Socrates, and the most comprehensive human truth. If we want to think for the "Human Species" (which is the proper, Protagorean, sense of "objectivity" and "responsibility") then we must begin by seeing that our own personal life and happiness is not a very serious matter.⁸ We

⁸Plato also says, of course, that it is the most serious thing with which we are concerned. He repeats this Socratic truism much more often, and dramatizes it in the story of the sage's trial and execution. But

shan't make much difference in the end, because "in the long run we are all dead." Our "responsibility" is to make "the long run" as long as possible for our species.

However, like Plato himself, I am out of tune with the times; and Haworth is in tune. One can see this by considering the present state of the game that supplied me with my "playful" ideal in the first place. The "Gentlemen and Players" match perished years ago. First-class cricket is now played entirely by "professionals." But also it now exemplifies the implicit danger of "professionalism." The **variety** has been simplified out of it; and it has become an image of war rather than of a happy life. It is now a contest between the simple **speed** of the ball and the reliable rapidity of the batsman's response. The three-day games continue; but the mass audience is for one-day games in which the opportunities of the two sides are mathematically equalized and fixed. All of the players make a good living; but this is largely because the professional game is sponsored by the *tobacco* industry.

Cricket now seems to me to be a remarkably good image, not of life as it ought to be, but of life as it is; and it shows why anyone who wants to present us with an ideal, must begin from the "professional" side of the coin. Socrates, the perfect model of the amateur, is so far unique that he cannot serve as a general pattern for our world. We must all be "professionals" if our sense of doing something worth doing with our lives is to be socially confirmed and reinforced. "Work" and "leisure" certainly ought not to be opposed in our minds. The desirable condition of life is only reached when what we do at "work" is as significant, and as spiritually rewarding, as anything that we do in our "free time." But the advent of "retirement" is something that we all have to look forward to. Some of us, like myself and Haworth, have reached it. So we have to graduate to the Socratic consciousness of life as "playing for the Gods" in the end; and, no matter how professionally committed we may be, our working lives should prepare us for that too.

"Socrates" maintains his "playfulness" even when talking about his "mission."