

Chapter 15

Protagoras

1. His career

Perhaps thirty years before Demokritos, there was born in Abdera, the man who became its most famous citizen, Protagoras. By the time Demokritos himself was born (about 460 BCE), Protagoras was embarking upon a career of forty years or more as an itinerant teacher of “political wisdom.” Like Demokritos he was later said to have been instructed by the Persian Magi. But no one fathered any works of magic upon him; he was a verbal wizard on his own account without that (80 A 5, A 8).ⁱ

The stories of his early life are fictions (see e.g. A 3) — though his father may have been rich and influential. Who taught Protagoras anything important, we cannot guess. He himself, at thirty, was ready to teach an art of verbal persuasion, for which he made bold claims, and which proved eminently saleable to rich and noble young men in the Greek cities — especially the “democracies.” Apart from speech-making, Protagoras taught a philosophy of democratic politics, and a theory of human affairs generally.

He called himself a “Sophist”; and since he made a lot of money he soon had many imitators who called themselves — or were called — by the same name. According to Protagoras, the profession was an old one; he liked to say that Homer was a Sophist. Before his time the word

simply meant a “wise” or clever man — particularly one with some trained expertise. The Seven Sages, and various poets, musicians and seers, had all been called “Sophists” by the time Protagoras took the name to himself; and long after his death Plato called the Divine Craftsman of the *Timaeus* a “Sophist.” The word never quite lost the laudatory sense of “skilled expert”; but the many imitators of Protagoras gave it a bad aura from which it has never recovered. It is important to realize that no one took Protagoras for a verbal trickster or a cheat; and he does not deserve that kind of evaluation. (Plato loathed what the Sophists stood for; but it is clear that he respected both Protagoras and Gorgias personally.)ⁱⁱ

Protagoras went from city to city giving display speeches (for which one paid an admission fee) and longer courses of instruction to the individuals who were willing to pay for them. Plato makes him say that they only had to pay what they were prepared to swear the instruction was worth (A 6). There is a delightful story about a dispute between Protagoras and Euathlos — a younger Sophist, who was one of his pupils. Protagoras is supposed to have sued Euathlos for his fee; and when Euathlos claimed that he did not have to pay, because he had not won a case in court yet, Protagoras retorted that if the court decided in Protagoras’ favor then Euathlos must pay by its decision; while if it decided for Euathlos, he must pay because he had won a case (A 1: 56). This story is a myth. But the fee-dispute may have been real; and it may have been settled by the method that Plato reports. Being famous, it would then have become the source of Plato’s knowledge.

Protagoras was working in Sicily for a time when Hippias was young (A 9, *Hipp. Ma.* 282de); and he was in Athens on several long visits. Plato’s dialogue is set, probably, in 432 BCE, just before the War with Sparta began. By that time the fame of Protagoras was universal in the Greek world — for in 444/3 he had served on the commission that provided constitutional laws for the new colonial foundation at Thurioi in Italy. At Athens we hear of his discussing a philosophical problem about responsibility with Perikles (A 103; Plutarch, *Perikles* 36). He gave a display speech at the house of Euripides (A 1: 54); but it was Perikles who was his great patron (and protector) at Athens.ⁱⁱⁱ

His most famous essay began with a sentence saying that he did not know whether the Gods existed or not; our reports (which are all late) say that he was prosecuted for impiety at Athens because of this, and either banished or condemned to death. His death in a shipwreck occurred when he was sailing away as a consequence of this (A 1, 54-5; A 2, A 3, A4, A12).^{iv}

That he was actually *condemned to death* is very unlikely, because Plato makes Sokrates say that he “died when nearly seventy, having spent forty years in the exercise of his profession, and in all that time down to the present day never ceased to enjoy his high repute” (A 8).^v The testimony of Plato about his age at death is generally accepted by modern scholars. But the clear witness of Plato makes the survival of another tradition that Protagoras lived to be nearly ninety rather surprising (A 1: 55). One cannot help wondering whether Plato was deliberately setting up a parallel with Sokrates (as his great antagonist). In that case the testimony of “Sokrates” about Protagoras’ age is worthless (and perhaps he *was* “condemned to death,” after all). The best we can do is to say that Protagoras lived until 420 BCE (at least), and perhaps for as much as ten years after that.

We cannot decide just how many books he published. We have a late catalogue (A 1, 55), and various titles in the reports. But librarians and scholarly writers gave titles to books at their own discretion; and it is sometimes evident (or likely) that two or more titles refer to the same work. I shall refer here to four essays that seem to me to be distinct (with the alternative titles that I take to refer to them: *Truth; Opposed Arguments* (“Throwers” or “The Art of Controversy”); the *Great Logos* (“The Primitive Order” and “The Constitution”); and *On the Gods* (including “The Dwellers in Hades”).^{vi}

2. The Theory of Truth

By far the most famous (and the most important) dictum of Protagoras was that “of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that [or how] they are, and of the things that are not, that [or how] they are not” (B 1).^{vii} Plato discusses this dictum at length (in the *Theaetetos*); and in fact

most of our knowledge of Protagoras comes from Plato; but I shall largely avoid Plato's arguments because I think that he raises problems and alternatives that Protagoras meant to avoid. (I think also that Plato knew this, but thought that the problems must not be avoided. His account of the sort of responses that Protagoras would give, I take to be reliable.)

I take the dictum about the "measure" to be a methodological principle adopted in response to Parmenides' Way of Truth. Protagoras assumes from the beginning that the natural philosophers have undertaken a hopeless quest. "What is" is beyond our comprehension. We have to live in the cloud of different opinions; and, with certain obvious commonsensical qualifications, we must assume initially that all opinions are equal. For Protagoras himself, this "democratic" assumption was the necessary foundation stone for his career as an authority on persuasion. You cannot expect to persuade someone unless you begin by admitting that he is entitled to his opinion. (I do not write "(s)he" and "her" because women could not speak in the Assembly or appear in the courts; but the position of Protagoras is not gender-specific; and if Aspasia joined in the famous discussion with Perikles, I am sure that they both listened attentively.)

We shall see, soon, that it is necessary to distinguish between different kinds of opinion, and between the different situations of those who hold opinions. But if we begin with the question "How do you know that what you say is *true*?" there is one frequent and obvious answer that identifies a whole class of opinions about which argument is soon seen to be useless. If someone says "I can *see* that," "I heard her *say* that," etc., then their personal sense-experience is usually conclusive. If a statement of sense-experience is aberrant from the norm (as represented by what others can see, or have heard) then — if we are convinced that the respondent is "speaking the truth" — we look for some reason why the perception is not what we were expecting. In this way, we may discover that the speaker is color-blind, or has some more temporary illness.

The methodic principle here is that all "truthful" reports are equally valid. The Atomists — especially Protagoras' fellow-citizen Demokritos — saw the relevance of this lesson when they agreed with Anaxagoras that "what appears is the sight of the unseen" (59 B 21a). The "truth" is not

that something “is,” but that “something appears to somebody.” “What is” is “the unseen”; and that is to be discovered by thinking about, and investigating, “What appears.”

There are two lines of criticism to which this “democratic” position is open. The common-sense attitude is that surely what “is” is what appears to the great majority who have normal sight and health.^{viii} Protagoras would agree with this view, *in the sense that* he would expect the color-blind or sick person to be persuaded of it. But in a *philosophical* discussion, he would expect us to agree that the general consensus is not “more true”; it is only “better” or “more useful.” “What appears” to the sick (or otherwise aberrant) perception is just as “true” as what appears to everyone else.

This prepares us for the more radical criticism that Protagoras is reducing knowledge to what is perceived. On the one hand, we can protest that Parmenides was right to say “It is” (and since he insisted that “the same *is* for being and for thinking” — 28 B 3 — we can translate this as “Truth is”) even if we know very little about “what is” — and what little we know is puzzling, and almost useless. And on the other hand, we can ask why “Man” should be the privileged perceiver; are not the pig and the baboon (as “Sokrates” asked) equally good “measures” of what is and what is not? (B 1 — *Theaetetus* 161c).

Let us begin from Messrs. Pig and Baboon, and then come to Father Parmenides. The Pig and the Baboon will not have problems about “Truth” because their world will be simply and directly what they perceive (or remember they have perceived). We can say fairly certainly that Protagoras has thought about them, because (in Plato’s picture of him — *Protagoras* 334a-c) he refuses to define the Good as “what is useful *to humanity*” and insists there are things useful to horses and other animals rather than humans; and “the Good” is a more fundamental category in his thinking than “the True.” If the good of animals is part of our living concern — as it plainly is — then their “truth” can come into our consideration also. But what this reveals to us, philosophically, is how much more is involved in human “truth” than the simple sense-perceptions to which we must suppose the other animals to be confined. Whether our perceptions differ from those of the Pig and

the Baboon is not very important because perception is only the material foundation for the beliefs that we hold to be true — and it is our beliefs that we disagree about.

Suppose that some worthy citizen catches his young son stealing from him. What will he say? That “It is *wrong* to steal.” Why? Perhaps, “because the Gods have forbidden it.” Here, we enter a new dimension of the Protagorean theory of truth. Obviously Protagoras can say that this answer is “true” for the good citizen, and that the worthy man wants to make it “true” for his son. But *properly* (or in the philosophical view of it) it is *neither* “true” nor “false.” There are too many disagreements about who or what the Gods are, and what they want; and there is no way of reaching a consensus (as we can reach a consensus about colors that embraces even the color-blind).

Hence Protagoras began his essay *On the Gods* with the explicit assertion “About the Gods I have no means of knowing either that [or how] they exist, or that [or how] they do not exist. For there are many factors preventing knowledge: the unclarity [of their being] and the life of man being short” (B 4). “The Gods” here is a shorthand expression for the “true Being” of the philosophers (from Father Parmenides onwards). What is axiomatic about “true Being” is that it is not immediately *evident*; it is not “clear,” and easily identified by all eyes and minds. And what is practically obvious from the history of natural inquiries is that no consensus is going to be reached about it in any one human lifetime. Parmenides for example — who thought that his argument was so conclusive — has only started an endless controversy. For Protagoras, the proper conclusion is: “Leave it out.”

Parmenides has given birth to a type of “truth” which can be categorically rejected as not true at all. Even in the Protagorean universal-democratic conception of truth, there are views that are purely and simply *false* (because they are quite evidently so to all eyes). Zeno’s arguments (and his mathematical assumptions about the world) are false. Anyone who looks can see that there are no “points” in the world. There are circles and straight lines, but there are no mathematical *tangents*, touching at a single point (B 7 — *Metaphysics* 997 b 32).

This rejection of ideal rational standards was the crucial point of disagreement between Protagoras and Plato. Plato insisted that “God, not man is the measure” (*Laws* 716c); and he certainly knew that when Protagoras said that we cannot know whether the Gods exist, he meant to deny our knowledge not just of Zeus and Apollo, but of the divinity of Reason. We shall see (quite soon) that in the view of Protagoras, we do have to believe in Zeus and Apollo (even though we cannot be sure of their existence). This belief is not just socially useful; it is practically necessary. But the Gods of our belief are beings of myth and fantasy only. A human educator must acknowledge the Gods who are actually believed in by the community. But the *philosophical* “standpoint of God” is as impossible as a mathematical point.

In our actual world, two opposed positions are possible about every question. Plato and Protagoras have opposed views about mathematics, and about whether God can be known. Protagoras regards himself as a teacher of human virtue (or “excellence”); but it would come as no surprise to him that after he is dead, Plato’s Sokrates can not only argue that virtue is not teachable, but can even conduct a conversation with him, in which — with a proper respect for Protagoras’ views in his writings — the parties find that they have changed sides. That is the human situation, and the nature of argument itself. In philosophical argument more than two sides are quite possible; and Protagoras was interested in argument for its own sake. Thus in the famous day-long discussion with Perikles, the debate was about the death of a bystander stricken by a misdirected javelin thrown in an athletic contest. Was the javelin itself “responsible,” or the athlete who threw it, or the authorities who organized the games? (A 10 — Plutarch, *Pericles* 36).

In his professional life, Protagoras mainly had to deal with political and legal issues in which two views were in conflict: “our” side, and “their” side. So he wrote model discourses on both sides of many issues, and he made his students do the same.^{ix} He claimed that he could “make the weaker the stronger” (A 21, B 6b), in the sense of enabling a minority view to win out over a more popular one. In the mouths of his critics this became “make the worse appear the better cause”; and the climax of the critical reaction was reached when Aristophanes lets “Sokrates” organize a debate in which the “Unjust *Logos*” makes the “Just *Logos*” admit defeat (*Clouds* 889-1105; cf. 112-6). Thus

life actually did to Sokrates what “Sokrates” does to “Protagoras” in Plato’s dialogue. And, unlike Plato, life was equally unfair to both of them.

The fact that there are two sides to every question caused Protagoras to compare his own “art of life” with wrestling (B 8).^x His confidence that he could win any argument probably depended on the discovery of “Throwers” like the argument that “Man is the measure” (which puts all appeals to supposed objective standards out of court) or the unknowability of the Gods. But he would not have thought much of the so-called “recoil” argument which was supposed to be a “thrower” against his theory of truth. If every opinion is “true,” says the recoil, then the opinion that not every opinion is true, will overthrow it. The possibility of arguing like this — and the actual tactics in argument of some who were taken as followers of Protagoras — gave rise to the view that Protagoras denied the law of contradiction (A 15, A 19).^{xi} He may have held and said explicitly that all apparent truths are equally grounded in “what is” (A 14).^{xii} But this only shows us that philosophical propositions must refer to the total situation in which an assertion is made. We can see, evidently enough, from his critique of the mathematicians, that Protagoras had no quarrel with the law of contradiction as such.

3. The practice of Education

Protagoras was an educator. He saw himself as the teacher of the knowledge and skill that civilized society needs. We must begin in our youth to become good citizens; and civic excellence requires both natural ability and discipline (B 3).^{xiii} Every good citizen, or good parent, is teaching civic virtue all the time, just as we teach children their native language by talking to them. Protagoras himself is an expert at doing what everyone does, being “rather better than anyone else at helping a man to acquire a good and noble character” (*Protagoras* 327e-328a, 328b). He is the advanced professor who completes the training of leaders for the political community.

A political community has to have its own view of the aims and purposes of its life, and of the necessary or desirable life-conduct of its members. This is what is contained in its customs and

constitutional laws; it is maintained and communicated through the communal education (beginning with and including the domestic upbringing of children). But this “Great Logos” is also maintained through the system of criminal law under which those who do not conform at the level of what is deemed minimally necessary are punished. The rationale of criminal justice is not *retribution*, although the retribution of the Gods may be spoken of in the myth that is regularly told and generally believed; the better (wiser, more rational) understanding of punishment is to see it as *reformatory* (or *exemplary*). All punishment, beginning with the correction of childish misdeeds by word or slap, is part of the educational process. Everyone in the community shares in the sense of justice and civic virtue, because they must; at the very least they must pretend to have this virtue, even if they have it not. The agreed way of life is the “Great *Logos*” that must prevail over — even if it is not directly embodied in — every personal *logos* (the standing interpretation that one makes of one’s individual life in the world).^{xiv}

Protagoras promised “to make the weaker <*logos*> the stronger” (A 21).^{xv} This promise applied within the restraining context of the political constitution and customs (the “Great Logos”) of the community. He did not offer to help the womenfolk become participants in politics, or the slaves to achieve liberation. His promise was addressed to those who already had the right to participate in political deliberation. Speaking in Athens, to an audience of Athenians, he presents his social theory as a rational justification of the “great *Logos*” of the Athenian democracy; and by considering his argument about how a rational person regards punishment we can see that his educational theory of society contains an implicit ideal of participatory democracy that is perfectly universal; even the opinions of the young children should be heeded — and they must be able to recognize that they are being listened to — if our educational activity is to be maximally effective. But we must not think of Protagoras himself as an ideological democrat. Sparta will not let him in at all, because he is a social rationalist; but he can go anywhere else, and teach any would-be political leader how to understand the rationale of his actual community. Here in Athens, he justifies the attention paid to every “smith and shoemaker” in the political Assembly. But he says nothing about the womenfolk, who are not consulted at all, or about the slave population — which outnumbers the citizen body, males and females together. His argument is that civilized life depends on a

unanimous consensus about the communal way of life. Every community will define itself differently. But those who are excluded from the defining process, must have “civic virtue” as much as those who participate. In fact, the servile majority will be disciplined more harshly than the citizens for any failings; and the story of the prosecution of Protagoras himself shows both how far the Athenian democracy itself was from Protagorean rationality, and how essential its mythic consciousness of the Gods was to it.

The “great *Logos*” itself has evolved through an educational process. Otherwise we humans would be worse than the Pig and the Baboon. We should be like the “savages” introduced in a Greek comedy that may have been influenced by Protagoras.^{xvi} With the evident intention of showing how important religion is in the process of community-maturation, Protagoras presented his theory of the evolution of human society in a “myth.”^{xvii} Mortal creatures (humans and other animals) were created at the appropriate time by “the Gods” (i.e. by the forces of Nature) out of “earth and fire” (as the Ionians and the Italians now agree) and other things (because the natural philosophers can only guess at how we emerged in any case). Prometheus and Epimetheus (Forethought and Afterthought — Forethought is Reason guided by the perceptual experience that is reflected upon in Afterthought) were put in charge of all mortal life. First, the native capacities of the other animals were developed by After-thought (i.e. they learned by experience how to use what gifts they had in order to survive). Many special adaptations to the environment evolved naturally, without any designing mind that *we* know about (since we can only reflect on the way things actually are). But there was no adequate means of survival for humanity that could simply be learned by experience. So Forethought finally had to take care of us. (That is to say, we must learn to *use* the rest of Nature as *tools* for our survival.) First, therefore, Prometheus stole skills from Athena and Hephaestos (such as weaving or making clothes, together with fire and fire-skills such as cooking).^{xviii} But humans had still no “political wisdom” (no “great *Logos*”). They lived in families, or in small tribal groups. They were the “Wild Men” of Pherekrates.

Political wisdom was in the keeping of Zeus, and self-preservative utilitarian prudence could not achieve it. But humanity “had a share in the portion of the Gods.” In other words, human beings

are *naturally* religious. Forethought — the *human* capacity — causes the projection of the forces of Nature as Gods; and in particular we recognize Zeus, the “father of Gods and men,” as the keeper of the lightning, and of the other natural terrors of the sky that are his “sentinels.” The foundation of all human existence, the capacity that makes “forethought” itself possible, is *language*. Language makes possible the *sharing* of experience, and the communication of the emotions expressed in religion. So the tribes begin to build altars to the Gods (Zeus, Athena, Hephaestos). Even as they are themselves inventing the arts, they ascribe them to divine givers. For, after all, no mere man is remembered as the *first* to do anything. We learn everything from others, so all of our traditional life-skills must have come, originally, from the Gods.

When the small natural communities were on the verge of wiping one another out, Zeus, the Lord and Father of all, sent Hermes (the conductor of the souls of the dead to Hades) to distribute “reverence and justice” to all of us. This *aidos* (which I render as “reverence”) is something more developed than the primitive awe of the unknown, which was the root of religion at the tribal stage. Hermes, here, is the figure of impending death at the hands of some neighboring tribal group. The “reverence” that Hermes brings to us is a respect for the other tribe’s life (and their religion) as equal in worth and dignity with our own; and “justice” is the convention we agree to that makes it possible for us to live together with other tribes on the basis of that respect. It is at this stage that Zeus is recognized as Father *and King* of us all. Soon we are intermarrying readily and our “tribal” affiliations are virtually forgotten. We have finally become properly *political*, and we share a “great *Logos*.” We no longer carry on tribal feuds, and we have surrendered the administration of criminal justice — especially the death-penalty — to a constitutional authority. We have recognized Hermes as the *herald* of Zeus.^{xix} (When human religion reached *political* maturity, Prometheus was punished as a thief; and he deserved it. Protagoras himself is Prometheus, and he almost got what he deserved from the religious.)

We can express the division represented by the mythical intervention of Zeus, as the distinction of “nature” from “convention.” But this is not quite how Protagoras seems to have seen it. His theory of truth does not permit any very precise separation of *physis* from *nomos* (as we shall

see very soon in his theory of “correct diction”). But the gifts of Zeus are what makes the “social contract” possible; and the necessity for a *religious* sanction is an implicit control over “the law of the stronger.” Political society begins (perhaps) with the stark necessity of survival, and the consequent authority of brute force; but it *ought* to move towards the rule of persuasion, and the establishment of consensual obedience to constituted law.^{xx}

Protagoras himself is a sceptic about the Gods. But he must respect the pieties of every community that he enters. Otherwise he may be put to death. He wants to teach those who have the capacity, and the opportunity (the material resources) for advanced education in politics, how to become effective community leaders. The education that they have already had is almost entirely literary; and the tradition that they share with their less fortunate fellow citizens is all enshrined in myths, and in oral poetry. So as well as teaching the technique of arguing on both sides of any particular question, and the method of discovering “throwers” which will enable one to win any verbal wrestling match, Protagoras teaches his students how to use the respected wisdom and authority of the poets to achieve their own political goals. It was no accident that he called Homer “the first Sophist.” Homer is his patron saint. He can only go where Homer’s songs are remembered and sung as the most precious communal heritage; and he was in fact a good critical interpreter of Homer.^{xxi}

He wrote about correct diction (A 26, A 24);^{xxii} and since he must surely have agreed with Hermogenes (in Plato’s *Cratylus*) that names are conventional rather than natural, it would be interesting to know more precisely what the standard of “correctness” was. But we can see from the jokes of Aristophanes that the standard was based upon the “great *Logos*” of the Greek community as a whole, and that it may have involved appealing to our universal perceptual experience of “the natural order.” Protagoras wanted to rationalize the genders of nouns in Greek speech in accordance with our experience of natural gender. “Sokrates” says that male equipment, and even passions conventionally regarded as proper for men ought to be masculine in speech also — and women’s things and passions, feminine (A 28, C 3).^{xxiii}

We can get some idea of what a Protagorean rhetorical poetry-lesson was like, from the way that he examines Sokrates about the poem of Simonides in Plato's dialogue. He suggests that Simonides is inconsistent; and Sokrates has to become the defender of the poem's consistency. The first efforts of Sokrates are rejected as worse than the proposed inconsistent reading; and finally Sokrates embarks upon a continuous exposition. Here we can assume that he is mimicking the habitual procedure of Protagoras himself (*Protagoras* 338e-347a).^{xxiv}

How Protagoras taught his pupils to *use* the poets in their speeches can also be seen in the argument of Sokrates with Polemarchos in the first book of the *Republic*. Polemarchos is plainly one of the rich and ambitious young men who have studied with Protagoras. He quotes Simonides' definition of justice as "giving to each his due"; and explicates the meaning as "doing good to friends and harm to enemies." Life, he implies, is to be thought of (with appropriate allowances in its different dimensions) as a contest like a wrestling match. This is the view of Protagoras; and Polemarchos' definition of *political* justice is just what follows directly from Protagoras' own myth. One ought to be absolutely loyal — willing even to sacrifice one's life — to the "great *Logos*" of one's own *polis*. In showing Polemarchos that it cannot be truly *just* to do harm to anyone, Sokrates brings out one of the most important facets of Plato's disagreement with Protagoras.

If we turn, finally, to the vexing question of "What 'man' is the measure of truth?" (the singular individual, or the rational universal), we can uncover the deep affinity between Plato and Protagoras. Both of them regard the world as an educational institution — a place of soulmaking; and in this context the alternative "singular or universal man" is quite inappropriate. For the singular "wild man" who has no society, there is no "truth" except that of Pig or Baboon; one must have a "great *Logos*" in order for there to be truth (or correct speaking) at all. But the community involved usually is not (it usually *cannot* be) "humanity as such"; and whatever community it may be (or however it is defined if it is a theoretical ideal) it is *my* community because it recognizes me as a member, and because I *take* it to be mine. The Athenians believed that they were doing right in their condemnation both of Protagoras and of Sokrates. Thus the Protagorean criterion of truth is neither the individual as such nor universal humanity as such. It is the speaker or agent herself

(speaking universally in *Plato's* way for the moment) defining the meaning of her own life and recognizing her own responsibility; and that definition is made in the context of some specific community.^{xxv}

This is the message of the Speaker in the Myth of Er. Our “truth” is the “Great Logos” that we are *responsible* to, and for. It is Plato who makes this completely explicit; but if we look back to the argument of Sokrates with Polemarchos, we can clearly see why Protagoras was right to insist that we must not identify our “truth” with “God.” Whenever all participants in a discussion agree, the argument stops. We have the only “measure” that we need, and the best one that we can hope to achieve; and it is never *final*.

Thus there is a deep irony (and a kind of “wild justice”) in the accusations (repeated several times, and not always by Plato’s enemies) that Plato “plagiarized” from Protagoras; and considering how unlucky we have been in respect of the survival of Protagoras’ works (or even of fragmentary quotations), we must be profoundly grateful for those “plagiarisms” (B 2, B 5).^{xxvi}

Notes

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- i. All of the material in Diels-Kranz is translated in R.K. Sprague (ed.), *The Older Sophists*, Columbia SC, 1972. A 5 is from Plato, *Protagoras* 317c; and A 8 is from *Meno* 91e; A 1, 56. Plato's testimony suggests a birthday before 484 BCE; for the Magi see A 2. From what "Sokrates" says in the *Meno* (91d) we may hazard the guess that Protagoras first came to Athens around 460 BCE, when Sokrates himself was still a child.
 - ii. It is important that Homer was the *universal educator* of Greece. Protagoras was willing to educate anyone who could and would pay. Everyone accepted it as normal that doctors should be paid. But the sale of political skill upset those who thought that the proper exercise of political power presupposed more than money. Protagoras himself was a *Periklean* democrat, rather than an ideologist of social equality; and several of the professional Sophists were supporters of political oligarchy, who thought that political power ought to be in the hands of those who were rich enough to be educated as well as possible in the best tradition of their culture. (Most of their potential customers took this "oligarchic" position for granted — see especially Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, chapters 2, 5, 6.)
 - iii. Perikles owed some part of his great skill in political debate to Protagoras. Plutarch (*Perikles*, 8) says he could argue himself out of apparent defeats; and J. de Romilly (1993, 88) points out that he is never opposed in a Thucydidean debate. He could not always prevent the banishment of his freethinking friends; but Protagoras, at least, was unmolested while Perikles was alive — his prosecutor was one of the oligarchic revolutionaries of 411 BCE (de Romilly, 213-4).

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- iv. Diogenes Laertios (A 1) and Eusebios (A 4) say that those who owned his books had to give them up for public burning.
 - v. The “condemned to death” version may have been influenced by the subsequent case of Sokrates himself.
 - vi. Guthrie (III, 264) divides the titles in a different way. My titles only represent recognizably distinct topics in Protagoras’ work. Some other works — or some of my “alternatives” — may have been separate. One would like to hope that the catalog was based on that of the Library at Alexandria — but that is only a guess.
 - vii. I quote from Sextus; but see also Plato, *Theaetetos*, 151e-152a; *Theaetetos*, 161c tells us that this statement came at the beginning of the book called *Truth*; Sextus says it was at the beginning of *Throwers*).
 - viii. It seems clear that Diogenes of Apollonia made this response. But as a physician he had to accept the “truth” of a patient’s aberrant perception.
 - ix. We have a collection of “Double Arguments” (*Dissoi Logoi*) that look like the notebook of someone who studied with one of the disciples of Protagoras. Among the topics examined from both sides is “Whether Wisdom and Virtue are reachable.” (This collection belongs to the generation of Plato, rather than that of Sokrates — see D.-K. 90.)
 - x. Plato (*Sophist*, 232de) speaks as if Protagoras wrote a treatise “On Wrestling and the other Arts.” Actually it is clear that he regarded *argument* as verbal wrestling — compare the title

“Throwers,” which is probably the treatise that “Theaetetus” is referring to at that point in the dialogue.

- xi. Demokritos used the “recoil” — 80 A 15 is 68 A 114, but see also 68 A 113.
- xii. Even this claim by Sextus may simply be a wrongheaded inference about an absolute “Being” with which Protagoras himself did not want to be concerned. It involves the methodical assumption of Leukippos and Demokritos rather than that of Protagoras.
- xiii. Compare further Plato, *Protagoras*, 323d. This was a topic which Protagoras seems to have opened up, but which soon became a commonplace. We find it in Demokritos (68 B 242) and in later Sophists (e.g. Antiphon, 87 B 60, and Kritias, 88 B 9).
- xiv. See *Protagoras*, 323a-327a; my interpretation of the expression “great *Logos*” is a hypothesis only — but compare 80 B 3.
- xv. This is Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a 23. Compare 80 C 2 (Aristophanes, *Clouds* 112ff, 889ff).
- xvi. Plato, *Protagoras*, 327d makes Protagoras refer to the “Wild Men” of Pherekrates as “produced last year” (420 BCE). This confuses the dramatic date of the dialogue — which seems otherwise to be about 433 BCE. But if the comedy was inspired by views of Protagoras that became known in Athens in (or after) 433, the reference is a natural one. (It is also a plausible hypothesis that Protagoras was in Athens when Pherekrates put on this comedy.)

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- xvii. *Protagoras*, 320c-322d. By saying “Protagoras presented his theory” (not “Protagoras”) I am indicating my conviction that Plato has taken the myth directly from one of Protagoras’ books. That, of course, is only a hypothesis.
- xviii. The theft of fire is, of course, traditional. Even the additions to the story come mainly from Hesiod. It is clear that Protagoras set out to *interpret* Hesiod in order both to recommend his own social theory, and to confirm its “wisdom.”
- xix. It is in this connection that a discussion of “Those in Hades” (80 A 1, 55; cf. B 8h) would have been relevant. For the particular importance of the death-penalty see *Protagoras*, 325a. It is *mythically* represented by the fact that Zeus uses *Hermes* as his messenger. The whole myth is about *mortal* creatures, and especially about the one who has a “share in the divine” — i.e. a calculative capacity that becomes proper *social* prudence, through its *religious* evolution.
- xx. If Protagoras wrote his theory out in plain prose somewhere, then he may be the direct source of Diodoros I, 7; but it is more likely that Demokritos understood his “myth” and wrote out the theory. (In any case, Demokritos agreed with Protagoras.)
- xxi. See Guthrie, III, 269 for quotation and references. (The “myth” that Plato has preserved for us, shows what he could do with Hesiod.)
- xxii. The authority is Plato (*Phaedrus*, 266d-267d and *Cratylus*, 391bc); but compare C 3 (*Clouds* 658-79). Protagoras had many followers in this sphere too — especially Prodikos. Compare also Demokritos among the natural philosophers (cf. 68 B 26).

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- xxiii. A 28 is from Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 173b 17. (I assume that the proposal in C 3 about men's and women's *things* is a comic exaggeration of Protagoras' serious proposal for gender rationalization in Greek grammar.)
- xxiv. Probably Plato has satirically inverted the roles. Protagoras (as Sokrates) claims inconsistency; and Sokrates (as Protagoras) defends the poem. Notice that Sokrates appeals to Prodikos for help (which is readily given) — at 339e-340e; and Hippias is eager to give *his* interpretation as soon as Sokrates is finished. (Many Sophists followed the lead of Protagoras in this area.)
- xxv. I am claiming that — implicitly anyway — Protagoras agreed with Sokrates: the only “measure” we need to be concerned about is the voluntary agreement of the party we are arguing with — or our agreement with him (see especially *Gorgias* 427BC). But Protagoras took this view for sceptical utilitarian reasons — and Sokrates on more *existential* grounds.
- xxvi. Porphyry (B 2) who was certainly not a hostile witness. Aristoxenos (B 5), was hostile. Diogenes Laertios says that Aristoxenos claimed that “nearly all of the *Republic*” was plagiarized. But I think that what Aristoxenos actually said was “nearly all of *the beginning*.”