

## PROTAGORAS' DOCTRINE OF JUSTICE AND VIRTUE IN THE 'PROTAGORAS' OF PLATO

PROTAGORAS has just been presented with a new pupil, Hippocrates, and he states what he proposes to teach him—such prudence in domestic affairs as will best enable him to regulate his own household, and such wisdom in public affairs as will best qualify him to speak and act in affairs of state (318e). Socrates asks is this the art of politics and is Protagoras undertaking to make men good citizens, and Protagoras agrees (319a). Socrates replies that he had supposed that this art could not be taught, and he gives two grounds: (1) the Athenians are agreed to be wise men, yet, while they call in experts in the assembly to advise them on technical matters, they regard all citizens alike as capable of advising them on matters pertaining to the city (319b-d); (2) the wisest and best of the citizens are not able to hand this virtue on to others. So Pericles educated his sons well in all that could be taught by teachers, but he did not try to teach them, or have them taught his own wisdom, but left them to pick it up unaided (319d-320b).

Now Protagoras, it has been pointed out,<sup>1</sup> is in a difficult position. He is apparently confronted with the choice of admitting that virtue cannot be taught and that his profession is a fraud, or of declaring that the theory of Athenian democracy is false, and his patron, Pericles, is ignorant of the true nature of political virtue. His reply takes the form of a myth, followed by a set argument (Logos). Some have regarded his reply as 'a tissue of obscure and contradictory ideas,'<sup>2</sup> while others who have recognised its skill, have regarded it as failing in one way or another to give a satisfactory answer to Socrates' objections.<sup>3</sup> It is the aim of what follows to show that Protagoras' answer is perfectly satisfactory if rightly understood, and that the contrary opinions are due to misunderstandings of what Protagoras actually says in the dialogue.

The myth proper extends from 320c8 to 322d5. It is followed by an explanatory passage 322d5-323a4, and this in turn is followed by what might seem to be a series of independent arguments down to 324d1. Then Protagoras says one difficulty still remains (that of the sons of good men). 'For this point, Socrates, I shall not now (οὐκέτι) tell you a myth, but a Logos.' This sentence makes two things plain: the Logos begins here only and not earlier at 323a4, and in some sense the discussion of the myth is regarded as continuing right down to this point, 324d1. As the myth proper clearly ends at 322d5, this can only mean that the whole section 322d5-324d1 is regarded as an explanation and application of the myth. The last sentence of the section then, 324c5-d1, must be regarded as summarising the contents of the myth.

The myth proper (320c8-322d5) describes how, before the fated day<sup>4</sup> on which mortal creatures were to come up to the light from inside the earth, Epimetheus distributed the various 'powers' among the animals on an equalising principle, to secure them protection both against one another and against the elements (320d-321c). But human beings received none of these powers and so lacked protection. Accordingly, Prometheus stole for them skill in crafts together with fire, thus enabling them to live. Clearly all this takes place *before* men come up to the light of day for the first time. On reaching the earth's surface, men develop religion, speech, and the material elements of civilisation. For defence against wild animals they founded fortified posts (Poleis), but as they lacked the art of politics injustice prevented them from living together and they soon scattered again (322a-b). Accordingly, Zeus sent Hermes to give men Aidos and Dike to secure their protection. The crafts had been distributed among men in the same way as the powers among the animals, namely different crafts to different people. But Aidos and Dike are to be given to all men, and all men are to share in them. Any man who is unable to share in them is to be killed, as being a plague to the city.

So ends the myth proper; in the following section (322d5-324d1) the main points made are: (1) that the Athenians rightly listen to advice from all citizens on the affairs of the city, on the ground that all men share in political virtue; (2) a man who declares himself unjust is mad; (3) political virtue is not in man by nature, but springs from teaching and practice; (4) this is shown by the fact that punishments are inflicted for injustice but not for natural deficiencies.

It has been argued above that the whole of this passage is an application and interpretation of the myth. For this view to be acceptable it must be shown that the passage fits the myth proper and does not contradict its contents. This, in turn, depends on a right understanding of the myth itself. Two points here are of vital importance for a correct understanding of the myth. I. Does Protagoras mean that all men possess Aidos and Dike by nature?<sup>5</sup> It seems clear that the powers

<sup>1</sup> Prof. J. S. Morrison in *CQ* XXXV (1941), 7. This article is in a sense the starting point for what follows, and the criticisms here expressed in no way affect its main contentions.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Th. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, E.T. II. 309 ff., Frutiger, *Les mythes de Platon*, 183-4.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *Plato*<sup>4</sup> 243; Raeder, *Platons philosophische Entwick-*

*lung*<sup>2</sup>, 108; Morrison, *op. cit.* 8; Pohlenz, *Aus Platons Werdezeit*, 87 ff.

<sup>4</sup> The same day for both animals and men, cf. 320d4 with 321c6-7.

<sup>5</sup> This is stated by Zeller, *Ph. d. Gr.* I<sup>5</sup> 1120; Raeder, *op. cit.* 108; Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, 82 n. 2; Pohlenz, *op. cit.* 86.

of the animals are regarded as being by nature, and it is possible that the skill in crafts is so possessed by human beings. It was given to mankind before they began their life on this earth, and it is to man what the powers are to the animals. But Aidos and Dike are in a different position—they are something got after man has been living in the world. Zeus commands that all men should share in them, and makes provision for those who can't. It is true that the provision is death, but this suggests that their natures can't be altered, not that Zeus is adding something to the nature of man as such. The fact that all men are regarded as sharing in Aidos and Dike is not in itself sufficient to show that they do so *by nature*. The position of Aidos and Dike in the myth is sufficiently distinct from that of skill in crafts to raise no difficulty if we find other reason to deny that the former are in man by nature. We have in fact the strongest possible reason for supposing that Protagoras does not regard them as shared by nature. He himself says (323c3-8), 'these then are the reasons I give why they rightly allow every man to offer his advice regarding matters involving this (political) virtue, because they believe that every man has a share in it; but that they consider it to be not by nature nor of spontaneous growth, but in whomsoever it is present, the result of teaching and practice, this I will next endeavour to demonstrate'. Nothing could be more emphatic—political virtue is both shared in by all men and is not by nature. Protagoras puts the statement in the words of the Athenians, but he is defending their view and identifying it with his own. We have already seen that the whole of this passage is regarded by Protagoras as an explanation of the myth proper.

One possible objection must be met. A famous fragment of Protagoras<sup>6</sup> says, 'teaching needs nature and practice', and this is interpreted to mean that teaching requires a natural disposition to be taught. That Protagoras did posit such natural dispositions is true, and, as will be seen, is relevant to a later part of the present argument. But these natural dispositions cannot be identified with Aidos and Dike, nor is Protagoras saying that, by teaching, Aidos and Dike develop into political virtue.<sup>7</sup> An attentive reading of the text from 322d5 to 323c8 shows that Aidos and Dike are for Protagoras the *same* as political virtue, and what Hermes brings to man is not the rudiments or materials for political virtue, but political virtue itself. In fact, the terms Aidos and Dike occur only in the myth proper. The explanation of the myth speaks immediately of everyone sharing in political virtue (323a2), and in the following lines we have 'justice and the rest of political virtue' used as a synonym for Aidos and Dike, with the same phrases applied to it as were applied to them in the Myth (*cf.* especially 323a3, 323c1-2 with 322d5). It is impossible to maintain that Protagoras is here making any distinction—if he were it would destroy the whole point of his argument, which is that because all men share in political virtue they are rightly all consulted on questions involving it. We must accordingly conclude that so far as any rate Protagoras regards all men as sharing in political virtue and in Aidos and Dike, not by nature, but in some other way.<sup>8</sup>

II. Were all men regarded as sharing equally in Aidos and Dike? This is often stated to have been the view of Protagoras. There is no evidence for it whatever.<sup>9</sup> It is certainly not implied by the Greek verb for sharing.<sup>10</sup> Even if Aidos and Dike were *by nature* it would not follow that they were equally shared in by all. Indeed, it would be an extraordinary thing to claim that all men were equally just, and equal in political virtue, yet this would be involved on this supposition, as we have seen that Protagoras does not distinguish them from Aidos and Dike. Again and again in the discussion which follows the myth and in the Logos we shall see that Protagoras is supposing that the participation is not equal.

Once it be granted that for Protagoras Aidos and Dike, though shared in by all, are not *by nature*, and are not shared equally, the inconsistencies and contradictions of which Protagoras has been accused fade away. Upon the conclusion of the myth proper, Protagoras proceeds to apply and expound its meaning. Since all men share in political virtue, the Athenians and others rightly allow all citizens to advise them on political questions (322d5-323a4). It is not, of course, suggested that all advice is of equal value or that all men are equally qualified to give advice, only that no one is without some qualifications. This is made clear in the sentence immediately following (323a5-c2). Unlike the crafts, in the case of justice and the rest of political virtue a man who is unjust and says so is regarded as mad—all men are expected to assert they are just whether they are or not, as everyone must in some sense (ἀμῶς γέ πως) share in justice or not be among men. This argument seems often to have been regarded<sup>11</sup> in such a way that a curious inconsistency is involved.

<sup>6</sup> Diels<sup>5</sup> 80B3.

<sup>7</sup> The view expressed by Heinemann, *Nomos und Physis*, 116; Loenen, *Protagoras*, p. 11 and n. 28; A. Levi, in *Mind* XLIX (1940), 294 n. 4; and implied in many other discussions, e.g. Jaeger, *Paideia*, E.T. II. 115.

<sup>8</sup> The denial that Justice was by nature is attributed to Protagoras and his supporters by Plato in *Theaetetus* 172b. Cornford, *ad loc.*, argues curiously that this passage does not refer to Protagoras, in part on the ground that in the *Protagoras* Plato ascribes to Protagoras the doctrine that Aidos and Dike are by nature. As a result he is forced to adopt a strained interpretation of the passage in the *Theaetetus*. Though Protagoras is not named, there is no reason to doubt the same

doctrine is referred to in *Laus* 889e, and in Cicero, *De Legibus* I. 46-7, on which see Untersteiner, *La dottrina di Protagora e un nuovo testo dossografico* in *Riv. di Filol.* xxii-xxiii (1944-45), 21 ff. In Euripides *Supp.* 911, Aidos is the product of upbringing. This passage almost certainly has the doctrine of Protagoras in view, *cf.* Morrison, *op. cit.* 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Pointed out by Loenen, *op. cit.* 12-13, who refers to supporters of the view. To them add Untersteiner, *La fisiologia del mito* 311.

<sup>10</sup> μετέχω. Where an equal share is meant, ἐξ ἴσου or its equivalent is added, e.g. in Plato, *Rep.* VIII, 557a.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Gomperz, E.T. II. 310.

Protagoras is supposed to be saying that a proof that all men possess justice lies in the fact that *when they don't have it*, they ought not to say that they do not have it. This fantastic interpretation seems to rest on two assumptions: (1) that 'unjust' here means 'without justice altogether', as if it were 'not sharing in Dike'; (2) that Protagoras supposes that all men share equally in justice. Once these assumptions are dropped, no difficulty arises. What Protagoras is saying is that when men act unjustly *in any respect*, they must not profess it. As all men have a share in justice, they could and ought to have acted justly on this particular occasion. Accordingly, they must expect blame not sympathy if they admit to injustice.

Having shown in this way that all men are regarded as possessing some share in justice and political virtue, Protagoras immediately goes on to declare that this share is not *by nature*, nor is it acquired of its own accord, but from instruction and by practice (323c3-324d1). Men do not punish others for natural or chance defects, but they do punish them for failure to learn. In fact, in civilised societies punishment is a sort of teaching. Punishment is inflicted for deficiencies in justice and virtue. So on both grounds justice and virtue are regarded as teachable. So much Protagoras bases on his myth, and before leaving it he sums up the two main conclusions once again: Virtue is shared in by all and can be the product of teaching (324c5-d1).

At this point Protagoras abandons the myth and proceeds with his Logos. Three main points remain to be dealt with: (1) how all men get their share in virtue if not by nature; (2) why good men on the common view do not teach their sons virtue; (3) why the sons of outstanding men so often fail to show the excellence of their parents. He answers that as virtue is the basis of all activities, so it is taught in all the standard forms of teaching—by parents, nurses, school-teachers, music-teachers, and gymnastic instructors. In addition, it is taught by the whole community through laws and punishments. It is important to notice that Protagoras is not simply saying that people absorb the traditions of the community in which they live unconsciously—it is no chance matter, it is an essential part of the formal teaching all receive. It was Socrates who had suggested the unconscious view of moral education.<sup>12</sup> Protagoras' answer is quite definite: good men do have their sons educated in virtue, and take great trouble over it (*cf.* especially 325d7-9). His point is that the teaching of virtue is universal throughout the community and that those who teach it have no special *names* as teachers of virtue. It is the same point he made earlier in the dialogue when he said there had been many sophists before himself who lacked only the name (316d3-e5).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the difference between parents and children in virtue is to be explained as due to variations in natural aptitude in the persons concerned. This will always show itself when all people have practically the same teaching and the same opportunities to learn. In addition, some people get more schooling than others (326c3-6) and some teachers are better than others. Such a teacher Protagoras considers himself to be (328a8-b5).

The Logos which so concludes is not a continuation of the myth, it is rather an alternative to it. So Protagoras claims that the Logos and the myth each show that virtue can be taught and explain the difference in virtue between sons and fathers (328c3-6). Both likewise clearly offer explanations of how all men share in virtue. Accordingly, the universal instruction in virtue in the Logos should be regarded as an alternative statement of the conferring of Aidos and Dike by Zeus in the myth. The two are the same thing, the one expressed in mythical form, the other in rationalised form. The conferring of Aidos and Dike *is* the teaching which all people receive in the community.<sup>14</sup>

So interpreted Protagoras' reply to Socrates' objections is consistent throughout. To recapitulate, Socrates objected that virtue could not be taught, because all men are regarded as sharing in it, and those pre-eminent in virtue do not hand on their pre-eminence to their sons. Protagoras replies that all men share in virtue *because* they are all taught it, and the difference between parents and sons is due to differences in natural aptitudes for learning.

It remains to consider some general criticisms of Protagoras' answer.

I. It has been said that Socrates' objections concern the craft of politics, the art of being a good statesman and ruler. Protagoras' answer refers to good citizens, and the teaching of men to be good as citizens, *i.e.* as subjects rather than as rulers.<sup>15</sup> To this it may be replied that if there is any confusion it is due to Socrates not to Protagoras. It is Socrates, not Protagoras, who makes the substitution of terms in the first instance—you seem to me to be speaking of the craft of politics and to be promising to make men good citizens (319a3-5), and in the objections which follow, Socrates speaks of virtue (Arete) throughout, not of Craft (Techne). Secondly, it is clear that Protagoras supposed that the same qualities were required in good rulers and in good subjects (*cf.* especially 326d6-7). It was in fact the natural assumption for Greeks to make at the time.<sup>16</sup> We may question it, but Socrates does not. Plato in the *Republic* seems sadly aware that special qualities may be required to obtain office, but he does not admit them as necessary for the just exercise of

<sup>12</sup> So οὐδ' ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου in 323c5-6 is a direct denial of αὐτομάτοι in 320a2. Taylor, *op. cit.* 246, seems to forget this when he says that 'goodness is merely picked up in the main automatically'.

<sup>13</sup> For this *cf.* Prof. Morrison in *Durham University Journal*, XLI (1948-49), 57 ff.

<sup>14</sup> This point is made by J. Moreau, *La construction de l'idéalisme platonicien*, p. 37; *cf.* also O. Gigon in *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühlh*, pp. 97-8.

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, *op. cit.* 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Cf.* Raeder, *op. cit.* 108 n. 1.

the art of the ruler. When we remember that it is Athenian democracy that Protagoras is defending, we need not regard the objection as a very substantial one.

II. Protagoras' reply has been interpreted as an argument that the Athenian people subscribe to two incompatible principles—that everyone possesses virtue and that virtue is taught.<sup>17</sup> There is nothing inconsistent in these two principles, provided it is remembered that Protagoras never says that everyone possesses virtue by nature. It is perfectly reasonable to claim that everyone possesses some degree of moral insight and so is entitled to be heard in discussions in the Assembly, and at the same time degrees of virtue will differ, and the best man should hold the highest offices in the state.

III. It has been objected that the argument involves the identification of goodness with the actual traditions of an existing civilised state. So when Protagoras claims to be able to teach virtue to Athenians, as he does at the end of his speech, he would need to claim exceptional ability in catching the tone of the social traditions after only a few visits.<sup>18</sup> This is surely a perverse criticism. The virtue with which Protagoras is concerned is repeatedly stated to be the condition of all cities<sup>19</sup>—without it no Polis can exist. The criticism in fact is not one which arises from the *Protagoras* at all—it derives from the doctrine attributed to (and certainly held by) Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* (166d seq) 'whatever practices seem just and laudable to each city, are so for that city as long as it holds them'. A full discussion of this point would require a consideration of the whole doctrine of the relativism of Protagoras which cannot be attempted here. But it can be said at once that the *Theaetetus* provides no basis for the present criticism. The doctrine there attributed to Protagoras has as a corollary, that while whatever seems just to any city is so, in place of practices which are harmful the wise man substitutes others that are beneficial (167c4-7). It is perfectly clear in the *Theaetetus* that the sophist is regarded as capable of changing the views of a whole community as to what is held just. His function cannot be merely therefore to express and teach what the community already believes.

IV. Protagoras postulates virtue as a condition of social life; at the same time he represents it as a product, through teaching, of social life.<sup>20</sup> This is a standing problem for sociological realists and behaviouristic theories of ethics. Protagoras' answer, if not satisfying, is clear and consistent. Men, before societies existed, were unable to form societies, because they lacked what they could learn only from and through societies. Accordingly, divine intervention was required to enable the process to start.

V. One weakness in Protagoras' theory remains to be considered. It is not a matter of inconsistency but rather a matter of vagueness. Protagoras has not so far made clear what he means by virtue, and it is the regular Socratic position that it is impossible to tell whether virtue is teachable or not until its nature is first understood.<sup>21</sup> This forms the subject matter of the remainder of the dialogue. It was the weak point in Protagoras' armour, and it is here that Socrates is able to reveal confusion in Protagoras' mind.

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<sup>17</sup> Morrison, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.* 245-7.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. very clearly 324e2-325b1.

<sup>20</sup> J. Moreau, *op. cit.* 37 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Plato's *Meno*, *passim*.