PROTAGORAS: Reading Selection #2

Head-note: These two introductory pages list the principal Protagorean material stripped of context. “Text #” refers to item numbers in the selection from Graham’s edition/translation that follows.

FRAGMENTS

Fragment 1. Man-Measure (Texts 1, 16-19)  
Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not.  
[πάντων χρησμάτων ἐναι μέτρον τῶν ἄνθρωπον, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν]

Fragment 2. Appearance (Text 21)  
The being of things that are consists in being manifest. . . It is manifest to you who are present that I am sitting, but to one who is absent it is not manifest that I am sitting; it is non-evident whether I am sitting or not. [And all things that are consist in their being manifest] For instance, I see the moon, another does not; it is non-evident whether it is or is not.

Fragment 3. Concerning the Gods (Texts 3, 29-31)  
Concerning the gods I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one’s knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man’s life.  
[περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὐθ' ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ' ὡς, ὡς οὐκ ὡς ὡς ὡς ὡς ὡς ὡς ὡς]  

Fragment 4. On Pericles (Text 39)  
Although his sons were young and noble, and both died in a period of eight days, he [Pericles] bore up without grieving. For he maintained his peace of mind, from which he benefited greatly every day in good fortune, freedom from sorrow, and a good reputation among the people (τὴν ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖσι δόξαν). For everyone who saw him bearing his own suffering patiently judged him to be noble, courageous, and self-controlled (μεγαλόφρον' τε καὶ ἀνδρείαν ἐδόκει εἶναι καὶ ἔαυτοῦ κρείσσον), as they were vividly aware of his plight in his present misfortunes.

Fragment 5-7 On Education, Natural Ability, Practice (Texts 40-42)  
Teaching requires natural ability and practice (φύσεως καὶ ἀσκήσεως διδασκάλια δεῖται). . . They must learn starting young  
Tekhnê without practice or practice without tekhnê is worthless.  
[μὴ ἔπει σκῆσε τέχνην ἄνευ μελέτης μήτε μελέτην ἄνευ τέχνης]

Education does not spring up in the soul unless one descends to a great depth.
TITLES, DOCTRINES, SUBJECTS OF INTEREST

A. “It is not possible to think what is not” (Source: Socrates speaking for Protagoras in Plato, Theaetetus 167a7)

B. Titles of Works by Protagoras (Texts 13, 14, 22)
   Titles of works by Protagoras include:
   - Art of Eristical Arguments (Τέχνη ἐριστικῶν)
   - On Wrestling
   - On Mathematics
   - On Government (Περὶ πολιτείας)
   - On Ambition (Περὶ φιλοτιμίας)
   - On Virtues (Περὶ ἀρετῶν)
   - On the Original State of Things
   ....
   - Leadership (Προστακτικός)
   - Trial for a Fee (Δίκη ὑπὲρ μισθοῦ)
   - Opposed Arguments 1 and 2 (Ἄντιλογιῶν α’ β’)

[Elean Visitor]: Furthermore, discussions of all arts and of each individual art which are needed to contradict (ἀντιλογοῖν) any particular craftsman (ὁμιλωργός) have been published in writings for anyone who wants to study them.

[Theaetetus]: You seem to be referring to Protagoras’ writings On Wrestling and other arts.  
   (Text 13: Plato, Sophist 232d-3)

C. “Impossible to contradict” (Text 20)

D. “Make the weaker [logos, argument] stronger” (Texts 27, 28, 43)

E. “An argument (logos) can be opposed to any argument (logos)” (Texts 1, 25, 26)

F1. “Correct speaking (Correct diction or use of words)” (Texts 33, 34)
F2. “Most accurate account” (Text 7)
F3. Gender of nouns, agreement in grammatical gender, correct grammar (Texts 35-38)
15 Protagoras

Introduction

Protagoras was one of the first sophists. He became a leading intellectual, and in his travels he carried his ideas around Greece. Although we can describe the breadth of his interests, it is more difficult to determine what his philosophical position was.

He was born in Abdera around 490 BC. He apparently spent time in Athens in the 440s, and returned around 433. Plato portrays him at the later time as a kind of senior statesman of the sophistic movement. He died at around seventy years of age, full of honor, as Plato says (6). He made good money as an itinerant teacher, and probably opened the door for later educators. The sophists filled a need for higher education in a time when there was no formal education beyond primary school. They tended to teach practical subjects, especially public speaking, political science, and estate management (the forerunner of economics), and if we can believe Plato, this is all that Protagoras taught (despite his interests in other areas as indicated by his writings).

An innovative teacher, he seems to have been the first to teach students to argue both sides of a case. This causes him to be considered a mercenary by critics, but his practice is now standard in law schools. He not only presented public declamations, but also displayed his prowess in question-and-answer sessions. Plato’s Protagoras depicts him (and other sophists) using different pedagogical techniques and dealing with different subject matters.

We know that Protagoras propounded some important doctrines, but it is difficult to construct a systematic theory for him. His most famous doctrine is that of relativism, presented in 16 (F1). The formulation he gives there is perfectly general, and can be applied to almost any domain. In the Theaetetus, Plato interprets it first as applying to perception, but as having relevance to ethics as well. He presents it as a sophisticated view, but one which ultimately defies itself. How generally Protagoras meant to apply it is not clear. In the Protagoras Plato represents him as defending views of ethics and moral education which do not draw on relativism. Indeed, Protagoras seems to make morality, or at least a moral sense, innate. At the same time, he seems to accept the conventional morality of the polis as the standard to be instilled in the young. Protagoras seems to have offered refutations of monistic (presumably Eleatic) ontologies, and hence to have entered into mainstream philosophical debates; unfortunately we are not informed about his arguments. Protagoras was also famous, or infamous, for the agnostic position he assumed at the outset of his treatise On the Gods, but again
we are told little more about the content of that work than the opening sentence. He was a leading researcher in language, for the first time exploring the moods of verbs and grammatical gender. According to Plato, Protagoras saw himself as part of a great intellectual tradition extending back to the epic poets. Insofar was we view sophistic as an effort to understand the world, including areas of practical interest, using the tools of knowledge developed by philosophy, we can assent to the judgment: Protagoras was the scion of a great intellectual tradition.

Our best view of Protagoras comes from Plato, who gives us vignettes of the sophist as a teacher and performer. Plato's dialogues are works of fiction, but historical fiction that captures the spirit of the fifth century. In the dialogue named after Protagoras, Plato is unusually respectful of the sophist, even as he reveals his weaknesses. He shows Protagoras holding fairly conventional views about virtue and its teaching, and avoiding extravagant claims for his own unique abilities. At the same time, he puts in the sophist's mouth a more plausible view of moral education than that defended by Socrates. He portrays Protagoras invoking a kind of practical relativism in the dialogue (46) but not applying it to ethics. We also see the sophist's broad interests, including a commitment to a general kind of education in letters, in his foray into literary criticism. Yet what Protagoras sees as an opportunity to display his breadth and culture, Socrates (and Plato) sees as a digression from the main inquiry.

Plato takes Protagoras' relativism seriously in the Theaetetus, giving it a general formulation and a detailed analysis and refutation. More importantly, he even introduces, for the first time in the philosophical record, an appeal to the principle of charity in interpreting an opponent's views, in the voice of Protagoras (167d–168c). Plato seems committed here to giving Protagoras a fair hearing.

It remains difficult to unify the views we get of Protagoras from Plato and other witnesses. Does Protagoras have a thoroughgoing relativistic theory, or only a dialectical technique? Is he a relativist in ethics, or does he believe that virtue comes by nature, or by convention? More generally, does he have a unified theory, or just a set of argumentative commonplaces? In the state of our evidence only tentative reconstructions are possible. But Protagoras clearly was capable of inspiring his students with new ideas, and presenting to them penetrating insights that were at least suggestive of important philosophical theories.
I. Life

1 Protagoras, son of Artemon; or, as Apollodorus and Dinon – in the five books of his 
Persian History – say, son of Maeandrius; of Abdera, as Heraclides of Pontus 
says in his Laws, and he also says he composed the laws for Thurii. But Eupolis in 
his Flatterers says he is a Tean, for he says, “Protagoras of Teos is inside.” He 
and Prodicus of Ceos charged fees for their lectures. And Plato in the Protagoras 
says Prodicus had a deep voice. Protagoras was a student of Democritus. (He was 
nicknamed Wisdom, as Favorinus says in his Miscellaneous Studies.)

(31) And he first said that there are two opposing arguments on every subject. 
By means of these he asked a series of questions, being the first to use this method. 
He also began one work in this way: [Fis] of all things the measure is man, 

of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not. He said 
there was no soul apart from the senses, as Plato states in the 
Theaetetus (152. ef.), 
and all opinions are true. And in another work he began with these words: [Fr]. 
(32) Because of this introduction to his treatise, he was exiled by the Athenians, 
who burned his books in the marketplace after the herald had confiscated them 
from each of their owners.

He first earned a fee of one hundred pounds. And he first defined the tenses 
of verbs and expounded the importance of the proper timing, arranged debates, 
and formulated sophistical arguments for debaters. And he abandoned the sense 
of words in favor of the letter in his arguments, and began the current race 
of contentious arguments. So Timon says of him, “Gregarious Protagoras, skilled 
in disputation.” (33) He first invented the Socratic form of argument. And he 
first used the argument made famous by Antisthenes purporting to prove that 
it is not possible to disagree with anyone, as Plato says in the Euthydemus [26]. 
And he first developed a system for objecting to any proposition, as Artemidorus 
the dialectician says in Against Chrysippus. He first invented the “shoulder-pad,” 

on which porters bear burdens, as Aristotle says in On Education. For he was 
a basket-carrier, as Epicurus says somewhere, and in this way he came to the notice 
of Democritus, who observed how he bound sticks.

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1 Menag. 113a; BPP 1.5.
2 Diels: περιστατικον εν Ρ' Π. : περιστατικον εν ΒΔ.
3 ΠΡ: μεσανδριου ΒΔ: μεσανδριου Ναι σταδα.
4 Ναι: Κνος: BPP: Κνος Ναι.
5 Πρσιδρογος ο Πρσιδρογος εν πολεμικω εν τοις προς πολεμικος εν τοις προς πολεμικος.
6 Φ: κερκος BPP. 7 Ρ' Π: ιδεαστα Φιντο.
7 Πρσιδρογος ο Πρσιδρογος εν πολεμικω εν τοις προς πολεμικω εν τοις προς πολεμικος.
8 Πρσιδρογος ο Πρσιδρογος εν πολεμικω εν τοις προς πολεμικος εν τοις προς πολεμικος.
9 Diels: επιμετρος σώματος.
10 Diels: δεικτικος σώματος.
11 Cassetton: δεικτικος ΒΔ. δεικτικος ΠΡ.
2. Philostratus *Lives of the Sophists* 1.10.1–4 (A2)

Πρωταγόρας δε ο Αθήναισις σοφίτης [καὶ]. Δημοκρίτου μὲν ἄκροστής οἰκοὶ ἐγκεκρίτει, ὡμολογεί δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἐκ Περσῶν μάγοις κατὰ τὴν Ἕρσου ἐπί την Ἑλλάδα θαλασσ. παράγει γὰρ ἣν αὐτῶι Μαυλάνδριοι πλοῦτοι κατακεκυκλοφοροῦσιν παρὰ πολλοῖς τοῖς ἐν τῇ Θρᾴκῃ, δεξίων μὲν καὶ τοῖς Ἕρσου οἰκείας τε καὶ δόρους τὸν ἔμφορος τῶν μάγων τούς παραπλάνησαν, οὔ γάρ παρατείνεται τοὺς μή Περσᾶς Πέρσας μάγοις, ἡ μὲν οἱ βασιλεῖς βρέφη. (2) τὸ δὲ ἀποκρίνεται διὰ σαφῶς, εἴτε ἐικός ἐτέλες αὐτό εἶναι, διὸ μοι Πρωταγόρας ἐκ τῆς Περσικῆς παρατείνεται παραμυθητήσατε μάγοις γὰρ ἐπιθείας. εἶναι μὲν αὐτοῦ ἤπειρος τῷ θείῳ καταλύει οὐκ ἐπιθετεῖσθαι δοκεῖν παρὰ αὐτὸν δύνασθαι. (3) διὰ μὲν δὲ τοῦτο πάσης γῆς ὑπὸ Αθηναίων ἡλάθι ὡς μὲν τινες, κριθῆς, ὡς δὲ ἄλλοι δοκεῖ, ψηφιζομενής μὴ κριθείναι, νῆσοι δὲ εἰς ξηρᾶς ἰματίους καὶ τὰς Αθηναίων τριήμεροι φυλαττόμενοι πέντες σαθῆσαι ἀντιπέρουσας κατέχουσας τὸν Ἐλληνικόν, δοκεῖν δὲ τριήμεροι Ἐλληνες, πράγματι οὐκετί οὐκετί διὰ τὸν αὐτόν ἐξιστότων τῶν πρῶτον. γνώσει δὲ τοῦ Πρωταγόραν ὁ Πλάτων σεμνὸς μὲν ἐφιμένωσε, ἐνπεπερατίας δὲ τῇ συμόντητι καὶ πολλακαλογέρτων τοῦ συμμέτρου, τὴν ἤθει αὐτοῦ μύθων μακράς ἐχαρακτηρίσειν.
3 Hesychius from scholium on Plato Republic 600c (A3)
Πρωτογόρας Ἀρτέμιδος Λαβδηρίτης, οὕτοι πορφοπαστάτης ἦν, ἐντυχέων δὲ ἀνθρώπινου ἐφιλοσοφήσας καὶ ἐπὶ ὄρτοποι εἶχε. καὶ πρῶτος λόγους ἐφιλοσοφήσας εἶπε καὶ μισθὸν ἔπραξε τοῦς μαθητὰς μιᾶς ρ. διὸ καὶ ἐπικλήθη λόγος, τοῦτον μαθητὴν Ἰσοκράτης ὁ βέθος καὶ Πρόδικος καὶ Κείσος, ἴσως δὲ τὰ τοῦτον βιβλία ὑπ’ Ἀττικῶν. ἔπει γὰρ περὶ θεῶν ὡς ἐν διάνοιας ὡς ᾠδοὶ ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι εἰς ἀνόητον. ἔγγραφε δὲ οἷς αὐτῶν ἡ Πλάτων διάλεξον. πλήθος δὲ αὐτοῦ εἰς Σικελίαν ἔστησε χριστιάσας ἔτην "κύριον" ἐκείνου, σοφιστάεσθαι ἐκείνη τεσσαράκοντα.

4 Plato Protagoras 317b3–c3, 318a6–9, 318d9–319a7, 349a1–4 (A5)
[ΠΡΩΤΑΓΟΡΑΣ] έγιόν οὐκ ὑπὸ σοφίας τῆς ἐπιστήμης ἐπικλήθη καὶ μαθητέεσθαι μιᾶς ρ. διὸ καὶ ἐπικλήθη λόγος, τοῦτον μαθητὴν Ἰσοκράτης ὁ βέθος καὶ Πρόδικος καὶ Κείσος, ἴσως δὲ τὰ τοῦτον βιβλία ὑπ’ Ἀττικῶν. ἔπει γὰρ περὶ θεῶν ὡς ἐν διάνοιας ὡς ᾠδοὶ ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι ὡς εἶναι εἰς ἀνόητον "κύριον" ἐκείνου, σοφιστάεσθαι ἐκείνη τεσσαράκοντα.

4 Protagoras son of Artemon, of Abdera. He was a porter, but when he met Democritus he learned to philosophize and became a rhetorician. He first invented contentious speeches and earned a fee of 100 pounds from his students. So he was nicknamed "Speech." Isocrates the orator and Prodikus of Ceeos were students of his. His books were burned by the Athenians because he said, Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not [F3]. Plato wrote a dialogue about him. Sailing to Sicily he died in a shipwreck, <being> ninety years old, having practiced as a sophist for forty years.

4 [Protagoras addresses Socrates and his young friend Hippocrates, a prospective student:] Thus I have pursued the contrary path [to that of earlier sophists], and I openly profess to be a sophist and to educate men. . . . And indeed I have practiced this profession for many years, for in fact I am quite aged: and there is not a single one of this group of whom I am not old enough to be the father. . . .

[To Hippocrates] Well, young man, if you study with me, on the very first day you come, you will go home a better man, and likewise on the following day. And each day you will improve. . . . The other sophists mistreat the youth: after the youth have escaped certain disciplines the sophists lead them back willy nilly to pursue them, teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music (as he shot a glance at Hippias), but if he studies with me he will learn nothing but what he came to learn. The subject I teach is discernment in household management, that he may direct his household as well as possible, and also in city affairs, that he may be as powerful as possible in acting and speaking.

[Socrates] It seems to me that you profess the political art, and you promise to make men good citizens.

[Pr.] This, Socrates, is the very profession that I make.

[Soc.] You publicly advertise yourself to all the Greeks, calling yourself a sophist and declaring yourself to be an instructor of education and excellence, the first who claimed to make a living from this profession.

5 Protagoras here is able to make excellent long speeches, as his recent performance shows, and he is also able to give succinct answers to questions posed to him, and when he poses questions to await and respond to answers, which is a skill possessed by few.

5 suppl. Friedländer. 1 el μὴ B.
6 Plato *Men* 912a–5, e3–9 (A8)

I know one man named Protagoras who made more money from this profession than Phidias, who was so famous for his works of art, and any other ten statue-makers... [Socrates defends Protagoras ironically:] So we are to believe Protagoras deceived the whole of Greece, corrupting its students and sending them home worse than they were when they came to him, for more than forty years. For I believe he died near the age of seventy, after forty years in the profession. And in this whole time and down to the present day his reputation has never been impugned.

7 Plutarch *Pericles* 36.3 (A10)

When a certain pentathlete accidentally struck Epithimus the Pharsalion with his javelin and killed him, [Pericles] spent the whole day with Protagoras investigating whether the javelin, the thrower, or the officials should be considered responsible for the mishap, according to the most accurate account.

8 Athenaeus 5.59, 218b–c (A11)

Nevertheless the conversation in the *Protagoras*, which takes place after the death of Hipponicus, when Callias had already inherited his fortune, <refers to> Protagoras having come to visit Athens a second time not many days before. When Euthymus was archon [426], Hipponicus as general marshaled his men with Nicias against Tanagra and their Boeotian allies, and won the battle; but he probably died not much before the production of the *Flatterers* by Eupolis, when Alceaus was archon [421]... In this drama Eupolis introduces Protagoras as being in town. But Ameipsias in his *Connex*, produced two years earlier [423] does not count him in the chorus of wise men. So it is clear that he came in the time between these dramas.

9 Athenaeus 11.113, 505f–506a

Nevertheless Paralus and Xanthippus, the sons of Pericles who died in the plague, could not have been present to converse with Protagoras, when he came to Athens for <the> second time, since they were already dead.

10 Eupolis fr. 157 Kassel–Austin

Eupolis is said to have the natural philosopher Protagoras appear when he makes fun of him in the line “who criminally carries on about heavenly phenomena, but he eats things from the ground.”

11 Eupolis fr. 158

“Protagoras bid [Callias] drink, that he might have his lung cleaned out before the dog days.”

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1 codd. have Euthydemeus, archon in 431; see commentary.
12 [Hippias] Once when I arrived in Sicily and found Protagoras visiting there, though he was famous and older, and I much younger, in a short time I made much more than a hundred and fifty pounds, and from one very small town, Inyenus, more than twenty.

II. Works


14 [Visitor from Elea] Furthermore, discussions of all arts and of each individual art which are needed to contradict any particular craftsman have been published in writings for anyone who wants to study them.

[Theaetetus] You seem to be referring to Protagoras' writings On Wrestling and other arts. [Criticisms of universal expertise follow.]

15 "Books by authors earlier than Plato are rare; otherwise perhaps one would have observed more <plagiarisms> by that philosopher. For instance when I by chance came across the speech by Protagoras On Being, as I read it I found him giving the same kind of replies to those who advocate the view that what-is is one. For I made an effort to memorize his words verbatim." Having said this he [Porphyry] rehearses the arguments at length.

III. Philosophy

A. Man the measure

16 And some have included Protagoras of Abdera in the chorus of philosophers denying that there is a standard of truth, since he says all appearances and opinions are true, and truth is relative, because everything that appears or seems to someone really exists for him. Thus at the beginning of the Refutations he pronounced these words:

[Frb] Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not.
17 Plato Theaetetus 151e8–152a8, b2–c3 (B1)

[Socr] You have hit on a clever account of knowledge which was also held by Protagoras. In a different way he has said the very same thing. He says somewhere:

[Frd] Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not.

Have you ever read it?

[Theaetetus] Often.

[Soc.] So he means something like this: that as each thing appears to me so it is to me, and as it appears to you, so in turn it is to you; for you and I are men... Isn't it true that sometimes when the same wind is blowing low one of us feels cold, one does not? And one feels a little cold, another very much so?... Shall we say then that the wind itself by itself is cold or not cold, or shall we agree with Protagoras it is cold for the one who feels cold, not cold for the one who does not feel cold?... Therefore it appears to each person in this way... To have an appearance is to perceive?

[Th.] It is.

[Soc.] Then appearance and perception are the same thing concerning the hot and all such qualities. Thus according as each person perceives, so it happens to be to him.

18 Just as Protagoras said with the words [Frd] Of all things the measure is man, as if to say, as things seem to be to me, so they are to me; as they seem to you, so they are to you.

19 And Protagoras maintains, [Frd] Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not, by 'measure' meaning the standard, and by 'things' objects, as if potentially to claim that man is the standard of all objects, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not. And for this reason he posits only appearances for each subject, and thus he introduces what is relative. (217) That is why he seems to have something in common with the followers of Pyrrho; but he differs from them, as we shall see when we have correctly explained Protagoras' theory.
Now this man says matter is in flux, and as it is in continual flux new material replaces what is emitted and the senses are changed and altered with age and other conditions of the body. (218) He says also that the grounds for all appearances are contained in the underlying matter, so that matter, in its own right, is able to be all things that it seems to anyone to be. And men receive different perceptions at different times according to their different dispositions. He who is in a natural state comprehends those things in matter which are able to appear to one in a natural state, while he who is in an unnatural state comprehends things which are able to appear to those in an unnatural state. (219) And the same account applies in relation to one’s age, and whether one is asleep or awake, and according to each kind of disposition. So man proves to be the standard for himself of the things that are. For all things that appear to men also exist, while what appears to no man does not exist.

Thus we see that in holding that matter is in flux and that the grounds of all appearances are contained in matter he is a dogmatist — even though these are obscure subjects concerning which we should withhold judgment.

20 Although I have heard many making this assertion repeatedly [that it is not possible to contradict anyone], I am always amazed at it. For in fact the followers of Protagoras insisted on this, and others still earlier. But I am always amazed at how this argument can undermine itself at the same time it is undermining other arguments.

B. Appearance

21 [Fα]. The followers of Protagoras come to another doctrine (Protagoras was a sophist). He says that the being of things that are consists in being manifest. He says that it is manifest to you who are present that I am sitting, but to one who is absent it is not manifest that I am sitting: it is non-evident whether I am sitting or not. And they say that all things that are consist in their being manifest. For instance, I see the moon, another does not; it is non-evident whether it is or not. An apprehension of honey, that it is sweet, comes to me when I am healthy, but to another that it is bitter, if he has a fever. Thus it is not evident whether it is sweet or bitter. And in this way they mean to assert dogmatically the absence of a self-evident apprehension. (After Woodruff.)

C. Opposed arguments

22 Euphorion and Panatæus have said the beginning of [Plato’s] Republic was found having been rewritten many times, which work Aristotle says was written almost complete in Protagoras’ Opposed Arguments. . . . Favorinus says in his Miscellaneous Studies II [that the Republic] was found almost complete in the Opposed Arguments of Protagoras.
23 [Aristotle says that] arguments about notable topics were written and prepared by Protagoras, which are now called commonplaces.

24 = Prd12.

25 The Greeks, starting with Protagoras, say that an argument can be opposed to any argument.

26 Protagoras says it is possible to argue every position pro and con with equal plausibility – including the very question whether every position can be argued pro and con.

27 And this is what it means to make the weaker case the stronger. Hence men were rightly indignant at this profession of Protagoras. For it promotes what is false and not true, but speciously plausible, and it is found in no other art but rhetoric and the study of contentious arguments.

28 Protagoras, who Eudoxus reports made the weaker case even stronger and taught his students to criticize and support the same position.

D. On the gods

29 Protagoras, a follower of Democritus, got the reputation of being an atheist. For he is said to have started his treatise On the Gods with this introduction: [F3] Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not, or what form they have; for there are many obstacles to knowing, including the obscurity of the question and the brevity of human life.

30 [Socrates speaking for Protagoras] Noble youth and elders, you sit around arguing to the masses by calling on the gods, about whom in my speeches and writings on them I refuse to speculate whether they are or are not.

31 Protagoras of Abdera... the greatest sophist of those times, because he wrote at the beginning of his book, Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not [F3], was by command of the Athenian government banished from their city and territory, and his books were burned in the marketplace.
E. On mathematics

32. Nor are perceptible lines such as the geometry represents them (for no perceptible line is so straight or so round; for the circle touches the ruler not at a point, but as Protagoras said in criticizing the geometrists).

F. Language, literature, education

33. [Protagoras] I consider... the greatest part of a man's education to be having skill in poetry; specifically, to be able to discern what has been rightly expressed and what not in the words of the poets, and to know how to analyze their words and answer questions about them. [Discussion of a poem of Simonides follows.]

34. [Phaedrus] Wasn't there a similar Protagorean term?

35. Fourth, we must like Protagoras distinguish the gender of nouns: masculine, feminine, and neuter. For we must also express gender correctly. “Having come [fem.] and spoken [fem.], she left.”

36. Solecism: [here, errors of noun-adjective agreement] there is a difference between committing this, not committing it but seeming to, and committing it but not seeming to, as Protagoras used to say. For instance “wrath” and “helmet” are masculine in sense [but grammatically feminine in Greek]. He who says wrath is “destructive” [fem.] really commits an agreement error according to him, but does not seem to, to others; whereas he who says it is “destructive” [masc.] seems to commit an error, but does not really do so.1

37. For why should one understand what Protagoras criticizes to be an error: that in intending to pray [Homer] uses a command form, saying, “Sing the wrath, goddess”? For to bid someone to do something or not, he says, is a command.2

38. Protagoras says the following episode of a mortal [Achilles] fighting with the stream Xanthus is designed to set off this battle [from the battle of mortals] so that [Homer] can make a transition to the battle of gods, and perhaps so that he might build up Achilles... [text damaged] dangers... capturing... he leapt not in the stream but in the plain.

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1 Referring to the opening lines of the Iliad.
2 And not a “prayer” or wish or entreaty, appropriate for addressing deity. See Diogenes Laerterius 9.53-4, text 1 above, on kinds of sentence. (This also refers to the opening lines of the Iliad.)
39 [F4] Plutarch Letter to Apollonius 118e–f (B9)\(^1\)

tōn γάρ υἱῶν νεκρῶν δυτικοῦ καὶ καλῶν, ἐν ὁδῷ δὲ ταῖς πάσησιν ἡμέρας ἐπισημάνουσιν ὑποθέσως ἀνέλθει; εὔθετα γὰρ ἔχετο. \(^2\) ἐκ δὲ πολλῶν ἀνθρώπων κατὰ τάσσον ἡμέρας εἰς ἐννομίαν καὶ ἀνωτάτην καὶ τὴν ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς δόξαν, πᾶς γὰρ τῆς μιᾷ ἱδρύμα τῶν ἅγιων πάντων ἐρωτομένους φέροντα, μεγαλόφρονα τα καὶ ἄνδρεύν ἓκειν εἶναι καὶ ἱεράτου κρίσεια, κάρτα εἰδίκεις τῆς ἱερατοῦ ἐν τοιούθεν πράγμασιν ἀμηχανίην.

40 [F5] Paris Anecdotes 1.171.31 (B3)

ὅτι ἐν τοῖς ἐπιγραφομενοῖς Μεγαλών λόγω δ' Ἀριστοτέλους εἶπεν: \(^3\) ἠφέσω καὶ ἀκαθίσπαστος διδασκαλία δεῖται καὶ \(^4\) ἠφέσω ἐν τῆς ἰδιότητος δὲ ἀρχαίως δεὶκα λαμβάνειν, οὐκ ἂν ἦλθεν τούτο, εἰ καθ' ὧν ἡ διάκονη ήν, ὡς ἐν ψυχῇ καὶ ἐλεγεν Ἐπικουροῦς πεπερασμένον Ἀριστοτέλος.

41 [F6] Stobaeus 3.29.80 (B10)

Πρωταγόρας ἔλεγε μηδὲν ἐνίοτε μήτε τέχνην ἄνευ μελέτης μήτε μελέτην ἄνευ τέχνης.

42 [F7] Plutarch On Practice 178.25 (B11)\(^5\)

worted by the author: "Nicht sprießt Bildung in der Seele, wenn man nicht zu vieler Tiefe kommt."

43 Aristophanes Clouds 112–15 (C2)

| ΣΤΡΕΨΙΑΔΗΣ | εἶναι παρ' αὐτοῖς φαινείν ἄμφος τῷ λόγῳ, τῶν κρείττον, διατις ἐπικρατεῖ, καὶ τῶν ἠτοικον, τούτων τῶν έτερων τούτων λόγοιν, τῶν ἠτοικόν, \(6\) νικάν λέγειντα φασι κακὸν χιλικώστερα.

44 Ibid. 658–79 (C3)

| ΣΧΙΚΡΑΤΗΣ | ἀλλ' ἔτερα δὲ ἐστὶ συντρόπω τούτων μαθήματι, τῶν τεταρτόνων δὲτ' ἐστιν ἄρθρον ἀρνεῖ τότε. \(660\)

| ΣΤ. | ἀλλ' οἵτ' ἐγγέγραφo τέρπεσα, εἰ μὴ μαθηματικόν ἠδύνατος, κρότος, τράγος, ταύρος, κῦλοι, ἀλκετρικῶν, κατὰ ταύτην καλεῖς ἀλκετρικῶν κατὰ ταύτην καὶ τῶν ἀρνεῖν. 660

| ΣΤ. | τῶν δὲ, φέρε;\(^6\)

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\(^1\) Following codd.; some editors have restored ionic forms.

\(^2\) Tertullian, Volubiius: εἰρέτο codd.

\(^3\) C. 660 Pz. \(^4\) SA Max.: εἰδέναι M.


\(^6\) 614 om. RV.
45 Plato Protagoras 320c8–322d5 (Ct)

νυν γὰρ ποτε χρόνος ὄπειρα μὲν ἦσαν, θυτίτα δὲ γένεις οὐκ ἦν. ἐπειδὴ δὲ καὶ τοῦτος χρόνος ἦλθεν εἰμικρινός γενέσεως, τυποῦσιν αὐτὰ θεὶς ἡγήσαν ἐκ γῆς καὶ πυρᾶς μείζονες καὶ τῶν ὥσιν πυρι καὶ ἡγήσασίτε. ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἢγήσαν αὐτὰ πότε φῶς ἐμελλέτω, προσευκάσσαν Προμήθη καὶ Ἐπιμήθη κοσμεῖται ταῖς καὶ νεώδεις δυνάμεις ἐκάσχος αὐτὸς πρέπει. Προμήθη μὲν ἐπειρατεῖται Ἐπιμήθης αὐτὸς νεώδει, "Νεώδεις δὲ μου," ἐπιτίθηκε, "καὶ αὐτῷ πίεσαι νέωδε;"

νεώδες δὲ τοῖς μὲν ἴσων ὤντες ἔφεξαν προσέπτηκαν, τοῖς δ᾿ Ἀσθενεστέρων τάχιος ἐξέσκειν τοὺς δὲ ὕππλεξε, τοὺς δ᾿ ἄσπολον διδόσαμι φώσιν ἄλλην τινὸς αὐτὸς ἵμηροῦσα παῦσιν ἐφεξείν τοῖς συστρέεσι, ἢ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν εἰκομίζω, ἢ μὲν νεώδε ἐμπρόσθετε, ἢ μὲν ἐπειδή δὴν ἀτελησίως ἐπείκιστο ἐπειδὴ δὲ αὐτὸς ἀτελησίως ἐπείκιστο ἐπειδή δὲ αὐτὸς ἀτελησίως ἐπείκιστο ἐπειδὴ δὲ αὐτῶν ἀτελησίως ἐπείκιστο ἐπειδὴ δὲ εἰς ἀτελησίως ἐπείκιστο ἐπειδὴ δὲ εἰς ἀτελησίως ἐπείκιστο ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἢγήσαν, ἢμβως δὲ ὄχι ἃς ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως ἢμβως Ξ.
Now since he was not altogether prudent, Epimetheus failed to notice that he had used all the gifts on the animals. He left the human race without any gift, and he wondered what to do. As he was wondering, Prometheus came to inspect the distribution, and he saw that other animals were adequately taken care of in everything, but man was naked, unshod, without bedding or armor; and already the appointed day was at hand, on which the creatures including man should go out from earth into the light. So being at a loss as to how to preserve man, Prometheus stole from Hephaestus and Athena knowledge of the crafts together with fire (for without fire it was impossible for anyone to obtain or practice the crafts), and thus he provided an endowment for man. Now in this way man obtained the art to earn a livelihood, but not the political art; for that was still with Zeus. And Prometheus no longer had access to the citadel where Zeus dwelt (moreover the guards of Zeus were terrible). But he had been able to sneak into the common house of Athena and Hephaestus, where they practiced the crafts, to steal the craft of working things with fire from Hephaestus, and the rest of the skill from Athena, to give them to man. From then on man enjoyed plenty in his livelihood, as they say, later overtook Prometheus for the theft he committed to help our Epimetheus.

Since man had a share of the divine, in the first place because of his kinship to the gods he alone of the animals recognized the gods, and he undertook to build altars and set up statues of the gods. Further, he soon constructed meaningful sounds and words by art, invented dwellings, clothing, footwear, and beds, and discovered how to raise food from the earth. Being thus supplied man dwelt in scattered habitations in the beginning, and there were no cities. Consequently, men were killed by beasts as they were in every way weaker; and the productive crafts which were sufficient for obtaining food were of no use in the conflict with the beasts. For men still lacked the political art, of which the art of war is a part. They did indeed try to gather together for their mutual protection by founding cities. But whenever they gathered together, they would wrong each other because they lacked the political art, so that they would once more be scattered and perish.

So Zeus, fearing that our whole race would be destroyed, sent Hermes to men to bring them justice and a sense of shame, that there might be order in cities and bonds of friendship to unite people. So Hermes asked Zeus in what way he should give justice and shame to men. "Should I distribute them as the arts were distributed – like this? One practitioner of medicine is adequate for many patients, and so with other craftsmen. Is this how I should convey justice and respect to men, or should I distribute them to all?" "To all," said Zeus, "and let all have a share of them. For there would be no cities if only a few had a share of these things like the other animals. And lay this down as a law from me, that anyone who is not able to have a share of respect and justice should be put to death as a menace to society."
46 As things are, Socrates, you demur; because everyone is a teacher of virtue to the best of his ability, you think no one is. Similarly, if you should inquire who was someone's instructor in Greek, you would not find a single one. And even if you should inquire for us who taught the sons of craftsmen that very art which they had learned from their fathers, insofar as each father and his fellow craftsmen were able to impart it — anyway, as to who taught them, I don’t think it would be easy to say, Socrates, who their teacher was (though of the incompetent it would be quite easy to point out their teacher), and so it is with virtue or anything else. But if there is any one of us who is even a little better than others in leading people to virtue, he should be valued. This is what I profess to be, one who is better than other men in helping someone to improve his character, and worth the fee I charge, and even more, as my students themselves think.

Accordingly, this is the policy I have established concerning my fee: when someone has been instructed by me, if he is satisfied, he pays the money I charge. If not, he may go to a temple and declare under oath how much he considers my lessons to be worth, and pay that amount.

47 But I know many things that are harmful to men: food, drink, drugs, and countless other things, while some are beneficial. And some that are neither to men, but to horses; some to cattle only, some to dogs; some to none of these, but to trees; some things are good for the roots of trees, but bad for the sprouts; for instance dung is good when it is put on the roots of all trees, but if you try to put it on the shoots and new twigs, it kills them all. Olive oil is terrible for all plants and very damaging to the hair of all other animals except humans, but it is helpful for the hair of humans, and for the rest of the body. So complex and various is the good, that in some cases while oil is good for the external parts of the human body, it is extremely harmful for the internal parts. That is why doctors universally forbid their patients from consuming it except in the smallest amount in which they are going to eat, enough only to suppress the disagreeable smell arising from the bread and meat.
15 Protagoras

Commentary 13–20

archonship of Euthydemos (431/0), but he was rather elected in the archonship of Euthymus (426/5), and the battle of Tanagra took place in 426 (Thucydides 3.91).

The story of the sophist’s charging a fee of one hundred pounds (1.52, 3) is absurd in that taxes were in the range of three to five pounds (Plato Apology 20b, Isocrates Against the Sophists 3). The number might, however, reflect a total amount paid by a cohort of students, as it does in Hippas’s anecdote (12).

In 4 Protagoras claims to be one of a long line of sophists who often hid their general expertise under the guise of some special skill. He, however, makes an open profession of his abilities. Here we seem to see the evolving use of the term “sophist,” which originally applied to “those who in one way or another function[ed] as the Sages, the exponents of knowledge in early communities” (Kerferd 1970). As Kerferd points out, Plutarch recognizes this development (Themistocles 2.3–4), which in Athens Plutarch traces back to Solon. The early “sophists” were sages but not professional teachers; thus in a sense Protagoras can trace his intellectual roots back to earlier times, but can also rightly claim that he represents something new as a professional wise man rather than a layman. The early sages did not, however, disseminate, nor did they need to, since they were not advertising their ability to educate anyone who could pay. (See also Kerferd 1981.)

13–15. The list in 13 omits famous works such as On Truth and On the Gods, and must have a lacuna.

16–20. Plato plausibly interprets Protagoras’ doctrine to invoke the following scheme: If x seems F to S, then x is F to/for S. This scheme provides a kind of criterion for relativism, and also a basis for its analysis. For different values of F we can get different kinds of relativism; for instance, for perceptual predicates like “hot” and “cold,” we get perceptual relativism, the kind of theory Plato considers first. For predicates of value like “good,” “bad,” “right,” “wrong,” we get ethical relativism. We can also vary the subject according to which the judgment is made; if S is a person, we get subjective relativism; if a social group, cultural relativism; if a species, species relativism, and so on.

According to this view, if an individual asserts “x is F,” for instance, “the air is cold,” he is really saying “x is F for me.” On this view no conflict of opinions is possible, because if A says, “the air is cold” and B says, “the air is hot” — or better, “the air is not cold,” — then the two statements say: “the air is cold for A” and “the air is not cold for B.” The statements, suitably filled out, are different and no contradiction can result. Hence all opinions are true.

In the Theaetetus Plato explores a number of problems for this view, the most important and telling of which is that the statement “All statements are relative,” if true, must itself be relativized for the speaker. All statements are relative for Protagoras, but they are not relative for Plato. On this interpretation, Protagoras has not even succeeded in uttering a general philosophical claim. If, on the other hand, the statement is a general and not a relative truth, then it also falsifies its own claim. Aristotle also takes on Protagoras’ theory in Metaphysics IV,5–6.
In general one can keep statements from being contradicted by other statements if one relativizes them with a phrase such as “for S,” but one then runs the risk of trivializing all discourse and making all communication self-referential. See Burnyeat 1976 on Plato’s refutation of Protagoras.

In 19 Sextus takes Protagoras as having a positive physical theory on which his theory of perception is based—perhaps influenced by Plato’s free-wheeling reconstruction in the Theaetetus. But we have no strong confirmation of this. Protagoras seems to be radical precisely in rejecting a physical basis for perception. As Guthrie observes, “No natural philosopher went as far as this [rejection of a naturalistic theory of perception], for it is a denial of the very meaning of physi” (HGP 3,186). (On the other hand, it has been claimed that Protagoras is not so much a relativist about perception as an “extreme realist”; see Bett 1989.)

21 [F3]. A new fragment (or testimony) of Protagoras was discovered by Gronewald 1968. Protagoras seems to approximate Berkeley’s axiom for physical objects: to be is to be perceived. Protagoras further claims that a state of affairs which is manifest to one person will not necessarily be manifest to another. Hence it will be non-evident, where presumably Protagoras means not evident to everyone. But presumably it is evident to one who perceives the state of affairs. Is this an attempt to point out that on the basis of subjective experiences we cannot ascend to intersubjective agreement? On this passage, see Meier 1972; Declave Caizzi 1976; Mansfeld 1981; Woodruff 1985. Woodruff points to the application of the point made here to theology: unless a god manifests himself to Protagoras, the existence of gods is non-evident to him (see 29 [F3]). I have in general followed his suggestions for reconstructing the fragment.

22–28. The practice Protagoras introduced of training students to argue both sides of a case seemed to many ancient critics to be the height of sophistry, in the negative sense of the term. Yet this training teaches the student to anticipate an opponent’s position and now serves as a standard practice of debate and forensic training. Arguably, the truth can emerge from the conflict of opposed opinions. What Protagoras’ justification for this practice was, however, is uncertain. Besides the practical advantage of being able to anticipate an opponent’s arguments, the study of opposed arguments could help one formulate one’s own opinion. But if Protagoras takes relativism as a fundamental principle, he cannot believe that argument establishes objective truths. A sample of opposed arguments is found in the Debated Questions (Dissoi Logoi, Dsl) below.

29 [F3]–31. The term astros was used more broadly than our “atheist.” Protagoras was an agnostic rather than an atheist in the modern sense. His candor on this point is striking, and implies a freedom of speech for the age. Unfortunately we do not know what else Protagoras had to say in his treatise On the Gods. For all we know, the opening could be, as it was for some early modern skeptics, a premise for accepting religious traditions. Schiaparelli 2003, 148, suggests it was an introduction for an anthropological account of the gods.

32. Protagoras seems to distrust the abstraction of the mathematician. His work provides evidence that mathematics was not yet seen as highly specialized and as providing an ideal of scientific rigor. On the imperfection of the drawn circle, see also Plato Letter VII, 343a.

33–38. Protagoras made important advances by identifying features of language such as grammatical gender and the mood of sentences (or verbs, as we would now say). See 1.53–54 for a list of moods, corresponding roughly to optative, subjunctive, indicative, and imperative moods of the verb, here perhaps being formally distinguished for the first time. The “correct diction,” orthoepeia, he seeks to incultate seems to involve word choice, grammatical agreement of terms, or narrowly semantics and morphology, and to embody good principles of composition. The attempt to correct grammar, however, by appeal to sense (36–37) is an ill-conceived enterprise. From 38 it appears that Protagoras had some intelligent observations to make about literature. Plato portrays Protagoras as eager to disclose on poetry and using logical tools in literary criticism (Protagoras 339a–d).

In the same passage we see Protagoras as more of a dilettante than a philosopher: unlike Socrates, he does not wish to stick with a philosophical inquiry but turns from the question at hand to literary questions. From another point of view, we might say that he was more interested in a liberal education than in technical studies.

39–42 [F4–7]. Like other sophists, Protagoras seems to require good character, teaching, and practice to produce the proper results in a student.

43–44. Aristophanes sees the method of arguing both sides as deceptive manipulation (42), as appears in a sample debate between the Stronger Argument and the Weaker, personified (889–1104); the latter of course wins. In 43 Aristophanes is able to make fun of Protagoras’ revisionary grammar.

45. Plato puts in the mouth of Protagoras an elegant myth designed to illustrate the principles of moral education. Many scholars think Plato is borrowing an actual story from Protagoras, presumably from On the Original State of Things, while others think Plato is inventing it. The myth allows Protagoras to say, on the one hand, that everyone has a kind of moral instinct, while he implies, on the other hand, that everyone can profit from instruction. The political art is a special art that all must share in. Man’s great endowment consists of technology and morality. The former is useless without the latter.

One striking feature is the difficulty in determining from the story what part of moral education is innate (planted by Zeus or Hermes) and what instilled. Here Protagoras seems to miss the opportunity to exploit the nature-convention (nomos–phusis) distinction which became prominent in the late fifth century. Could this story antedate the distinction?

A similar account of divine providence appears in Herodotus 3,108, in a book that elsewhere has possible connections to Protagorean political theory (see Morrison 1941).

46. Protagoras’ stance allows him to advertise himself as a moral educator while recognizing that many others also contribute to the education of the young (thus disarming the resentment of traditionalists). Morality can exist without the sophist, but the sophist has a useful role to play in improving citizens. Anyone
can teach morality to those who are deficient (for instance children), but some are especially gifted in imparting moral education. Protagoras also states his money-back guarantee.

Protagoras seems to anticipate Aristotle’s emphasis on habituation as moral training: everyone contributes to the proper behavior of the young by correcting them. The analogy with language learning (second sentence) is suggestive: as philosophers of language and linguists have pointed out, children learn how to express themselves in language starting from an impoverished environment. They seem to have some innate facility for language which, however, is adapted to some particular language: English or Greek or Chinese. Similarly, children have an innate facility for moral and social behavior, but we educate them in the customs and mores of our particular society.

The analogy between morality and a craft reminds one of the Socratic craft analogy. Here, however, it seems potentially confusing because the moral endowment (“respect and justice”) are allegedly universal, unlike craft skills. But Protagoras probably wants to focus on the practical and situation-oriented nature of craft learning: as the apprentice learns a craft by practicing it under the tutelage of a master, so a potential moral agent learns morality by performing moral acts under the tutelage of a moral agent (as in Aristotle’s theory). How exactly this improvement takes place remains obscure (even in Aristotle), but that it does take place can be argued on the basis of experience.

47. A number of lists like this one are found in the Dissoi Logoi. At one level they provide grounds for a debate to disagree with an absolute statement made by an opponent, and thus offer a useful tool to the sophist. Indeed, at some practical level we must all take account relativizing conditions such as those Protogoras mentions. In the dialogue the audience wildly applauds Protagoras’ speech, at least indicating the popularity of its distinctions among intellectuals of the time. The immediate context is value judgments; but how broadly Protagoras means his point to be taken is not clear, and in any case he does not exploit his distinctions further in the present dialogue. Here we get a kind of practical relativism rather than the high-powered theoretical relativism of 16–20. The general point that different things are good and bad in different situations is present already in Heracleitus: Hc779/F49.

Select bibliography