

# Political, All Too Political. Again on Protagoras' Myth in Its Intellectual Context

Mauro Bonazzi | ORCID: 0000-0003-1347-8225

Full Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,  
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands  
*m.bonazzi@uu.nl*

## Abstract

The paper argues for an analytic interpretation of Protagoras' myth in Plato's dialogue by showing that its goal is not so much to reconstruct the origins of civilization as to identify some essential features of humankind. Against the widespread opinion that human progress depends on the development of *technai*, Protagoras claims that political art is the most important one, insofar as it is the condition for the existence of society. More concretely, the emphasis on the political art also serves to bring light to what is distinctive of Protagoras as opposed to the other sophists and poets. As clearly shown in the dialogue, Protagoras can thus present himself as the only teacher who is capable of imparting the teachings suited to the needs of the new world of the *polis*.

## Keywords

Protagoras – Sophists – Plato – Greek political thought

## 1 An Important Testimony, and a Controversial Authorship

The *Protagoras* is one of Plato's most celebrated dialogues. It tells of an encounter between Socrates and Protagoras, who discuss several topics, not always in an orderly manner; and while some of these topics clearly refer to Plato's own interests (for instance, the unity of virtues), others can be probably traced back to the sophist. This holds especially true for the first part of the dialogue, where Protagoras presents himself to Socrates as a teacher of 'political art' in private and public affairs (318d–319a). Socrates contends that such an art cannot

be taught by raising two doubts: 1) in public life, in the Assembly, when the Athenians debate on ‘technical’ matters, they accept the advice of experts, and of nobody else; on the contrary, when they have to deliberate about politics, everyone is entitled to express his own opinions, on the assumption that everyone is an expert (wise, σοφούς, 319b) – therefore there is no need for teachers (319a–e); 2) in private life, the best citizens educate their children in everything except political virtue, on the assumption, evidently, that it is a natural gift and not something that can be taught (319e–320c).<sup>1</sup> Protagoras replies with a long speech (the ‘Great Speech’, as it usually called, 320c–328d), by first recounting a myth (320c–322d)<sup>2</sup> and then continuing with a *logos* (322d–328d).<sup>3</sup> The myth, an adaptation of Prometheus’ story, will serve to answer the first doubt;<sup>4</sup> the speech will repeat and confirm what was already established by the myth (322d–324d) and also answer the second doubt (324d–328d).

This ‘Great Speech’ – especially the myth – is one of the most important sources at our disposal on the sophist Protagoras. Given its relevance, many efforts have been devoted to assessing its value as an historical testimony, and several hypotheses have been advanced. In the *logos*, which follows the myth, mention is made of Pherecrates’ *Savages*, which was staged in 420 BCE (327d3–4), whereas Pericles’ sons, who died in 429 BCE, are presented as alive (328c6–d2). As has been remarked, ‘this contradiction cannot be reconciled with possible utterances of the historical Protagoras’ but appears to be

1 These two criticisms are not identical: the first, concerning public life, implies that all people are (political) experts; the second, concerning private life, does not.

2 On the use of *mythos*, see 320c4 and c6; 324d5.

3 On the use of *logos*, see 324d6.

4 In short, the myth retraces the key stages in the history of humankind, starting from the well-known events surrounding Prometheus, the beneficent daemon. When the time had come to generate mortal animals (including humans), the gods entrusted Prometheus with assigning each species qualities that would allow it to survive and prosper. Prometheus (literally, ‘he who understands first, who foresees’) left the task up to his brother Epimetheus (‘he who understands afterwards’), but the latter forgot humans. To make up for his brother’s mistake, Prometheus stole fire and technical expertise from the gods, allowing humans to approach the world of the gods, learn how to speak, and master the technologies required to solve practical life problems – the provision of food, clothing, and housing. However, despite this progress, humanity risked extinction, as it lacked political wisdom: only this wisdom would allow humans to organize themselves into social groups and live together, so as to protect themselves from wild animals and natural dangers. Humans were trying to save themselves by coming together into cities, but ‘when they gathered together, they committed injustice against one another ... so that they scattered once again and were destroyed’ (322b8–9). Finally, fearing that the human race would meet extinction, Zeus despatched Hermes to distribute justice (*dikē*) and shame (*aidos*), not in the same way as with the other arts (whereby, for instance, one physician is enough for many patients), but to everyone indiscriminately.

compatible with Plato, 'as he seems not too concerned with absolute historical truth'.<sup>5</sup> The historical value of the myth (which is presented as strictly interchangeable with the *logos*, 320c) is more controversial. Only the great German scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff seems to have taken into consideration the possibility that it may be a direct quotation from Protagoras, on the assumption that the *Protagoras* is one of the earliest dialogues, in which Plato collects views from other thinkers and records Socrates' arguments with the sophists.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, it would be too much to assume that Plato simply incorporated a long extract from an opponent's work into his own text; the sophisticated quality of the text suffices to show that this is an untenable reading.<sup>7</sup> Nobody seems to share this view today. The opposite hypothesis, that this is an entirely Platonic invention, has not found many supporters either, apart from Gerd Van Riel. In a very interesting paper, he has claimed that the text is 'Plato's own work' and that it 'expresses a number of anthropological points which represent Plato's own doctrines'.<sup>8</sup> On this reading, the myth serves not so much to introduce Protagoras' views as to establish an anthropological thesis on which both participants in the discussion agree. To be sure, Van Riel does not exclude that this myth could somehow have come from Protagoras ('Religion and Morality', p. 162), either as a verbatim quotation or as a paraphrase by Plato; but he seems to imply that as consequence of this likely Platonic reshaping ('Plato assumes this myth and its contents as his own') it has lost much of its virtual dependence on Protagoras (whose views are rather discussed in the long speech which follows). This is going too far, in my opinion. Since Protagoras presents myth and *logos* as virtually identical and interchangeable, it seems incorrect to draw such a strong opposition between

5 B. Manuwald, 'Protagoras' Myth in Plato's *Protagoras*: Fiction or Testimony?', in J. Van Ophuisen, M. van Raalte, P. Stork (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera: the Man, his Measure* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 163–164, at p. 177.

6 U. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Platon* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1920), vol. 1, pp. 80–81, 127, 151; vol. II, p. 431.

7 A good discussion in J. Sihvola, *Decay, Progress, the Good Life? Hesiod and Protagoras on the Development of Culture* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1989), pp. 91–93; see also R. Barney, 'Protagoras and the Myth of Plato's *Protagoras*', in C. Riedweg (ed.), *Philosophie für die Polis* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 133–158, at p. 134.

8 G. Van Riel, 'Religion and Morality. Elements of Plato's Anthropology in the Myth of Prometheus (*Protagoras*, 320d–322d)', in C. Collobert, P. Destrée and F.J. Gonzalez (eds.), *Plato and Myth. Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 145–164, at p. 145. Along similar lines, see also W.J. Prior, 'Protagoras' Great Speech and Plato's Defense of Athenian democracy', in V. Caston and D.W. Graham (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2002), pp. 313–326.

them. Stimulating as it may be, Van Riel's reading is not entirely convincing.<sup>9</sup> After all, as Mario Vegetti among many others has remarked, there must remain some 'family resemblance' with the historical figure.<sup>10</sup> Protagoras was a famous thinker, who has passed away only a relatively short time before. Plato could hardly have disregarded his views to such an extent, when constructing the character for his dialogue. Besides, an accurate portrayal is also a precondition for the critique to be really successful. It is most likely that Plato's Protagoras advocates views that can be traced back to the actual historical figure of this philosopher.

Scholars who agree with this conclusion have therefore addressed two other, strictly related, issues in order to better assess the value of this testimony. First, they have tried to establish whether the choice of the myth was Protagorean or Platonic – did Protagoras use the Prometheus myth or is Plato reshaping some of his views by adding a mythological veneer? Second, these scholars have explored the intellectual background of Plato's text, the context to which the myth belongs. On the first point scholars widely disagree; as far as the second point is concerned, there is wide agreement that this testimony constitutes Protagoras' contribution to one of the most hotly debated topics in fifth-century Athens – the investigation in the origins of human civilization (often referred to by the German term *Kulturentstehungslehre*). Indeed, the myth has often been taken to convey Protagoras' views on the emergence of society. We know from Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Protagoras* that he wrote a text entitled *περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως* (9.55 = 80a1 D.-K.): a footnote added to many a paper suggests that this is in all probability the source from which Plato drew his account.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, this hypothesis is impossible to prove.<sup>12</sup>

9 Besides, it can be remarked that the theological views of the myth and the account of civilization are clearly flawed and incomplete. It is implausible that Plato wished to claim these views as his own (K. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], p. 136 n. 4). As will become clear later, one major problem with Van Riel's interpretation depends on his literal and chronological reading of the myth, which is not the only possible one.

10 M. Vegetti, 'Protagora autore della *Repubblica* (ovvero, il "mito" del *Protagora* nel suo contesto); in G. Casertano (ed.), *Il Protagora di Platone: struttura e problematiche* (Napoli: Loffredo, 2004), pp. 145–157; at p. 154.

11 See e.g. M. Untersteiner, *I sofisti* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996<sup>2</sup>), p. 28 n. 24; C. Kahn, 'The origins of social contract theory', in G.B. Kerferd (ed.), *The Sophists and their Legacy* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), pp. 92–108, at p. 98; A. Brancacci, 'Protagoras, l'*orthoepia* et la justesse des noms', in M. Dixsaut (ed.), *Platon source des présocratiques* (Paris: Vrin, 2002), pp. 169–190, at p. 172; Barney, 'Protagoras and the Myth of Plato's *Protagoras*', p. 135.

12 Of course, there is also a problem with titles in relation to Protagoras and, more generally, early Greek writers: see N. O'Sullivan, 'Written and Spoken in the first Sophistic', in I. Worthington (ed.), *Voice into text. Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece* (Leiden: Brill,

That Protagoras' testimony was somehow addressing the topic of human civilization is instead a reasonable claim. The problem is how to combine these two issues.

In relation to the first problem – whether the myth was Protagorean or not – the difficulty for those who endorse the 'Protagorean' option is that the myth, read literally as a contribution to the debate on the origin of human civilization, raises many perplexities.<sup>13</sup> The text is indeed full of contradictory or inconsistent claims. From the very beginning, when Epimetheus is in charge of the distribution of qualities, the distinction between humans and animals is in place, but it is only with Prometheus that humankind will receive the gift of rationality, which is what distinguishes man from all other animals. In other words, there seems to be a pre-existing human race, which is virtually defined by the possession of qualities that will be introduced only later.<sup>14</sup> Strangely enough, since human beings are created already provided with technical skills, there can be no mention of stages in the development of human society; as a matter of fact, the myth does not mention any stage of primitive life without technical skills, which is also surprising. Besides, if it is true, as we will later learn, that technical skills are not given to all, the consequence is that language and belief in the gods do not belong to all human beings – a patently absurd statement. Neither is it clear how these first human beings could develop the various arts and crafts, given that the development of specialized knowledge (see Hermes' example of the doctor, at 322c) would seem to presuppose the sort of communal life which is impossible without justice and politics. Besides, the passage from the second to the third phase proves mysterious: if it is true that no society or community is possible without some kind of justice and shame, in the second stage human beings must have been living in a completely isolated and scattered way.<sup>15</sup> Must we really conclude that there existed humans with no sense of justice and shame at all? And how could they have developed them? The only possible solution seems to point toward

---

1996), pp. 115–127 and M. Corradi, *Protagora tra filologia e filosofia. La testimonianza di Aristotele* (Pisa-Roma: Serra, 2012), pp. 190–191.

- 13 A recent attempt is K. Thein, 'Teleology and Myth in the *Protagoras*,' in A. Havlíček and F. Karfík (eds.), *Plato's Protagoras. Proceedings of the Third Symposium Pragense* (Prague: Oikoumene, 2003), pp. 60–70, at pp. 60–62.
- 14 M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 100–101; Sihvola, *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?*, p. 100.
- 15 See also Manuwald, 'Protagoras' Myth in Plato's *Protagoras*: Fiction or Testimony?', p. 172. Besides, this once again raises the problem of language, because it is unclear why human beings would have needed language if they were living alone.

Zeus – justice and shame are a gift from him, and this must be understood literally.<sup>16</sup> Controversial in itself, this option is also hard to reconcile with Protagoras' (in)famous agnosticism (8ob4 D.-K.), of which Plato himself was well aware (cf. *Tht.* 162d).<sup>17</sup> Such a reading conflicts, in other words, with one of the few surviving testimonies concerning his thought. Besides, in the *logos* there is no mention of gods or divine interventions. All in all, read as a contribution to the debate on the development of human civilizations, the myth proves quite problematic and not very interesting.

It is not by accident, then, that many scholars have advanced the alternative hypothesis, by suggesting that it was rather Plato who reshaped Protagoras' historical account in mythological terms. This option has often been endorsed implicitly; recently, it has been openly defended by Rachel Barney: 'in the Myth he is playfully imposing his own form on source material from a different genre. Nor is it difficult to imagine what that genre might have been'. In the fifth century, some theories of human progress began to replace the traditional idea of a degeneration from a primeval Golden age (Hesiod's golden race, Empedocles' age of Love etc.). They can be traced in such different authors as Democritus, Aeschylus, Sophocles as well as Euripides, the Hippocratic *corpus* and Critias (later also the poet Moschion).<sup>18</sup> According to many scholars also Protagoras should be counted in this group, as the author of a text 'covering much the same prehistorical ground as the myth'.<sup>19</sup> This is of course possible: everything is possible with Plato. But such a hypothesis solves the problems we were discussing at a very high price, insofar as it transforms this text into a banal summary of some popular and widespread views on human progress and civilization. As Rachel Barney has correctly remarked, in Plato's dialogue Protagoras' portrayal is nuanced and philosophically rich.<sup>20</sup> But this is not the case in his speech, if we read it as a piece on the emergence of human

16 G.B. Kerferd, 'Protagoras Doctrine of Justice and Virtue,' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953), pp. 42–45.

17 W.K.C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning. Some Greek Views on the Origins of Life and the Early State of Man* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 92.

18 See Aesch. *PV* 442–506; Soph. *Ant.* 332–371; Eur. *Supp.* 201–213; Critias 81B25 D.-K.; Hippoc. *VM* 3; Democr. *ap.* Diodorus 1.8.1–7; Moschion fr. 6 Nauck.

19 Barney, 'Protagoras and the Myth of Plato's *Protagoras*', p. 135 with a mention of περι τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως. See also A. Neschke-Hentschke, *Platonisme politique et théorie du droit naturel. Contributions à une archéologie de la culture politique européenne. Vol. I. Le platonisme politique dans l'antiquité*, (Louvain and Paris: Éditions Peeters, 1995), p. 58; A. Beresdorf, 'Fangs, Feathers & Fairness: Protagoras on the origins of right and wrong,' in J. Van Ophuijsen, M. van Raalte and P. Stork (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera: the Man, his Measure* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 138–162, at p. 143.

20 Barney, 'Protagoras and the Myth of Plato's *Protagoras*', p. 133.

civilization. Once upon a time, humans were living like beasts, and the technical skills they had were not sufficient to give them security and prosperity; then they joined together in cities and lived happily ever after. More or less, this is the story told by the myth, when we read it as an historical account of human civilization: as it has rightly been remarked, ‘the parallels between the Protagoras myth and our texts [i.e., texts on the origins of civilization] do not extend beyond the commonplace.’<sup>21</sup> Moreover, such an account does not explain the overall structure of Protagoras’ speech. Protagoras wrote a historical essay; Plato transformed this historical narrative into a mythological narrative; but the myth, read in this way, is not easy to reconcile with the *logos*. What is the relation between the *mythos* and the following *logos*? The *logos* shows no interest in any sort of chronological reconstruction, an element which plays such an important role in these interpretations – this is something we need to explain too. Given that this reading of the myth does not seem to have much in common with the *logos*, shall we then conclude that the latter is not important or is just Platonic? Once again, this contrasts with Protagoras’ claim that his *mythos* and his *logos* are interchangeable (320c2–7).

## 2 An Analytical Reading of the Myth (and of the *Logos*)

Since none of these readings is entirely satisfying, other options are worth pursuing. To be sure, in the current state of our knowledge it is almost impossible to reach certain conclusions on its authorship.<sup>22</sup> Leaving aside this problem,

21 T. Cole, *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology* (Georgia: Press Western Reserve University, 1967), p. 51 n. 9; ‘Protagoras’ account does not go beyond a vaguely conceived theory of challenge and response; of the more careful and detailed naturalistic reconstruction of history [...] there is no trace’.

22 In favor of the Protagorean authorship, which seems to be the most promising option, two arguments might be adduced. 1) As it has been shown by many scholars, the use and criticism of myths played an important role in the sophists’ activity: from Gorgias’ *Helen* and Palamedes to Prodicus’ *Heracles* and Hippias’ *Trojan Speech*, examples abound and confirm that many sophists’ *epideixeis* were playing on mythical themes, see Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, pp. 105–30 (another interesting parallel are Aesop’s fables: see Farrar, *Origins of Democratic Thinking* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], p. 88). Protagoras too can be counted in this group, see Sihvola, *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?*, p. 97; Beresdorf, ‘Fangs, Feathers & Fairness’, p. 146; M.A. Gavray, *Platon, héritier de Protagoras. Dialogue sur les fondements de la démocratie* (Paris: Vrin, 2017), p. 162. Indeed, as we will see later, the narrative of the myth can be read as a sort of sophistic *epideixis*, as an entirely consistent self-promotional speech by a sophist in support of this teaching (see 320c3: *epideixo*, 328d3: *epideixamenos* with Manuwald, ‘Protagoras’ Myth in Plato’s *Protagoras*, pp. 167 and 175.). Stimulating as it is,

it is perhaps more useful to address the other problem, and to reconsider the role of the myth in the intellectual context of its time. Interestingly, despite their divergences, all these interpretations share the view that Protagoras was somehow taking part in the debate on the emergence of human society by reconstructing the different phases in the history of human progress and civilization. As we have seen, this is precisely where the problem lies, because the myth does not fit historical reconstructions of this kind very well. An alternative option is thus to take the myth for what it is, namely a myth. To be sure, we can underline many important parallels with the dossier of texts on the origins of human society; there is no need to deny a common ground between Protagoras' myth and these texts. The myth clearly draws on them. That said, however, there is no need to read an historical narrative into the myth either, neither is it necessary, perhaps, to assume that there was such a Protagorean historical narrative which Plato reshaped into his myth. An alternative option, and perhaps an easier one, is to read the myth as a story, and not as history – as a story, that is, which is not meant to be an historical reconstruction, but which rather plays with the texts on human civilization in order to convey some important (Protagorean) ideas. In other words, it is not a matter of denying – for this would be impossible – that the story is clearly articulated into three phases, but of remarking that the myth need not be interpreted in a chronological sense, as if it were retracing the various stages of human civilization. Rather, it is meant to identify and circumscribe some essential features of humankind itself. In this sense Protagoras' myth can be interpreted as a variation on – or parody of – the *Kulturentstheung* tradition, whose aim is not so much to reconstruct how we became what we are, how our civilization developed, as to account for how our society is organized. Very much like Aesop's fables (an interesting parallel), the myth should not be interpreted historically,

---

this argument is far from being decisive, for the very simple reason that also Plato played with myths, as a polemical tool (just think of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* or Lysias in the *Phaedrus*) or as a way to convey his own ideas (see again Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, pp. 155–184). 2) Structurally, the role of the myth in the dialogue is not clear. It does answer only one of the two questions asked by Socrates, and its thesis is repeated in the first part of the *logos* that follows. This redundancy might give the impression that it was imported by outside, (see B. Manuwald, 'Platon oder Protagoras? Zur großeb Rede des Protagoras', in C. Mueller-Goldingen and K. Sier (eds.), *LHNAIKA. Festschrift für Carl Werner Müller* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1996), pp. 103–131, at p. 128). Interesting as it is, neither this observation seems to be decisive (the smooth transition from myth to speech, from the first problem to the second could also be interpreted as another proof of Plato's literary talent; the aim of an *epideixis* is to convey ideas in a pleasant way not to develop a system).



but rather as an explanatory, aetiological story, accounting for an ‘essential’<sup>23</sup> element of human nature, the condition for human flourishing.<sup>24</sup> Unlike most of the above-mentioned texts, ‘Protagoras’ story is not a naturalistic account of the rise of human society: it is not an account of how the world came to be but rather of how it is. The focus is on the present human condition, and the myth is – to use Cynthia Farrar’s words – not genetic but analytic: it analyzes ‘social man in its various elements’ in order to understand what is really important.<sup>25</sup>

When read in this way, the myth gains in clarity and originality. As we were saying, what is important is not so much to reconstruct the different phases of human civilization as to circumscribe some fundamental features of human beings. If the goal is to explain who we are, the myth does not need to be divided into three or five steps<sup>26</sup> (as it can be, of course), but rather into two parts, namely: the pre-political state of nature and the political world of the city, where the former is an impossible world, a counterfactual example which shows what is really distinctive about the human world. What really allows men to live the way they live is not technical skills (or the belief in the gods), but their political attitude, which consists in the possession of *aidos* and *dikē* – *aidos* corresponding to ‘the component that enables each to govern himself in his conduct toward other human beings’ and *dikē* to the norms which regulate social intercourse among human beings.<sup>27</sup> The state of nature in which humans find themselves living after their creation reflects an impossible situation and may be understood as a thought experiment to demonstrate *e contrario* that human beings are political animals. Human beings are political animals; and political society is not so much the final accomplishment of mankind’s long journey, as the condition of possibility for human life, which is always associated life. As the myth has it, this is what prevents human extinction, just as the various features and qualities given to the different animals have prevented

23 Sihvola, *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?*, p. 98.

24 See *Prot.* 323a4: *aitia*. An intriguing Platonic parallel is Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*; also in this speech the chronological development is the tool used to bring what is essential in human nature to light.

25 C. Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking*, p. 92; Vegetti, ‘Protagora autore della *Repubblica*’, p. 147; see also Sihvola *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?*, p. 98: the synchronic level of meaning is more important than the diachronic one.

26 See Van Riel, ‘Religion and Morality’, p. 149.

27 H. Segvic, ‘Protagoras’ Political Art’, in M. Burnyeat (ed.), *From Protagoras to Aristotle. Essays in Ancient Moral Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 3–27, at p. 9 (with interesting remarks on the relation between *aidos* and *dikē*, 10–11); On these two notions and their relation in Protagoras see D. Cairns, *Aidos. The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 354–360.

their extinction.<sup>28</sup> 'The political art seems to be not only an instrument which is discovered for improving the conditions of life, but an essential element of human existence.'<sup>29</sup>

In favor of this reading, it is worth observing that with it the virtual tension with the *logos* disappears. Indeed, the *logos* completes the myth by first repeating in plain words the same view as the myth and by then offering a solution to Socrates' second objection. The myth argued that we are all 'political animals', insofar as we all participate in *dikē* and *aidos*; the same idea is also repeated in the *logos*:

323a (*bis*): 'for they think that this particular virtue, political or civic virtue, is shared by all, or there wouldn't be any cities. [...] Consider this as further evidence for the universal belief that all humans have a share of justice and the rest of civic virtue.'<sup>30</sup>

323b–c: 'one must have a trace of justice or not be human.'

324d–325a: 'does there or does there not exist one thing which all citizens must have for there to be a city? Here and nowhere else lies the solution to your problem. For if such a thing exists, and this one thing is not the art of the carpenter, the blacksmith, or the potter, but justice, and temperance, and piety – which I may collectively term the virtue of a man ...'

Political virtue is the necessary condition for the very existence of the city, and it is the defining virtue of human beings. There is no human being who does not live with other human beings in a political community; there is no political community without some (degree of) justice; consequently, there is no human being without some (degree of) justice. Once this has been explained, the *logos* will show that this common possession of political virtue does not exclude differences in merit (see the example of the flute-players' *polis*, 327c–e). As a matter of fact, basic equality does not exclude that some members of society

28 Beresford, 'Fangs, Feathers & Fairness: Protagoras on the origins of right and wrong', p. 155.

29 Sihvola *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?*, p. 101; Farrar, *Origins of Democratic Thinking*, p. 95; B. Sommerville, 'Sophistry and the Promethean Craft in Plato's *Protagoras*,' *Classical Quarterly* 69 (2019), pp. 126–46, at p. 128; J. Kiersted, 'Protagora's Cooperative Know-How', in X. Márquez (ed.), *Democratic moments. Reading Democratic Texts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 17–23, at p. 19. On Protagoras' anthropology see now R. Güremen, 'The Myth of Protagoras,' *Méthexis* 29 (2017), pp. 46–58 and C. Balla, 'πέφυκεν πλεονεκετέιν? Plato and the Sophists on Greed and Savage Humanity,' *Polis* 35 (2018), pp. 83–101.

30 All translations of the *Protagoras* are from Lombardo – Bell in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato's Complete Works*, (Indianapolis/Indiana: Hackett, 1997).

may be potentially better than others, and therefore more capable of providing the community with the solutions it needs: ‘universal competence is both complemented and made possible by the excellence of the few’.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, there are some teachers who are better at imparting the city the lessons it needs. And this is precisely what Protagoras is offering, as we will see below: he is one of the talented few, capable of making people noble and excellent (328b).<sup>32</sup> Protagoras has given an answer to Socrates.

### 3 Protagoras against the *Technai*

If this reading is correct, the comparison with the testimonies on human civilization at our disposal shows what is distinctive, and remarkable, about Protagoras’ Great Speech, and particularly the myth. As it is well known, many ancient authors of that period have written about the origins of human society.<sup>33</sup> What all too often goes unnoticed, however, is that this dossier is made up of a heterogeneous mix of different texts: Presocratic ‘histories of almost everything’ combined with tragedies or poems, which do not necessarily belong to the same tradition.<sup>34</sup> For the sake of the present discussion, we can agree that in the fifth century there was great interest on the rise of human civilization and a growing awareness of the importance of *technai* for the development of society.<sup>35</sup> Protagoras is often added to this list. As we have already seen, scholars

31 Farrar, *Origins of Democratic Thinking*, p. 86.

32 Segvic, ‘Protagoras’ Political Art’, pp. 17–27 remarked that Protagoras’ teaching can be taken in two senses: he is teaching his students either how to become good citizens or how to satisfy their political ambitions. Plato clearly implies the latter. But Protagoras probably rejected this alternative: he was teaching how to achieve personal success by helping the city.

33 For a useful collection of these sources see, among others, Cole, *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology*; W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 79–84, and G. Campbell, *Lucretius on Creation and Evolution: A Commentary on De Rerum Natura, Book Five, lines 772–1104* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 331–333.

34 As is instead argued by Kahn, ‘The origins of social contract theory’. A good account of all the traditions converging in this dossier is Cole, *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology*, pp. 4–5 (historians, catalogs of inventions, Presocratics and perhaps sophists, poets).

35 For the sake of clarity, we can distinguish between first-order *technai* and second-order *technai*, i.e. between arts that have clearly specifiable products and ones that do not: see R. Kent Sprague, *Plato’s Philosopher-King. A study of the theoretical background*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), p. xiv. On the importance of *technai* more generally, see for instance Cole, *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology*, p. 1:

insist on the parallels between the myth and these other texts. The differences, however, are even more remarkable than the affinities. When we look at these texts, what is most noteworthy is the fact that, with the notable exception of the *Sisyphus* fragment (which was written later and is clearly reminiscent of sophistic ideas),<sup>36</sup> they all share a similar account of the history of human civilization, underlining the importance of technical skills as the key condition for human progress. From Aeschylus and the other tragic poets to the *corpus hippocraticum* and Diodorus/Democritus, the history of human progress is a Promethean story, in which *technai* play the central role. *Techne* is praised for enabling human beings to overcome natural needs and the perils of a hostile environment and thus to live a prosperous life. *Techne*, in other words, is what marks the distinction between civilization and savagery, and between human beings and animals. An eloquent text, which incisively summarizes these reconstructions, is *On Ancient Medicine* 3, where the original human condition is emphatically described through the use of terms such as ‘necessity’ (*anagkē*) and ‘need’ (*chreia*; see also Diodorus/Democritus, below):<sup>37</sup>

Necessity itself (αὐτὴ ἢ ἀνάγκη) caused medicine to be sought for and discovered by human beings and discovered by human beings, for it was not beneficial for the sick to take the same foods as the healthy [...]. It was on account of this need (διὰ δὴ ταύτην τὴν χρείαν), I believe, that these people sought nourishment suited to their constitution and discovered that which we make use of today.

VM 3<sup>38</sup>

As in the other texts of the dossier, this necessity is always external, coming as it does from nature. And human progress consists in the process of liberation from natural necessities – whereby human beings find a way to protect themselves from natural adversities and obstacles:

---

‘Nowhere, in fact, is the effect of Ionian rationalization on the Greek mind more striking than in the success of its contention that the technological achievements of civilization are of a relatively recent origin, and that man’s life was once more far simpler and poorer materially than it is now’; or M.J. Schiefsky (ed.), *Hippocrates, On Ancient Medicine* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 157: ‘The notion that human beings originally lived a brutal and savage life and then gradually attained a civilized existence through the development of technology was widespread in fifth-century’.

36 Another exception is Moschion, who is however later (third cent. BCE).

37 Interestingly, also the author of this treatise, like Protagoras in Plato’s dialogue, is presenting and defending himself and his activity, see Schiefsky, *Hippocrates, On Ancient Medicine*, p. 159.

38 Trans. Schiefsky, *Hippocrates, On Ancient Medicine*.

They say that the first men to be born in the beginning, leading a disordered and bestial life, dispersed and went out to the pastures and nourished themselves with the healthiest herbs and the fruits that grew spontaneously on the trees. When they were attacked by wild animals they came to one another's help, being taught by utility, and, gathering together out of the fear, they gradually came to recognize one another's features. [...] Now the first men lived wretchedly, since none of the things useful for life had been discovered: they were bare of clothing, ignorant of dwelling and fire, completely unaware of domestic food ... [...] But being taught gradually by experience, they took refuge in caves during the winter and stored away those fruits that could be conserved. Once fire and other useful things came to be known, the crafts were gradually discovered, and everything else that can assist life in common. For in general, it was need itself that taught human all things [...].

Democritus 68B5 D.-K. = 27d202 L.-M.<sup>39</sup>

This is the reason why *technai*, from agriculture to medicine and arithmetic (see Aesch. *PV*. 442–468), are so important. They help us in the battle against nature.

To be sure, a similar account is also present in Protagoras' myth. In his story too, mention is made of the most important technical skills (house-building, weaving, shoemaking, carpentry and agriculture, plus religion and speech, which are also present in the other texts). To be sure, also in Protagoras *technai* play an important role. But the differences are far more remarkable. For here, unlike in the other testimonies, *technai* do not play the decisive role – they do not suffice to ensure human survival and prosperity.<sup>40</sup> Protagoras is the only one (or: the first one, if we want to consider the *Sisyphus* fragment and Moschion) to insist on the fact that *technai*, alone, are not able to ensure human progress, or human survival, for the problem is not external, so to say, but internal: 'they committed injustice against one another' (322b). This is a remarkable difference, which changes the terms of the problem. Technical skills can help with natural necessities, but are not useful with human relations, which constitute a far more complicated problem. Indeed, human relations – in other words, politics – are a much more complex and potentially

39 Trans. A. Laks – G. Most, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 2016).

40 Sihvola, *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?*, pp. 100–101. Another difference is Protagoras' idea that technical developments occur within a short time (*tachy*, 322a6); the other texts all insist on the importance of the temporal element: see Manuwald, 'Protagoras' Myth in Plato's *Protagoras*', p. 173; Schiefsky, *Hippocrates, On Ancient Medicine*, p. 158.

dangerous issue than our natural weakness. Conflict, which was prominently absent in the other texts, becomes the real problem for Protagoras, who is also in a position to offer a solution to it through his teaching.<sup>41</sup> And in this capacity to see where the real problem lies and to offer a solution, lies Protagoras' superiority. What is important is politics, and political art is what Protagoras is teaching; much more than the traditional *technai*, political art is the *condicio sine qua non* for human survival and progress – and this, as already remarked, not in the sense of historical progress only. The point is that there is no human community without some form of politics. Protagoras' myth, by underlining this point, presents a very subtle attack against *technai*.

Most interestingly, the same hostile attitude to *technai*<sup>42</sup> is visible at the beginning of the dialogue, when Protagoras opposes his 'political' teaching and the 'specialist' curriculum of the other teachers present in Callias' house:

[Protagoras:] For the other people harm young men. Driving them back, despite resistance, towards the arts (τοὺς τέχνους) that they have fled, they cast them upon those arts (εἰς τέχνους), teaching arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music (and he cast a glance at Hippias).

80a5 D.-K. = 31D37 L.-M.<sup>43</sup>

The opposition to *technai* and specialist teaching plays a decisive role in Protagoras' self-presentation in Plato's *Protagoras*. Interestingly, this also finds confirmation in other testimonies.

41 See also Sommerville, 'Sophistry and the Promethean Craft', pp. 139–40.

42 As already shown above, the other sources too indistinctly refer to such different arts such as agriculture and housebuilding or mathematics and astronomy.

43 See also 31b–312a, where Protagoras' teaching is first opposed to that of doctors and sculptors, and then associated with that of teachers. On the importance of this opposition more generally, see Sommerville, 'Sophistry and the Promethean Craft'. An intriguing hypothesis concerns Prodicus, who is one of Protagoras' competitors in the dialogue, and who would appear to have insisted on the importance of agriculture in the development of human society (and of its religious tradition). Since his speech on Heracles was reportedly contained in a text entitled *Horai*, that is 'Seasons', W. Nestle, 'Die Horen des Prodikos', *Hermes* 71 (1936), pp. 151–70 and L. Soverini, *Il sofista e l'agora. Sapienti, economia e vita quotidiana nella Grecia classica* (Pisa, Pubblicazioni della Scuola Normale Superiore, 1998), p. 105 advanced the brilliant hypothesis that Prodicus celebrated Heracles as a symbol of the world of farmers and agriculture as well, and that the *Horai* provided some praise of agriculture, along with a theory about the origin of religion in connection with agriculture, and an exhortation to virtue (something necessary for agricultural life), embodied by the figure of Heracles at the crossroads. It is an intriguing and highly speculative hypothesis. If correct, it would make of Prodicus an ideal target for Protagoras; in the dialogue, however, Protagoras 'cast a glance at Hippias' (318e).

Along with this polemic, it is interesting to remark that we can also extract a second line of attack against *technai* from other surviving testimonies on Protagoras. So far, what has been at stake is the criticism of the idea that *technai* like agriculture or medicine are sufficient to create a viable human community. From other testimonies it emerges that Protagoras also developed a critique of certain specific *technai* such as geometry and astronomy, on the grounds that they are entirely removed from the world of ordinary experience, and hence either useless or unverifiable. In the specific case of geometry (and perhaps astronomy, also mentioned in the above text, and geodesics), Protagoras' polemical stance is confirmed by two testimonies, from Simplicius and Philodemus:

Not even this is true, that mensuration deals with perceptible and perishable magnitudes; for then it would have perished, when they perished. And astronomy also cannot be dealing with perceptible magnitudes nor with this heaven above us. For neither are perceptible lines such lines as the geometer speaks of (for no perceptible thing is straight or curved in this way; for a hoop touches a straight edge not at a point, but as Protagoras said it did, in his refutation of the geometers [that is along a line]).

80B7 D.-K. partly reproduced by L.-M. as 31D33; see also 29a29 D.-K. = Zeno d12 L.-M. reporting a controversy between Zeno and Protagoras, quoted below

Likewise, Philodemus states:

[...] that the <things> are not knowable, <the> words are not acceptable; <as> Protagoras indeed [scil. said] about ma<thematics>.

80B7a D.-K. = 31d34 L.-M.<sup>44</sup>

Another interesting parallel comes from a reported polemic with Zeno:

Zeno of Elea asked the sophist Protagoras: 'Tell me, Protagoras, does a single grain or even the ten thousandth part of a grain make any sound when it falls?' Protagoras said it did not. 'Then,' Zeno asked, 'does a bushel of millet make any sound when it falls or not?' Protagoras answered that it did, whereupon Zeno replied: 'But surely there is some ratio between a bushel of millet and a single grain or even the ten thousandth part of a

44 That this fragment contains a reference to Protagoras is disputed by C. Romeo, 'Per una nuova edizione del PHerc. 1676', *Cronache Ercolanensi* 22 (1992), pp. 163–167.

grain?'. Protagoras answered that there was. 'But then surely,' Zeno said, 'the ratios of the corresponding sounds to each other will be the same: for as the bodies which make the sound are to one another, so will the sounds be to one another. And if this is so, and if the bushel of millet makes a sound, then the single grain of millet and the ten thousandth part of a grain will make a sound.' This was the way Zeno used to frame the question.

29a29 D.-K. = Zeno d12 L.-M.

Leaving aside the problem of the historical authenticity of the encounter, this testimony has sometimes been interpreted as proof of the fact that Protagoras denied infinite divisibility. This seems to be an incorrect conclusion, because Protagoras – at least in theory – does not deny the possibility of division into increasingly small parts. What Protagoras denies is rather that the sound produced by these portions of millet is audible. In this case, as in the other two testimonies, it appears that the sophist examined things from the point of view of sensible experience, against the scientists' abstractions: just as sight does not perceive the touching of a sphere and a tangent at a given point, so hearing can only perceive sounds up to a certain point. This helps to explain what the problem with geometry is: if it does not deal with physical objects, it amounts to an insignificant verbal game; if it does deal with physical objects, it is subject to empirical evaluation, which offers different results from those provided by *a priori* analyses – and this explains why it is not useful.<sup>45</sup>

This is of course a different line of attack than the one found in the myth. It is not a matter of denying the social utility of geometry, but of arguing that this expertise is not even valid in its own field of application. Admittedly, if this is the polemic, it does not seem to raise interesting arguments against geometry. And yet, the presence of these polemics in Protagoras' testimonies should not go unnoticed. The two criticisms do not exclude each other. Rather, when taken together, they seem to confirm that *technai* and specialistic disciplines were one major target in Protagoras' thought. Another testimony, from Plato's *Sophist*, suggests what the goal of these polemics might have been:

[The stranger from Elea]: With regard to all the arts and for each of them, the way in which one must contradict each of the artisans himself is set out (καταβεβλήται) as it were in the public domain, written down for whoever wants to learn it.

45 See J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 546.



[Theaetetus]: You seem to be talking about Protagoras writings on wrestling and the other arts (περί τε πάλης καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνῶν).

80B8 D.-K. = 31d2 L.-M.

In all likelihood, the reference in this text is not so much to wrestling but to these discussions.<sup>46</sup> In an agonistic society such as the ancient Greek one, to contradict each individual expert in a given subject was a vital aspect of public debate, and an easy strategy to adopt for those who were seeking to present themselves on the public stage as the best teachers and their teachings as superior to those of other supposed experts and teachers. Of course, this polemical context is more relevant with regard to *technai* such as geometry or medicine than shoemaking. Interestingly, some memory of these polemical attacks is also preserved in texts belonging to this tradition. Thus, the prologue of the Hippocratean treatise *de Arte* alludes to some 'professional slanderers', who had made an art of vilifying the arts in order to display their own knowledge, without 'improving anything':

There are some who make an art of demeaning the arts, so they think, not achieving the result I just mentioned, but rather making a display of their special 'skills'. [...] The eagerness to debase the discoveries of others by an art of mean discourse, not suggesting any improvements but instead slandering those who have knowledge in front of those who have not – this no longer seems to be an object or an occupation of the intellect, but rather an indication of a mediocre nature or lack in art.

*de Arte* 1<sup>47</sup>

It is tempting also to count Protagoras among these writers: the affinity is remarkable.<sup>48</sup> All these testimonies confirm Protagoras' polemical stance with regard to *technai*, as found in the myth and the dialogue. What was at stake was one's prominence on the public stage.

46 See Corradi, *Protagora tra filologia e filosofia*, pp. 197–202.

47 Trans. J. Mann, *Hippocrates. On the Art of Medicine* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

48 Along the same lines, see Mann, *Hippocrates, On the Art of Medicine*, pp. 40–41.

#### 4 Protagoras and Hesiod

Marginal in the tradition on the origins of civilization, awareness of the importance of politics and justice was obviously widespread in the Greek world from the very beginning – from Homer and Hesiod. Interestingly, Protagoras' myth includes a clear reference to Hesiod's *Work and Days*. In the myth, when Zeus orders everyone to have a share in *dikē* and *aidos*, he proclaims that this will be his law, *nomos*.<sup>49</sup> This order clearly alludes to some very famous verses of Hesiod's *Works and Days*:

Perses, lay these things in your heart  
 And give heed to Justice, and put violence entirely out of your mind.  
 This is the law that Cronus' son has established for human beings  
 (τόνδε γὰρ ἀνθρώποισι νόμον διέταξε Κρονίων):  
 That fish and beasts and winged birds  
 eat one another, since Justice is not among them;  
 but to human beings he has given Justice, which is the best by far.

*Op.* 274–280<sup>50</sup>

This reference to Hesiod is not a display of erudition, but it aims to indicate an important subtext of the myth, with Protagoras adopting a subtle strategy of appropriation of the poet's verses.<sup>51</sup> Hesiod's basic idea is that *nomos* (law, justice, politics) is what distinguishes humans from animals, insofar as it allows them to transcend the world of brute force and violence by creating an order based on shared values. As a matter of fact, this is also Protagoras' thesis: what is typical of human beings is the common possession of justice, which is to say their political and social capacity. Protagoras' myth clearly alludes to Hesiod's story; the quasi-quotation is intended precisely to emphasize such a convergence. In this case as well, however, when we consider also the other Protagorean testimonies at our disposal, the divergences are not less interesting than the affinities. Borrowings are never neutral, and the appropriation is also a transformation. First of all, this is the case with regard to justice: in

49 *Prt.* 322d: 'Establish this law (*nomon*) in my name: that anyone who is unable to possess a share in a sense of shame and justice should be killed as a disease of the city'.

50 Trans. G. Most, *Hesiod. Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

51 Kahn, 'The origins of social contract theory,' pp. 103–108 discusses the parallel with Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. This is also an intriguing possibility, but since we don't know the exact content and story of the entire trilogy, the relation between the two texts remains less clear.

Hesiod, Justice is divine, she is a deity, the daughter of Zeus, who intervenes when he sees that men fail to respect her (*Op.* 257, 265; *Theog.* 901–903). Hesiod's verses reveal a belief in the absolute existence of justice, regardless of human beings; human justice is not independent of this order of divine values but must rather conform to it. All mythological imaginary aside, the situation radically changes with Protagoras, whose innovation consists in his emphasis on the human rather than divine dimension of justice, as we can clearly infer from the so-called 'Protagoras' Apology'<sup>52</sup> of the *Theaetetus* and as the agnosticism of fragment B4 D.-K. further confirms. There is no place for the gods; justice is something human; it depends on laws, which can vary depending on political situations – it is not what brings us close to the gods but what fulfills our natural potential.

This kind of humanism gives an optimistic twist to Hesiod's traditional pessimism, and this is the second difference. Interestingly, Hesiod too mentions *dikē* and *aidos*. He associates the two terms in the myth of the races, when he talks of the Age of Iron. What characterizes the Age of Iron is precisely the flight of justice and shame, and the consequent triumph of violence. Indeed, it is the world in which we live now, according to Hesiod, but it recalls the one without politics in Protagoras' myth:

Δίκη δ' ἐν χειρὶ καὶ αἰδῶς οὐκ ἔσται.

Justice will be in their hands, and reverence will not exist.

191–192<sup>53</sup>

52 Plato, *Tht.* 167c–d (= 80A21a D.-K.; transl. Laks-Most, *Early Greek Philosophy*): 'whatever seems [or: is decreed to be, *dokein*] just and fine to each city also is that for it, as long as it thinks that it is [or: is decreed to be, *dokein*]'. On Protagoras' conventionalist notion of justice see Neschke-Hentske, *Platonisme politique et théorie du droit naturel*, pp. 56–59 and M. Bonazzi, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 66–68. It can be also remarked that also in the myth Zeus is the cause for *nomos* being present in the human *polis*. But nothing in the text, nor in the myth neither in the *logos*, indicates that the content of *nomos* has to be divinely inspired (as in the case of Hesiod). Again, it depends on human decisions.

53 An interesting parallel, and another example of Hesiod's influence in fifth-century Athenian literature is the use of these very same ideas in Thucydides' account of the *stasis* at Corcyra. But in that case the affinities are much more remarkable than the divergences: what happened in Corcyra is meant to confirm the truth of Hesiod's verses; see L. Edmunds, 'Thucydides' ethics as reflected in the description of *stasis*', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 79 (1975), pp. 73–92 and M. Bonazzi, 'Il movimento reale. Tucidide sulla guerra e l'uomo', in C. Altini (ed.), *Guerra e pace. Storia e teoria di un'esperienza filosofica e politica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), pp. 35–49.

By claiming that in our world there is always some degree of justice and reverence, Protagoras inverts Hesiod's account, offering a much more positive view of human beings. As long as there are human beings, there are communities and therefore some moral and political values: an inclination towards fairness is a natural endowment,<sup>54</sup> which is then concretely expressed through the enactment of laws and moral rules. Hesiod's iron age is rather implicitly associated with Pherecrates' *Savages* (see *Prt.* 327d3–4). Whereas Hesiod describes human history in terms of decadence (since it is difficult to imitate the gods), Protagoras presents it in much more favorable terms.<sup>55</sup> And this idea in turn strengthens the reasonable belief that acting in view of justice is in everyone's interest; this is another consequence of Protagoras' teaching, which indirectly responds to Hesiod's question as to why we should be just (*Op.* 270–273).

Remarkably, the quasi-quotation of Hesiod in the myth is not the first reference to the poet in the dialogue. Hesiod had already been explicitly mentioned by Protagoras himself at the beginning of his encounter with Socrates.<sup>56</sup> Once again, it is not easy to tell whether these Hesiodic references were already present in Protagoras or whether they rather depend on Plato. In favor of the first hypothesis we can observe that other testimonies show that Protagoras adopted similar strategies of appropriation also toward Homer.<sup>57</sup> It could be

54 On this point see Cairns, *Aidos*, p. 357 n. 40 and Beresdorf, 'Fangs, Feathers & Fairness', pp. 148–58. It is true that Protagoras says that ethical *aretē* is not a product of *physis* but arises from instruction, training and effort (323c). 'But this view is fully compatible with a belief in innate ethical tendencies, because his idea is apparently that the finished virtues are a product of instruction and training acting upon natural predispositions' (Beresford, 'Fangs, Feathers & Fairness', p. 151). On this point J. Kiersted ('Democracy's Humility. A Reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*', *Polis* 34 (2017), pp. 288–305, at pp. 303–304) sees some interesting parallels with Sophocles' *Antigone*.

55 With these observations I also hope to make clear why I disagree with Van Riel, 'Religion and Morality', p. 149, who describes Protagoras' myth as a tale of bitter misery.

56 'I say that the sophistic art is ancient, but that those ancient men who practiced it, because they feared the annoyance it caused, employed a screen and disguised it, some using poetry, like Homer, *Hesiod*, and Simonides, and others initiatory rites and oracles, the followers of Orpheus and Musaeus; and certain ones, I have heard, under gymnastic [teachers] too, like Iccus of Tarentum and another one, still alive, as much a sophist as anyone: Herodicus of Selymbria, originally a Megarian colony. And music was the screen employed by your fellow citizen Agathocles, a great sophist, Pythocles of Ceos, and many others' (*Prt.* 316d–317c = only partly included as 80a5 D.-K. and Soph. Ru L.-M.).

57 See, for instance, A. Rademaker, 'The most correct Account: Protagoras on Language', in J. van Ophuijsen, M. van Raalte and P. Storke (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera: The Man, His Measure*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 87–111. The same attitude would find another interesting parallel in Simonides, if Plato's parody reflects an historical interest on Protagoras' part. Protagoras is also associated with Orpheus in 315a–b. In general, on Protagoras and the

argued that the same also holds true in relation to Hesiod. In any case, the goal of these references is clear. The above-quoted statement is not merely designed to place Protagoras under the authority of a well-rooted tradition, but rather contributes to a more complex strategy of appropriation and transformation. By claiming a direct link to these wise men, and to the poets in particular, Protagoras can present himself as an heir to Greek *paideia*, as one of the great teachers, or, rather, as *the* great teacher, the only one who is capable of imparting a teaching that draws upon tradition but can also meet the needs of the new times. The poet's task was to preserve and transmit the system of values on which the life of his community was based. To engage with poetry was to engage with tradition; and this engagement was a fundamental part of the sophists' teaching. In such a way, Protagoras could reinforce his claim to be a new teacher, an educator capable of imparting teachings suited to the needs of the new world of the *polis*. Plato's goal, in the *Protagoras*, was to show that this was not correct – while in the myth the sophist was implicitly identifying himself with Zeus, in the end he turns out to be more akin to Epimetheus.<sup>58</sup> But for the time being, as long as this has not yet been proven, one can well understand Hippocrates' enthusiasm at the news that the great thinker has arrived in Athens.<sup>59</sup>

poetic tradition, see M. Corradi, 'Protagoras dans son contexte. L'homme mesure et la tradition archaïque de *l'incipiit*, *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 5 (2007), pp. 185–204.

58 As Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, pp. 147–153 brilliantly shows. I disagree with her claim, however, that Protagoras was implicitly presenting himself as Prometheus. In the myth he sides with Zeus and politics in opposition to the other sophists and teachers, who support the arts and are therefore implicitly equated with Prometheus.

59 Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Princeton Classical Philosophy Colloquium in December 2019, and then at the Utrecht Colloquium in the History of Philosophy in October 2020 and at the Leiden Forum Antiquum in March 2021. Special thanks are due to Mirjam Kotwick (my respondent in Princeton), Rachel Barney, Richard Bett, Melissa Lane, and the two anonymous readers for their many useful comments.