Extraneous Voices: Orphaned and Adopted Texts in the *Protagoras*

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Abstract: The *Protagoras* features the first known venture into detailed textual interpretation in the Western intellectual tradition. Yet if Socrates is to be taken at his word at the close of his hermeneutic contest with Protagoras, this venture is to be regarded as a playful demonstration of the worthlessness of texts for aiding in the pursuit of knowledge. This essay is an attempt to view Socrates' puzzling remarks on this point within their dramatic and historical contexts. I argue that, far from having us lay our inherited texts aside, we can find in the *Protagoras* a reorientation to the linked activities of reading and dialogue, where we need not be forced to choose between merely using our own unaided voices and relying upon the (textual) voices of others in the project of philosophic education.

At the center of the *Protagoras*, we the readers find ourselves suddenly implicated in the drama of Plato's text. In fact, we discover that we have been implicated all along, from the moment we began to read and interpret the dialogue. For in the space of a short passage, the very value of our activity as invested readers is put into question, and along with it, the epistemic value of the dialogues themselves. The passage begins at the close of Socrates' extended interpretation of an ode by Simonides, an interpretation that in Protagoras's eyes would mark Socrates as a man of high education. Oddly, Socrates moves to dismiss the entire hermeneutical exercise by likening it to the fruitless pastimes of the uneducated. The latter, he states, who are unable to hold a gathering amongst themselves by means of their own voices, must bring in an external voice, such as the melody of flutes, or, as Socrates implies, the composition of a poet, to entertain themselves. He goes on to say, at 347e,

> And so a gathering like this of ours, when it includes such men as most of us claim to be, requires no extraneous voices, not even of the poets, whom

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> one cannot question on that which they say; when they are brought forth in discussion we are generally told by some that the poet thought one thing, and by others, another, and they go on arguing about a matter which they are powerless to determine. No, this sort of meeting is avoided by fine and good men, who prefer to converse through each other, and by giving and taking, to test one another in their own *logoi*. It is this sort of person that you and I should imitate (μιμεῖσθαι); putting the poets aside, let us hold our discussion together from ourselves, making trial of the truth and ourselves.

The thrust of Socrates' words is that we cannot properly access the wisdom of a text where the author is not present to give an account of the thinking (διάνοια) that informs it. In the absence of any hermeneutical authority, what constitutes a correct apprehension of a text's meaning is the accurate correspondence of the reader's understanding to that of the writer. Since this ideal of meaning lies outside of our grasp, there is no way to confirm or deny the 'true reading' of a text. Consequently, the task of ascertaining the 'truth' of written *logoi* is pointless, unless the author can be brought in to explain his or her own words in further detail. Yet where this is possible, what has been composed, the text itself, thereby becomes superfluous. Reading, then, or even discussing what has been written, may be a pleasurable exercise, as the beauty of poetic texts often reminds us. But where ethical knowledge is concerned, it seems, we are forced to apprehend it through other avenues more trustworthy than through mute words on a page.

Socrates' objection to the practice of hermeneutics has serious implications not only for the educative value of the poetic tradition, but for the value of all inherited textual sources. In view of this criticism, the absence of interpretive authority remains a problem for every piece of writing that survives its author. If Socrates is to be taken literally in this claim, then we are compelled thereby to question our very practice of reading Plato; the *Protagoras*, as well as the rest of the dialogues, appears to be relegated to the status of extraneous voices no less than the poems of Simonides. Are we forced to conclude, with Plato's help, that we've been wasting our time by looking for truths therein? It may be objected, of course, that it is due precisely to this weakness of hermeneutics that Plato set his ideas forth in dialogue form, allowing us to experience more clearly the meanings intended by each character through a kind of reenactment of living speech. Yet this objection would only set for itself the further, more daunting task of explaining why there continues to be a considerable diversity of interpretations of his work. If this were Plato's intent in writing dialogues, then clearly something has gone awry. A reference to Socrates' telling statement in the *Phaedrus* assures us that this could hardly have been Plato's plan: "He who thinks, then, that he has left behind him any art in writing, and he who receives it in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person" (275c). We must, then, acknowledge the fact that Plato *chose to write*, and chose

this occupation with an awareness that his texts would in all likelihood outlive him. Moreover, he wrote with a particular fondness for irony and subtlety, both of which demand studied interpretation on the part of his audience.[1] Bearing this in mind, the need to confront Socrates on his devaluation of texts becomes all the more acute. Unfortunately, most studies on the *Protagoras* have given this problem limited attention at best.[2]

The fact that the interpretive exercise in the *Protagoras* is directed to a work of poetry holds special significance for the teachability of virtue. Protagoras's proposal of competing over the better interpretation of Simonides reflects the status that poetry was coming to occupy within the new rubric of sophistic education in the late fifth century. The pre-democratic practice of looking to the poetic tradition in order to ground a communal ethos was losing its validity where the very notion of ἀρετή, and how to achieve it, had become a matter of public debate. Poetic wisdom, as Socrates' generation encountered it, was already under conversion to an object of critique, and poetry to mere didactic material for the ends of persuasive technique.[3] At the center of the *Protagoras*, we are treated to a reenactment in miniature of this sophistic appropriation of poetry. In this contest of interpretation, the fate of the poetic tradition is to be decided. Socrates' elaborate hermeneutical efforts to "restore Simonides," as he puts it (340a), would seem to represent a reinstatement of poetry in its role as the safeguard of virtue. Yet his concluding dismissal of the entire effort commits Socrates, to all appearances, to subverting the poetic tradition more radically than even sophistry is able to: not only should a body of poetic works cease to function as a guide for civic education (παιδεία), but it should be cast aside altogether. Bereft of any true interpretive authority, the only alternative for coming to an understanding of virtue is to look solely to each other, removing ourselves from textual sources and using our own voices to settle the question of the good.

The object of this essay is to attempt a recovery of this perplexing passage in the *Protagoras*, and to determine what speaking in one's own voice can mean in light of Socrates' remarks on interpretation. I will begin by placing the character of Protagoras, as Plato portrays him, into relation with the poetic tradition that he seeks to overturn. That is, I shall examine how the model of sophistic education that he represents opposes the very essence of learning afforded through written works. From this vantage point, we can understand how Socrates' dismissal of texts is better read as a veiled critique of both the practice of sophistic παιδεία represented by Protagoras, and the tradition of poetic authority that precedes it. Lastly, I will argue that for Socrates, finding one's own voice, as an alternative between these two poles, does not entail turning away from the orphaned texts of the poets, let alone those of Plato, but rather serves as a preparation for responsibly adopting texts for ourselves through a critical engagement with them in philosophical practice.

The Erotic and the Mimetic in Poetic Education

In the latter portions of what has been called Protagoras's 'great speech,'[4] the eminent sophist explains to Socrates, and to the rest of those present at Callias's gathering, how it is that ἀρετή is not only capable of being taught, but how such instruction has already become an institution in Athenian aristocratic society. Almost offhandedly, he states that once the young have come to understand what has been written, as before they understood only the voice, they are given the works of good poets to read and learn by heart. He continues: "Here they meet with many admonitions, many descriptions and praises and eulogies of good men in times past, so that the youth might out of envy imitate (μιμῆται) them and yearn to become even as they" (325e–326a). What we receive here is an account of the place of poetic works in the early stages of education, as a stimulus for play through the re-enactment of models of virtue. According to Protagoras's own account, learning includes not only the power of memorization, but also the mimetic drive to recreate what has as yet only superficially been grasped.

This observance of the mimetic component in education is certainly not a theme unique to the *Protagoras*; Plato devotes a substantial portion of books two and three of the *Republic* to this very phenomenon, and a brief look at the *Republic* is instructive here for a more extensive understanding of what takes place in the educative mimesis of which Protagoras speaks. In his discussion with Adeimantus in book three, Socrates outlines the dangers of improper poetry for the souls of the young, where the pupil "gets a taste for the being [of a model] from its imitation. Or haven't you heard," he continues, "that imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and thought?" (*Rep.*, 395d). In essence, the young learner takes on the depictions and ideas represented in poetry, climbing inside, as it were, the models found therein. One attempts to see oneself and the world through the eyes of heroes and other men of praise, testing out one's capacities in accordance with the patterns of speech and action that exemplify noble behavior. That is, one pretends, to a greater or lesser extent, that he or she is Achilles, Odysseus, or Athena, and in this pretension to be what one is not yet, a certain inclination to self-transformation is kindled, where the learner "gets a taste" for, that is, learns to desire, that imitated persona. Mimesis in this sense is carried out as a twofold relation to these textual models, both in the sphere of action as well as in the domain of thought. It is not merely a playful reproduction limited to the outward expression of particular kinds of behavior where one maintains a clear distinction between what one really believes and what one does; it is also an expression of as-yet unformulated opinions about what is desirable and worthy of pursuit, of opinions about self and world that are gradually taken on and refined in and through the process of reenactment.

The conception of mimesis that we are dealing with, then, is that of an incipient form of understanding on the part of the learner. It involves more than comportment as a kind of likeness or copy, and therefore more than simple repetition of form; one ultimately desires to bring the world to light in a particular way through a personal investment in the ideas of a text. Insofar as these textual models are engaged mimetically by the learner in the context of his or her own surroundings, they provide him or her with a general structure according to which specific possibilities for expressing noble behavior in a given situation can be made evident. In this sense, the text places specific limits upon its reader, guiding and informing one's understanding through what is revealed to the learner in his or her creative act of imitation. Protagoras's reference to the pupil's "yearning to become" (ὀρέγηται τοιοῦτος γενέσθαι), and Socrates' observation about the soul's acquiring a "taste for being," in the encounter with these texts both bear witness to the erotic attachment intrinsic to mimetic learning. *Eros*, as the source of our strivings, emerges here as the specific desire to become good, to transform oneself with an eye to possessing those human qualities presented as valuable and praiseworthy through an active imitation of virtuous living.

Young Hippocrates serves as an embodiment of this desire in the opening of the dialogue, already in a state of frenzy at the prospect of studying with Protagoras, who would allow him to become better through the possession of sophistic wisdom. In his desire to become like Protagoras, highly esteemed by the many, the figure of Hippocrates gestures to the implicit question that arises alongside his yearning. He knows, only in the vaguest sense, what he wants: to possess that wisdom which would grant him distinction and excellence in the *polis*. As Socrates takes a moment to calm his young friend by questioning him about the ends of this desire, it becomes clear that Hippocrates has not yet properly asked after the nature of what it is that he desires, but rather how he can acquire it. His *eros* exemplifies the process of educative mimesis to the extent that such imitation begins with the question of how it is to be this or that model of virtue, how the world appears from the embodied standpoint of the desired qualities first communicated through poetic works. The process of mimesis brings forth a set of tacit and provisional answers to this question, answers under continual revision as one experiences the world through trying out the set of paradigms and maxims provided in exemplary texts. Yet as Socrates' questions to Hippocrates indicate, where it is a matter of leading one's own life, the questioning intrinsic to mimesis must be developed and properly directed.[5] This redirection entails a recognition of the priority of certain questions over others, as is made clear in the course of the dialogue, where the question of whether ἀρετή can be taught gives way to the more primary question of what ἀρετή itself is.[6] This ability to clearly pose and order a set of questions, to discern a necessary priority in questioning, is for Socrates an essential aspect of παιδεία.

The primary benefit of civic παιδεία grounded upon the poetic tradition consisted in the fact that these textual models for imitation served a cohesive social function for the *polis*. Where desire on the part of the young was directed to a particular set of ideals sanctioned by political or divine authority, the general *ethos* of society could be subtended by common, if vaguely construed, notions of virtue. However, due to the fact that the popular *ethos* in turn plays a role in how the poets are to be understood, the lessons and ideals of poetry are left open to manipulation in line with the popular trends in each successive age. Deciding what the poets meant, then, was not unrelated to the question of where the power and interests of the *polis* lay. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, "Plato's Socratic insight was that a binding political ethos, which would assure the proper application and interpretation of poetry, no longer existed once sophism had come to define the spirit of education."[7] By the time of the *Protagoras*, as the gathering of sophists in Callias's home suggests, the popular morality in Athens was already in a state of decline.[8] The obvious antagonism amongst the sophists—Protagoras's early disparaging remarks directed toward Hippias, as well as Prodicus's willing participation in showing up Protagoras's knowledge of Simonides—reinforces the notion that the willing pupil could pursue any of a number of divergent paths for learning civic virtue at the time. In Hippocrates, the potential student, we see a portrait of mimetic *eros* left to find its way in the erosion of traditional authority on virtue, amidst these competing claims to wisdom and the circulation of new doctrines and forms of education within the Athenian aristocracy. Socrates cautions the young man to consider the lack of knowledge he has of Protagoras, and as we find, it is not only the source of his desired education that must be taken into account, but the conception of wisdom that underlies it.

Thus far, we have been concerned with the role of texts that project embodied moral ideals in the formative stages of education, according to Plato's lights, as a process characterized by erotic attachment: through the phenomenon of mimesis as the primary mode of learning, the integration of desired forms of behavior into one's own life calls forth at the same time both inquiry and understanding. It is, as I will argue in the following section, precisely the essential relation of understanding and questioning to *eros* that is at stake in Hippocrates' decision to study with Protagoras.

The Image of the Sophist

Socrates' characterization of sophistry in the dialogue is composed of two parts. The first comes at the opening scene of Socrates' retelling, and the second comes by way of insincere praise just following Protagoras's great speech. After admonishing Hippocrates for not consulting those who most care for him before going to Protagoras, Socrates warns that the art he aspires to learn is not nearly so

lofty as its name suggests. "Can it happen," he asks, "that the sophist is really a sort of merchant or dealer in the wares on which a soul is nourished? For this is what he appears to me" (313c). In answer to Hippocrates' immediate question, Socrates goes on to state that the wares on which a soul is nourished are lessons (*μαθήματα*) that the sophist keeps in stock, carting them from one town to another. What is more, in order to sell his wares, any merchant may well sell them to anyone looking to buy, in many cases ignorant of the good or ill effects that a particular item of sale might have on the soul of his patron. The sophist is, in Socrates' eyes, no exception.

In order to determine whether Protagoras belongs to that class of sophists who do not know whether a given *logos* of theirs is good or bad for the soul, one would either have to possess at the outset a firm knowledge of goodness and evil, or one would have to experience the effects of that *logos* by attempting to live in accord with it. In the first case, one would have to be a "physician of the soul," as Socrates puts it, one who can already bring his or her life into a secure path toward the true notion of the good (313e). Of course, if there were anyone fitting this description, he or she would have little need of what Protagoras is trying to sell. In the second case, one puts oneself at the risk of living one's life according to false wisdom and damaging one's own soul in the process. As luck would have it, Protagoras saves us from these two options at a further point in the dialogue by refusing to offer a single definition of the good, saying instead that it is both elusive and manifold (*ποικίλον . . . καὶ παντοδαπόν*) (334a–c). That is, the good is to be determined situationally, according to individual perspective. In what he takes at the time to be a shrewd evasive move away from Socrates' questions about a human good, Protagoras unknowingly relieves himself of the authority he claims to make others better.

The fact that Protagoras is unable to determine the good or ill of his teachings is to be taken here as evidence for where he stands with respect to his own speeches. Unlike the mimetic comportment to texts that we've discussed above, wherein one attempts to understand the wisdom of the poets by living in accordance with the ideas presented, the sophist maintains an external relation to the *μαθήματα* that he sells. He fails to grasp their ethical import not because he lacks the sufficient intelligence, but because he has not been moved to investigate and to test the meaning of these *logoi* in the context of his own life. Where the learner engages a text mimetically, seeking the meaning of virtuous deeds provided therein through acting them out, such enactment provides a rudimentary understanding, and what is more, a kind of interpretation through play. Seen thus, interpretation is undertaken as a mode of questioning; it asks what a text has to reveal to one on the basis of his or her own experiences, beliefs, and ways of thinking. To the extent that one asks what a text can mean, one attempts, though in a more sophisticated manner than the playful child, to integrate it into one's

thought, to test out its possibilities for meaning through the questions that it opens up. Protagoras, on the other hand, by virtue of his remove from his teachings, exhibits a lack of the very desire and concern necessary to this search. As a proclaimed authority on virtue, his role, to all appearances, is not to put himself or his speeches into question, but to provide set answers, techniques, and even accounts of model behavior to his students.

In answer to the initial question of their exchange, Protagoras mockingly replies to Socrates in the course of the great speech, "Seeing that so much care is taken in both private and public virtue, do you wonder (θαυμάζεις), Socrates, and find yourself in an *aporia*, that virtue may be taught? Surely there is no reason to wonder at that" (326e). Wonder, as we recall from the *Theaetetus*, is for Socrates the very beginning of philosophy, the ground of seeking to know.[9] The character of Protagoras functions to stem this spirit of wonder and its provocation to questioning throughout the dialogue, to the point at which the possibility of having a dialogue at all seems to be endangered. And as a result of the sophist's own lack of wonder with respect to his logos on the teachability of ἀρετή, it is Socrates' task to push the discussion forward by first wondering at what Protagoras takes ἀρετή to be (329c).

The second part of the sophist's characterization by Socrates serves to supplement and deepen the question of Protagoras's relation to his own *logoi*. As a merchant of μαθήματα, the sophist must have in tow a stock of prepared speeches and techniques to present to his patrons. His method of teaching entails deciding which of the texts stored in his memory is appropriate for a particular situation, and then reproducing it in speech for his audience. At the conclusion of Protagoras's initial performance, which includes both a modified myth by Hesiod and a lengthy argument following it, Socrates remarks that similar speeches can be heard by various talented public speakers, including Pericles. "But suppose you put a question to one of them," he states, "they are just like books, incapable of either answering you or putting a question of their own; if you question even a small point in what has been said, [they hold forth again] just as brazen vessels ring a long time after they have been struck and prolong the note unless you put your hand on them" (329a). Turning to Protagoras, Socrates appeals to his own desire for the sophist to distinguish himself from these public speakers by giving brief answers when questioned, as well as waiting and accepting answers to the questions that Protagoras wishes to pose. However, Protagoras disregards this appeal, foremost by asserting his right to present his case in the form of extended, elusive speech just prior to the breakdown of the conversation at 334e, even in the face of Socrates' protestations that he cannot follow Protagoras's points.[10] The draw of the sophist's speeches, as Socrates hints early in the dialogue, has to do less with their degree of clarity and educative function than in the enchanting effect of the voice through which they come, which mesmerizes his students into

following wherever it leads.[11] At the close of the great speech, Socrates admits to being caught, if not wholly, under the sway of this enchanting effect, yet his attunement to what has been said, rather than to the manner in which it has been spoken, allows him an ability to question what is foreclosed for those who remain mesmerized.

In giving his great speech, what Protagoras takes to be an answer to Socrates' query is hardly the answer that Socrates had asked for. The request was originally for an ἐπίδειξις, a demonstration, that ἀρετή is teachable (320b). And what Protagoras gives, rather, is an argument for how ἀρετή *must be* teachable; while Protagoras does offer an answer, therefore, it is not an answer that responds to the sense of Socrates' question. It cannot be determined upon hearing the extended *logos* how it is that anyone has been made better by it; for the question of what virtue is has not even been broached. While the audience approves highly of his performance, Protagoras has only supplied them with the familiar, if modified, myth of Prometheus, and an explanation of Athenian customs that reflect their own belief that virtue can be taught. Long and winding, at points confused and at others brilliant, the great speech functions, in the end, to make its hearers forget the sense of their own question. We see in the course of the discussion following his speech, that when compelled to give short, concise replies to Socrates' questions on the intricacies of what has already been said, Protagoras shows himself unwilling to explain his case in the sort of detail that would clearly delimit the concept of virtue for his listeners.

These points underscore the implicit picture of knowledge possessed by the sophist primarily as the possession of *logoi* held in one's memory.[12] Insofar as one can call up prepared speeches from a storage room in the soul, providing one extended answer after another when questioned, he or she is to be counted as wise. This portrait of sophistic technique reduces the movement of thinking to mere reproduction of speeches that remain distant from invested understanding, and dialogue to the simple transfer of propositions and stories from one memory to another.[13] Where Protagoras is pressured at several points in the dialogue to give his own thoughts on the subject under discussion, he appears to be no better than the layperson at supporting his answers.[14] That Socrates must explicitly ask for Protagoras's own beliefs only substantiates the suspicion that Protagoras's real thinking bears little or no relation to the *logoi* that others are to accept from him. If 'brazen vessels' ring on when we strike them, this only happens when the vessel is empty, and here Socrates' analogy is particularly revealing. Because the sophist is unaware of the import of his teachings, his words have a hollow tone to them; they are not supported, not filled out, by clear convictions won through knowledge and experience. Much less than understanding and putting himself into a productively mimetic relation to the ideas in his own safeguarded texts, Protagoras's *eros* reveals itself to be as inhibited as that of the eunuch who guards

the door to Callias's home. He fails to exhibit sincere attention to the transformative process of becoming better through the desire to learn how to distinguish the good. Along with his claim to be an authority on teaching virtue, he must as well present himself as one who already possesses it.[15]

In contrast to the dynamic of productive mimesis sketched out in the previous section, the portrait of sophistry in the *Protagoras* reveals to us the mimetic drive in a degenerative form, where *eros* is restricted to repetition of memorized speech. If it is possible to identify in the sophist's conception of knowledge elements of productive imitation, it would be the act of likening himself, as Socrates puts it, to a book. For a book does not have the power that its author has of reformulating its content, and attempting to clarify what is said with an eye to the understanding of the individual who puts questions to it. Where the author is not present, the thinking that produces words on a page cannot reveal itself other than through these same words. And since Socratic dialogue aims at a transformation in understanding through question and answer on the part of both speakers, in this sense, texts reveal their obvious limitations. This point recalls once more the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. With respect to written *logoi*, Socrates says to Phaedrus, "You might think they spoke as if they had intelligence (τι φρονοῦντας), but if you question them, wishing to know what is said, they always say one and the same thing. . . . [E]ach word, when ill-treated or unjustly reviled, always needs its father to help it, for it has the power neither to protect nor help itself" (275d–e). Although we have little indication in the *Protagoras* of whether the sophist had composed his speeches himself, to the extent that he fails to explain further what is meant in them or clarify what remains obscure, Protagoras, though present, appears to be a deadbeat father of his *logoi*, if he is their father at all. This applies not only to his speeches on the sophistic tradition, the great speech on education, as well as those on the elusiveness of the good and the relation between strength and power, but also to many of the shorter answers that Protagoras is compelled to give. Despite his frequent emphasis in the great speech on the care necessary for civic education (ἐπιμέλεια, care, is mentioned no less than ten times in this passage), his evasiveness and his caution in the face of potential self-contradiction betray a care more for the maintenance of his authority and reputation than a care for self-transformation in light of the question of virtue. If Hippocrates represents an *eros* for learning cut free from the guidance of traditional authorities on ἀρετή, Protagoras conversely embodies unquestionable authority cut off from this *eros*. This aspect of Protagoras's thinking reveals itself nowhere more clearly than in the hermeneutical contest he arranges with Socrates.

The Interpretive Question

After the dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras has run aground due to a disagreement about how long one's answers should be, a provisional agreement is reached wherein each of them is able to take turns questioning and answering the other. In this way, Socrates hopes to teach the sophist how a successful dialogue, one aimed at shared learning, can be carried out. This arrangement also provides Protagoras with the opportunity to distinguish himself from those other booklike public speakers, who cannot pose questions of their own. To begin with, he states: "I believe, Socrates, that the greatest part of a man's education is to be formidable in the matter of verses. That is, to be able to apprehend, in what is said by the poets, what has been correctly and incorrectly composed, and to know how to separate them and give a *logos* upon them when questioned" (339a). Accordingly, he takes up an ode to Scopas composed by Simonides, citing the first few lines before asking Socrates whether he believes the poem to be finely and correctly composed. Upon hearing Socrates' assent, a second question is posed, namely whether a poem can be so if it contradicts itself, to which Socrates answers in the negative. Protagoras goes on to recite several following lines of the ode, in an effort to show that Simonides has, in fact produced a contradiction with respect to the nature of goodness, where he writes both that: "For a man, indeed, to become good truly is hard," and afterward, "Nor does it ring true to me that word of Pittacus, though it was a wise man who spoke, Hard it is, he said, to be good" (339a–c). Unfortunately for Protagoras, his certainty that the claims are opposed arises from a careless confusion of the meanings of being (*ἔμμεναι*) and becoming (*γενέσθαι*), such that he believes Simonides to be saying that it both is and is not hard to become good. What follows is a sustained, and at points comic, interpretation of the whole of the poem by Socrates in an effort to show how these two terms are meant to be not only distinct but pivotal for Simonides in pursuing the human good. While a thorough treatment of the interpretation cannot be ventured here, I would like instead to draw out a few implications of the approach that Protagoras takes to the poem, and use these as keys to understanding why Socrates is moved to discount his own hermeneutic performance.

In what is to be a renewed attempt at giving and taking *logoi*, of questioning and answering in turn, the questions that Protagoras poses to Socrates are not true questions in the strict sense. They can hardly be said to arise out of the acknowledgement of one's own ignorance and the subsequent wonder that brings forth philosophical questioning, given that Protagoras already has answers prepared for them. Rather than asking along with Socrates what the poem has to reveal about the good, what the meaning of the poem might be in light of a shared attempt to understand it in its wholeness, Protagoras stops short in encountering what he takes to be an inconsistency, and thereby dismisses the poem as poorly

composed. The correctness in poetry of which he speaks takes its first criterion from the formal requirements of a sound *logos*, where the content of what is to be made manifest goes largely untouched. As a result, the value of the 'failed' poem can only lie in serving as an instructional lesson about the validity and invalidity of *logoi*. His questions, then, only recapitulate the process of calling forth ready-made μαθήματα to then be filed away again for later use in debate. Such is the primary dynamic of sophistic knowledge in the *Protagoras*, as I hope to have shown at this point.

However, Protagoras's invocation of a kind of poetic correctness tells us something about the works that he would regard as "correctly composed," as Socrates goes on to show the poem at hand to be according to the sophist's criterion.[16] In Socrates' first playful attempt to distinguish Simonides' two statements, saying that perhaps Prodicus and others would agree with the words of Hesiod that becoming good is hard, but possessing virtue thereafter is easy, Protagoras criticizes this distinction on the grounds that possessing virtue is rather the most difficult of things, "as it is opined by all men," (340d–e). Socrates' interpretation is refuted by reference to predetermined opinions about virtue, which is precisely the matter, for Socrates, still in question. Along with logical self-consistency as a necessary condition of proper composition, then, the wisdom of a text must as well be consistent with popular belief, with what is already taken to be true. It is not simply that the individual can go on to seek the poem's meaning for him or herself once the work is found to be consistent, but that here a single authoritative meaning is to be used for determining what counts as a proper interpretation. That is, all that a work has to say to us has, in Protagoras's thinking, already been grasped; its meaning has been settled, and education in verses consists in retracing in thought the proper understanding of the text. A correct 'solution' of a poem would then be the correspondence to a predetermined meaning that exists, as it were, behind the work. Reading poetry, in this conception, amounts to compelling a text to say the same thing in each engagement with it, to elicit the same answer. Once this answer is revealed, the poem ceases to confront us in its dimension of questionability; the erotic comportment in which we may have first approached it has been put to rest through the correct answer to its meaning.

It is, I believe, with reference to this notion of correctness that Socrates ironically disowns his belabored interpretation. If a single, correct meaning of a text is to be confirmed, one can only look for such authority from the author himself, from the one whose διάνοια has informed the work at hand. Only then might a poem's 'answer' be procured, and so become an example of knowledge in the sophist's repertoire. In this expectation of a conclusive answer to the meaning of a work, the absence of the poet robs the interpretive exercise of its value, making it, in the end, a pointless venture.[17]

We might ask, however, what if Simonides were present? What if he were to be consulted on the true sense of what is said in the poem? We need only consult the *Apology* to see the depth of Socrates' irony here. Upon engaging different men held to be wise, Socrates relates that the poets were no better at giving an account of their poems than any layperson present. "I presently recognized this, that what they composed they composed not by wisdom, but by nature and by inspiration, like the prophets and the givers of oracles; for these also say many fine things, but know none of the things they say" (22c). Socrates' protestation that the poet is not in attendance to guide their interpretations gestures, I believe, to the fact that the wisdom of the poets is in a certain sense authorless; there is never any interpretive authority, any final ideal of meaning, to be sought in the tradition of poetry, whether the poet is present to be consulted or not. As seekers of *ἀρετή*, we likewise face a tradition that of itself possesses no voice by which its texts may be aided for the understanding of the interpreter. Even if tradition possessed its own set of authoritative voices, what help these voices could offer is subject to our hermeneutical efforts no less than the texts they would attempt to explain. What we have at our disposal instead is a multiplicity of voices with which to seek meaning, a community of interpretive voices that do not stop short of each other, as Protagoras's relativism would have it, but intermingle with one another, seeking a collective, yet open-ended determination of meaning through which the coherence of a work may be made manifest.

In the context of Simonides' poem, we can therefore see how Protagoras's confusion of meaning in the lines at issue plays itself out on the level of his conception of knowledge. According to Socrates' interpretation, being good is impossible for humans, and reserved only for unchanging, timeless divinities, whereas becoming good is the only goal that we temporal, transitory creatures can pose for ourselves. Since, he adds, lack of knowledge is the real source of faring badly, our inability to hold fast to knowledge "through time, labor, illness, or some other accident," relegates us to the sphere of becoming, we are subject in our mental as well as our physical lives to this condition of continual acquisition and loss of whatever we hope to preserve (345b). To believe, therefore, that knowledge of a text, like knowledge of the good, is a cognitive possession of meaning, persisting unchanged and selfsame in one's memory, is to confuse becoming with being in the most crucial sense. Where a script or a statement, either in writing or in one's memory, exists just as it is, our engagement with its content in thought, as the process of knowing, is a process to be carried out anew in every act of thinking. A text does not subsist as an object of knowledge in virtue of being retained as a mental property that can be recalled at any moment; it becomes known to us not in the act of recalling it, but rather in the movement of thinking it through and clarifying it for ourselves. The fact that ongoing experiences and developments in our understanding unavoidably reform our perspectives means that each

involvement with a text, each attempt to understand it in its coherence and with a care for its limits of sense, is not a mere repetition of meaning, as Protagoras would instruct us, but instead necessitates a new formulation of it.[18] This process of understanding thus constitutes a form of adoption by the reader; we assume a position of responsibility for the meaning of text in the acts of engagement and interpretation through a care for what the text can bring to light. The questioning that marks real engagement with the content of a text is for Socrates much less seeking to accord with its words or with an authoritative interpretation than it is a mutual relation of becoming; both the meaning of the text and the knowing of its interpreter undergo transformation in dialectical engagement.[19]

Such transformation on Protagoras's part is foregone where opposition rears its head, both with respect to the lines of the poem, as well as in his own *logoi*. A self-contradiction is taken, in his case, as evidence of an ignorance that is to be avoided at all costs. In addition, where two individuals may respectively possess ideas that oppose those of the other, the doctrine of relativity given by Protagoras sees to it that these conflicting viewpoints need not be questioned, but accepted, since there is simply nothing further to be discussed. His implicit idea of education demands precisely that one has set to memory a collection of *logoi* that agree with one another, without demanding that there be intersubjective agreement about them. Where Socrates is concerned, however, the discovery of such opposition, either within oneself, or between interlocutors, is the first opportunity to let the matter at hand show itself in its questionability, to open itself to the possibility of being addressed anew. Being, as we have seen, devoid of the *eros* that marks the first step in learning, the sophist is unable to see that finding oneself in the position of *aporia* is an occasion for wonder and a desire to know through subsequent investigation. In this light, Socrates' dismissal of interpretation and the appeal to converse in one's own voice are to be understood, I believe, as a response to Protagoras's inability to engage in real dialogue in accordance with their agreement. If questioning and the confrontation of one's own real doubt are necessary to the project of dialogue, they are no less necessary to the task of interpretation.

Charles Griswold takes Socrates' move away from the poets as a lesson about the inherent limits of education through texts: "In the standard game of exegesis, Socrates is suggesting, neither the exegete nor the author whose works are explained can be questioned or refuted. Neither has his or her own voice or helps the other to find his or hers."[20] This criticism holds, however, only when a standard of correctness for interpretation like that used by Protagoras is put into play, that is, when the single, "true" meaning of a work is assumed or expected. Where the interpreter takes on the responsibility of a particular reading, where he or she can give and defend reasons for understanding a poem in a certain way, this by no means results in an impasse for dialogue about the truth of the work. In making

the case for any given reading of a text, as well as in submitting the content of his or her interpretation to scrutiny (either by others or oneself), the reader is moved to investigate and develop views with regard to the work's content. Yet such reading is premised upon a value for thoughtful and invested inquiry, which is conspicuously lacking in Protagoras's comportment to the poem. A move away from the poets, in the context of Socrates' discussion with the sophist, would then signify both a reorientation to the preliminaries of dialogue, on the one hand, and a tactical means of preserving an openness to the meanings brought forth in poetic works where such preliminaries have not yet been mastered, on the other.[21]

In his full-length study on the *Protagoras*, Larry Goldberg notes that by calling for those at the gathering to speak in their own voices, "Socrates is urging once again that the conversation be carried on in mutual cooperation with reference to inner conviction rather than in a spirit of warfare and with reference to the force of external authority."[22] While this statement is not incorrect, I believe that the dialogue supplies us with resources for saying more about what Socrates has in mind here with relying on one's own voice. For if stating one's inner conviction about a matter is premised upon an invested attempt to understand it for oneself, as I have sought to make clear above, such understanding is not possible in the first place without the prior act of placing that matter into question. We should bear in mind that Socrates' insistence that they speak in their own voices was directed toward a mutual testing (*πεῖραν*) of the truth and of themselves. This kind of testing is inaugurated, however, well before Protagoras enters the dialogue, where Socrates, "to test (*ἀποπειρώμενος*) Hippocrates' strength, [begins] examining and questioning him" (310b). Hippocrates, who had simply assumed the belief of others that Protagoras was the wisest in speech, is made to see, through the process of testing carried out by Socrates' questions, the questionability of this opinion, and furthermore to see that this opinion is not truly his own. Only by being reduced to the state of *aporia* in this way could the young man begin to pose the question of Protagoras's wisdom for himself, as a question deriving its meaning *as* a question from the awareness of his newfound ignorance. Accordingly, once the call for them to speak in their own voices is answered with silence, Socrates is compelled to explain: "Protagoras, in speaking with you, there is no other wish on my part than to examine these *aporias* that occur to me at each point. . . . [W]hat then could I do but call upon you in this examination by questioning and communication? There was no other way" (348c–349a). In carrying out an examination, in looking into the nature of something with the aim of grasping it in truth, there must be, as Socrates insists, an articulation of one's own desire to know it that informs the very scope of one's vision. It is, therefore, in being questioned that the matter at issue reveals itself to us in such a way that what was at first taken for granted in our thinking now stands forth in its questionability, as if for the first time; it exists for us as something alien amidst the

familiar, and as such, draws our thought into the openness of a new possibility for understanding.

It is for the sake of this new possibility for understanding ἀρετή through questioning that Socrates calls for the use of their own voices. Dialogue, grasped as a form of mutual cooperation, is a means whereby two individuals can forge, through testing one another, an understanding that arises only where the openness to the unfamiliar is preserved. Where such questioning is withheld, where dialogue becomes merely an exchange of convictions, the possibility of gaining knowledge about that which is to be questioned is foreclosed.[23] Even in the very act of recalling an opinion, there must be at the same time a questioning, an openness, that allows us to re-understand those ideas that led us to form or accept it. Without this relation between questioning and understanding, what we recall is little more to us than a hollow statement, and therefore an extraneous voice. Only by heeding the questionability borne out of *aporia* and the desire to understand can we begin, therefore, to find a voice that is essentially our own.

In this light, the works that make up one's tradition are to supply sites and opportunities for such questioning, no less than gatherings of inquisitive individuals. While Socrates obviously finds particular advantages in interlocution, this by no means excludes texts from being an incitement to investigate the truth of a given matter. We may, for example, encounter a text that appears to contradict itself, as Protagoras thinks the poem does; yet by taking the work seriously and investigating its apparent contradiction, we are moved to ask how what appears to disagree with itself might actually be self-consistent, gaining thereby, more often than not, a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the concepts involved therein. Or we may find that while a work does not possess this failing, it does disagree with an accepted position on a particular issue, as, for example, Socrates' interpretation of Simonides leads to a disagreement with the opinion of the many on the nature of incontinence. We can then begin to comprehend more thoroughly the opposing position, and at the same time be obliged to rethink the validity of our own.[24] Once the virtue of this illuminative mode of questioning is recognized, as Socrates attempts to teach Protagoras in his roundabout way, one seeking to understand virtue need not be stuck between the equally dubious alternatives of passively accepting the authoritative meaning of particular works or of relegating one's tradition to an inaccessible self-enclosed—and therefore useless—region of the past. One can, rather, begin to read in a careful manner and pursue in thought and dialogue the questions that a text provokes. This is precisely the task that the Platonic dialogues set for us.

Notes

1. In the present case, the fact that the very practice of Plato's reader is put into question, and therefore becomes a question for the reader, is evidence of an irony that is not limited to the characters of the text, but extends beyond the text itself to its audience. We are told, essentially, that what we are doing by reading the *Protagoras* is not ethically or epistemologically relevant, precisely when we are trying to learn from it. The present essay proceeds with the assumption that this message is not to be taken as a sincere one, but is aimed rather at the reader's own presuppositions about what he or she is doing in reading this text. I cannot therefore agree with the view, expressed most strongly by Oded Balaban, that "[t]here is no reason to assume that the reader himself may become a victim of Socrates' irony. If this were the case, irony would lose its meaning. Irony is not intended to hide ideas. Rather, it is a way to express them." *Plato and Protagoras: Truth and Relativism in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (New York: Lexington Books, 1999), 16. The function of the sort of irony with which we, as readers, are confronted in Plato's works has to do less with a direct transmission of an idea to us, as I argue presently, than it has to do with an incentive for us to search for particular solutions to the problems raised by Plato's irony ourselves. For a more thorough account of Platonic irony in this view, cf. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 19–45.
2. Notable exceptions are Raphael Woolf's essay, "The Written Word in Plato's *Protagoras*" *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 21–30, as well as Hermann Gundert's "Die Simonides-Interpretation in Platons *Protagoras*," *Platonstudien* (Amsterdam: Verlag B. R. Grüner, 1977), 46–64. Joseph Cropsey does note the problematic nature of Socrates' pronouncement here, but offers little in the way of an interpretation: "The reader of such words must pause to wonder whether the author of them is not admonishing him to put down the book he is holding in his hands and to seek out instead some companionable interlocutors with whom, testing one another and the truth about the being and becoming of good, he might profit more than by continuing to speculate on the inscrutable intention of his present author. Something, perhaps our waking to the difference between the attributive speaker of those words and the ostensive recorder of them in writing, keeps us at our reading. At worst, we will have been induced to think." "Virtue and Knowledge: On Plato's *Protagoras*," *Interpretation* (Winter 1991–92), 151.
3. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. G. Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 291–2. Jaeger provides perhaps the most thorough account of this transformation of education in fourth- and fifth-century Athens. Cf. also Mark Munn's *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 15–91.
4. See Gregory Vlastos's introduction to the *Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), viiff.
5. As Francisco Gonzalez emphasizes, the directedness of Hippocrates' *eros* is the primary issue in this early exchange. See "Giving Thought to the Good Together: Virtue in Plato's

Protagoras," in *Retracing the Platonic Text*, ed. J. Russon and John Sallis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 115.

6. We see this point borne out more explicitly and forcefully in the *Meno*, where Meno begins the dialogue by asking Socrates how it is that virtue is acquired, which Socrates counters by asking, "If I do not know what something is, how can I even know what sort of thing it is?" (70b). In each of these dialogues, though in different ways, Socrates reorients the focus of questioning from the acquisition of virtue to an investigation of what virtue itself is.
7. *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), 50.
8. Cf. Jaeger: "[A]s the more binding forces of life—religion, morality, and 'music,' which for the Greeks always included poetry—lost their power, so the masses escaped from the formative influence of the spirit. . . . [T]he standards and ideals to which every class in the nation once paid allegiance were still announced, and that too with increased rhetorical embellishment; but less and less real attention was paid to them." *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 2, trans. G. Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), 10.
9. 155d, where Socrates tells Theaetetus: "For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumas made a good genealogy."
10. In addition, Socrates' appeal to brevity and clarity in speech is further disregarded in the extended answer Protagoras gives to the question of goodness at 333e–343c, as well as in his objection to Socrates on the matter of the relation between strength and power at 350c–351b.
11. The theme of enchantment (κηλητθμός) arises not only in Socrates' initial characterization of Protagoras as he sees him in Callias's courtyard, mesmerizing the students who follow behind him as he walks to and fro; Socrates admits to being held in enchantment at the close of Protagoras's great speech (328d). The significance of this theme within the dialogue has to do, as I see it, with its relation to *aporia*. If Socratic dialectic is to bring about a speaker's awareness of his *aporia* with respect to a given subject, Protagoras's brand of speech aims at producing a kind of confusion that masquerades as understanding on the part of the listener.
12. In light of this aspect of Protagoras's approach to wisdom, there is a strong tendency to view Meno as a recapitulation of this position to the extent that Meno, too, is content to rely upon repeating speeches from memory. Yet, whereas the *Meno* portrays an aspiring sophist whose capacity to learn is already noticeably stunted, the *Protagoras* offers an implicit account of how the taxation of one's memory through extended speeches contributes at the same time to a stultification of the critical capacities necessary for learning. Thus, the *Protagoras* can serve as a propaedeutic to the *Meno* by giving one possible story of how Meno came to be the challenged learner that he is.
13. Aristotle in fact characterizes sophistic education in general in terms of the distribution of memorized speeches, referring to the practice of Gorgias as a prime exemplar, who "used to hand out speeches to be learned by heart." *Sophistical Refutations* (183b37–38).

14. See the early discussion of the relation between the parts of virtue at 329d–333b, as well as Protagoras's position on courage, which begins at 349d. With respect to his great speech, Protagoras does not put forward a general position that disagrees with popular opinion. The belief that virtue could be taught by any of the noble Athenians (the καλοί κἀγαθοί) is echoed by Anytus, one of Socrates' accusers, in the Meno as well (92e).
15. This is, we should note, not a position unique to Protagoras; it is precisely Gorgias's contention, namely that possession of knowledge of virtue implies thereby that the possessor is virtuous (*Gorgias* 460b). If Protagoras were not, in accordance with his reputation, under pressure to exhibit the goodness that he propounds, then his guarantees of making his students better each day would appear rather untenable. If a student is free to disregard what he or she has learned about the good, pursuing instead something else, then Protagoras would not, strictly, have the power to make others better (assuming he otherwise possessed and taught such things). This means, then, that Protagoras would have to give not only doctrines of good behavior, but also awaken a desire for the good on the part of his students. This is, however, just the thing that he himself lacks. As we can see later in the dialogue, Protagoras must side with Socrates in denying ἀκρασία; if not, then he would have to admit a gulf between knowledge and compulsion, and therefore give up his strong claim to make others better.
16. Note that the issue of correctness in interpretation forms a central theme of the *Ion*, where Ion boasts of possessing as much knowledge of the arts portrayed in Homer as any technician. There are, however, two primary differences between the dialogues here. First, the status of goodness, and not art, is at issue in the poetic work; where Protagoras sees teaching virtue as a τέχνη among others, whether in poetry or in his own doctrines, it is precisely this conception of virtue, and the teaching of it, that Socrates resists. Second, Socrates and Ion debate about the correct portrait of technical matters within Homer, not about the ethical lessons that we may draw out of Homer's text as a whole, in contrast to the way in which Socrates extracts them from Simonides' ode.
17. This is precisely the conclusion at which Thomas Szlezák arrives in his reading of the passage at issue. Pointing to the "violence" that Socrates commits upon Simonides' text—namely, that Socrates "goes substantially beyond or past Simonides' intention" by imposing a special ontological meaning back upon the poet's terms of being and becoming—as evidence, Szlezák argues that Plato is here emphasizing the principle that "all interpretation is necessarily misinterpretation, at least partially." *Reading Plato* (London: Routledge, 1999), 37. Yet in order to sustain this claim and to hold Socrates guilty of abusing the text, Szlezák appears to assume the very access to Simonidean intent that Socrates disavows. Certainly, our lack of such access does not imply that all intepretations are valid, and that therefore no violence to texts can be identified. However, this lack should at the same time call into question any confident claim about what the author could possibly have had in mind, particularly when a text is shown to suggest readings alternative to the predominant conclusions of an interpretive community.

18. As Jacob Klein puts it, conversely, "Words can be repeated or imitated; the thoughts conveyed by words cannot: an 'imitated' thought is not a *thought*." *A Commentary on Plato's* Meno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 17.
19. This notion of becoming and transformation in relation to texts in one's soul has its counterpart in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* at 208a–b: "With regard to the possessions of knowledge, not merely do some of them grow and others perish in us, so that neither in what we know are we ever the same persons; but a like fate attends each single sort of knowledge. What we call study (*μελέτην*) implies that our knowledge is departing; since forgetfulness is an egress of knowledge, while study substitutes a fresh one in place of that which departs, and so preserves our knowledge enough to make it seem the same."
20. "Relying on Your Own Voice: An Unsettled Rivalry of Moral Ideals in Plato's *Protagoras*I," *The Review of Metaphysics* 53 (December 1999): 291.
21. Contra Woolf (1999), who maintains that interpretation of texts serves as a preliminary to debating the position one has reached through studying particular writings, I see Socrates using proper interlocution, at least in the context of the *Protagoras*, as a preparation for thoughtfully working through texts. Leaving the poets, on the conspicuously specious claim that we are unable to uncover their intended meaning, is rather the only means—given the state of Protagoras's thinking—to remove them from the violence of sophistic method.
22. *A Commentary on Plato's* Protagoras (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 211.
23. As Gadamer notes, "In the comic confusion between question and answer, knowledge and ignorance that Plato describes, there is a profound recognition of the *priority of the question* in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object. Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question." *Truth and Method*, trans. Weinsheimer and Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000), 363.
24. In giving attention to the way in which texts can serve an educative role for the reader where they are self-consistent, yet disagree with our own opinions, I am responding in particular to Woolf's argument ("The Written Word in Plato's *Protagoras*," 28) that in stimulating one's own views on a topic, "it is the peculiarly provocative nature of texts containing internal contradiction which the *Protagoras* privileges in this regard." It seems to me that Woolf takes this position only at the cost of overlooking the fact that a substantial portion of the dialogue following the interpretation of Simonides is devoted to showing how Socrates' own interpretation—one that makes the poem self-consistent—produces statements that oppose not only the popular conception of *ἀκρασία,* but also the popular conception of courage. On the basis of this consistent reading, Socrates arranges a mock dialogue between the many, on one side, and Protagoras and himself on the other. These novel arguments for the power of knowledge and the epistemic nature of courage, whether Socrates intends to stand by them or not, are both products of a disagreement in views between Simonides, as Socrates reads him, and the many.