

Introduction

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Guided by the bold ambition to reexamine the nature of philosophy, questions about the foundations and origins of Plato's dialogues have in recent years gained a new and important momentum. In the wake of the seminal work of Andrea Nightingale and especially her book *Genres in Dialogue* from 1995, Plato's texts have come to be reconsidered in terms of their compositional and intergeneric fabric. Supplementing important research on the argumentative structures of the dialogues, it has been argued that Plato's philosophizing cannot be properly assessed without considering its intellectual debts. By detailed examinations of the practical, generic and textual origins of the dialogues, it has been shown how Plato's chosen form of philosophical inquiry is deeply influenced by traditional forms of poetry, rhetoric, sophistry, and even medicine (e.g. McCoy 2008; Fagan 2013; Tell 2011; Levin 2014).

On this view, the reasons why Plato decided to write in this way are complex and diverse, but one shared and uncontested premise is that the dialogue form allowed him to discuss and scrutinize the intellectual tendencies of his day and age in a way that other literary forms could not (Destrée and Herrmann 2011; Peterson 2011). The dialogue made it possible for Plato to internalize rival types of authoritative discourse into his philosophical project without committing it to their claims and principles (Frede 1992; Nightingale 1995. Cf. Long 2013).

In stressing this point, contemporary research is however faced with a problem that has played a less prominent role in traditional scholarship: Even if it may seem reasonable to suppose that Plato's attempt to introduce and vindicate a new type of intellectual practice – called philosophy – required proleptic strategies and deep knowledge of the traditions whose authority he wanted to challenge, these strategies

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O. Pettersson, V. Songe-Møller (eds.), *Plato's Protagoras*, Philosophical Studies
Series 125, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-45585-3_1

have proven to be notoriously difficult to separate from the target of his supposed critique. Insofar as we acknowledge that Plato's dialogues are full of non-philosophical voices, we must also ask where, exactly, the lines are to be drawn. Where does the substantial contribution of philosophy begin and where is Plato merely entertaining an argument for the sake of its refutation? Although Plato's attitude towards rhetoric, for example, is as explicit as it is harsh, his own dialogues are not only rhetorical masterpieces in all senses of the word. It is also clear that even philosophically direct dialogues, such as the *Apology*, are written in a way that makes it impossible to think that they are composed without a profound influence by Athens' politico-forensic practice and its established rhetorical traditions.

One question, in relation to which this issue has proven to be significantly difficult to untangle, concerns the difference between philosophy and sophistry. At a first glance the philosopher and the sophist may seem to be each other's opposites. While the philosopher is poor, devoted to virtue, cares only for the soul and talks with the voice of blunt honesty, the sophist sells his teachings for a profit, cares more for his reputation than for his soul and deceives his fellow men with his clever tongue. At a closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the differences are not that easy to determine. Even if Plato's attitude is generally hostile, some sophists turn out to care a lot for virtue; and Socrates, the philosopher, is quite a clever speaker himself. Like the wolf and the dog, it seems, they are not always that easy to tell apart.

To fully understand the tension in Plato's account of sophistry, there are, of course, many factors to consider. Besides Plato's own explicit arguments, and his rich and complex portraits of historical figures such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias or Thrasymachus, there is however one additional factor that may turn out to be important. Plato's derogatory attitude may hide a deep intellectual debt. However indigestible it may seem, there are good reasons to doubt that the method of short questions and answers, that we have come to know as the mark of Socratic questioning, was a Platonic novelty. Instead, crucial parts of what Plato eternalized in the dialogue form may just as well have been a living and well-established sophistic practice (Frede 1992, xv). If this is true, what we generally consider to be Socratic questioning and a distinct and important characteristic of Plato's philosophical methodology is better described as an eloquent adaptation of an already influential and broadly acknowledged form of intellectual activity. And it is thus not ultimately clear if this method can be called philosophy at all. To distinguish the authentic voice of philosophy, it seems, we must look deeper.

Here, Plato's dialogue the *Protagoras* stands out as particularly important. In the guise of an intellectual competition between Protagoras and Socrates, this dialogue is often seen as the great showdown between philosophy and sophistry. While Protagoras teaches virtue for a fee and promises to make his students better every day, Socrates begins by denying that virtue can be taught, and questions the edificatory effects of the sophist's teachings. Supposedly meant to mark the difference between the philosopher and his rival, the dialogue sets out as a warning. Even if he admittedly does not know what it involves, Socrates explains that sophistry may be deceptive. In carefully weighed words, addressed to the young and somewhat

confused Hippocrates, Socrates says that without knowledge of what is good for the health of the soul, getting involved with sophists may not be worth the price.

Despite the fact that this opening may seem to suggest that Socrates and his young friend should remain in the security of their own conversation, this, of course, is not what happens. Whatever risks it may involve, they go and talk to the sophist. And as soon as Protagoras is allowed to explain himself, the distinctions are blurred. As it turns out, the sophist is a much more complex and morally interesting character than the dialogue's introductory conversation may seem to suggest. Not only does he want to foster virtue. He also encourages moral integrity and defends the importance of self-evaluation. Instead of exploiting this character to emphasize Socrates' unique devotion to virtue and philosophy's role in the task of becoming a better person, Plato presents a nuanced picture. Protagoras, in Gregory Vlastos' famous words from 1956, "has moral inhibitions", and while the sophist explains that his words are not just said for the sake of the argument, but "having regarded also the whole of [his] life" (Vlastos 1956), the moral depth of his teachings shines through: Protagoras, for example, both "refuses to admit that injustice is compatible with *sôphrosunê* [and to] identify a life of pleasure with the good life" (Vlastos 1956).

Although there may be many different reasons why Plato decided to characterize Protagoras in this way, it is reasonably clear that he is not out to make things simple. Even if Protagoras may charge a fee, his sophistical teachings are not to be identified with the amoral, hedonistic and relativistic school of thought it is popularly recognized as. Instead, and in contrast to Socrates' warnings, the sophist is presented as a fairly competent and reasonable person, and to make things even more complicated, Socrates himself turns out to be a rather sketchy figure. In contrast to what one might expect of a dialogue designed to defend philosophy's greatest hero in the heat of combat, Socrates is not depicted as a champion of truth and clarity. Evidenced, for example, by his repeated appeal to his forgetfulness, and his many cunning attempts to influence the form of the conversation, one has only to take a brief look at the dialogue's narrative framework to see what is at stake. Since it is Socrates who relates the detailed discussion with Hippocrates and the sophists to his unnamed friend from memory, it is not only clear that he lies throughout the conversation. His manipulative strategies are also reflected by the way he constantly undermines the authority of his own words. He surrounds his defense of short questions and answers with a set of speeches much longer than Protagoras'. He exemplifies his preferred method by a long interpretative oration. And as if this was not enough, at the end, he also manages to win the intellectual competition he denies knowing how to play.

Where, in this, is the philosopher? Where are we to draw the line?

This book is an attempt to help answer these questions. As a part of the new scholarly interest in Plato's endeavor to define and defend philosophy in a complex and rich intellectual context, and by paying close attention to the dialogue's structure and composition, this book is compiled to address the question of how philosophy is dramatized and discussed in the *Protagoras*. From a variety of different perspectives, all chapters contribute to the task of understanding how Plato fought to estab-

lish and negotiate the borders of a novel intellectual discipline and the strategies that this involved.

While many of the authors in this volume argue for a sharp distinction between sophistry and philosophy, this is contested by others. Hallvard Fossheim's "The Question of Methodology in Plato's *Protagoras*" belongs to the first camp and offers a synoptic discussion of the *Protagoras* as a whole. While this dialogue has defied a cohesive reading, it is Fossheim's aim to suggest a point of view that allows us to see what may unify it. By combining a reading of two compositional levels – the structural-argumentative and the dramatic – he argues that the *Protagoras* is mainly a discussion and an illustration of method. This, he suggests, becomes clear as the dialogue lays bare a contrast between two means of soul-shaping: while Protagoras' long speeches allow a semi-digested vision to lure itself into their listeners, the transparency of Socrates' questions and answers come with a build-in-defense against such impact. While Protagoras' speeches give their listeners the enjoyable experience of having understood, although the basic components of the story have not been unwrapped, Socrates' approach ensures that thinking, or learning, is done in small, well-defined steps that allows the listener to reflect and to comprehend each inferential move. According to Fossheim, the central issue of the *Protagoras* is thus not which theory to believe, but how to reach that belief or knowledge: which method to abide by.

With a similar intension of inquiring into the general orientation of the dialogue, Knut Ågotnes' "Socrates' Sophisticated Attack on Protagoras" sets out to analyze the nature of Protagoras' teachings. This he sees as the dialogues' main theme. In contrast to what is often thought, Ågotnes argues that Socrates is here not practicing his usual method of questions and answers in order to investigate the nature of virtue, as in many other dialogues. Socrates' conversation with Protagoras is rather designed to trap the sophist into self-exposure. In order to elucidate and display the obscurity of Protagoras' teaching – which he holds to be what Socrates sets out to uncover – Ågotnes suggest a distinction between virtue and value. Through a detailed analysis of the discussions about the distinct virtues, he shows that Protagoras makes the virtues into slaves of values, such as pleasure or honor, and thus ultimately deprives them of a true moral content.

Hayden W. Ausland's "The Treatment of Virtue in Plato's *Protagoras*" deepens the discussion of the virtues and their unity by a broad analysis of the perspectives presented by the dialogues' different interlocutors. In the *Protagoras*, Ausland argues, Plato subjects virtue to examination, starting from two main questions: (1) Can virtue be taught? and (2) Is it one thing or many? One at a time, Ausland analyzes the way virtue is discussed from the distinct perspectives of the dialogue's characters. He follows these perspectives out along several philosophical-literary pathways, both ancient and modern, and shows that even if the meaning assigned to virtue in this dialogue remains elusive, it must nevertheless be more complex than what is usually allowed in modernizing philosophical interpretations of it: If virtue cannot be taught, we nevertheless find ourselves learning about it; and if it is not clearly a unity about which we read, we find ourselves prompted to look for an understanding of it that, in due course, can emerge as such.

In line with Ågotnes, Jens Kristian Larsen's "By What is the Soul Nourished? On the Art of the Physician of Souls in Plato's *Protagoras*" also analyses the difference between Socrates and Protagoras. Larsen takes his point of departure in the dialogue's beginning. Here Socrates offers a warning to the young and ambitious Hippocrates: To entrust one's soul to a sophist, he says, is dangerous, if one – like Hippocrates – does not know what is good and bad for the soul. In the light of this warning, one dramatic feature of the dialogue may seem strange: Why, if it is dangerous, does Socrates accompany Hippocrates to meet Protagoras? In order to explain this decision, Larsen argues that Socrates does two things. He demonstrates what it means to be a physician of the soul and he shows that what Hippocrates desires is not what Protagoras offers for sale. While Hippocrates hopes to become good at speaking, and thus achieve honor as a politician, the eubolia, or good council, that Protagoras claims to teach is something else. Rather than being an art of speaking, it is the ability of self-beneficial calculation. This Socrates also manages to show Hippocrates by beating the sophist in the give and take of conversation: If Hippocrates wants to become good at speaking, he should not go with Protagoras, but stay with Socrates.

In a similar vein, Vivik Valvik Haraldsen's "Is Pleasure Any Good? Weakness of Will and the Art of Measurement in Plato's *Protagoras*" aims at exposing the sophist's moral assumptions by an analysis of Socrates' proposed hedonism. Valvik Haraldsen looks for the function of his hedonistic position in the dialogue as a whole and suggests that Socrates' argument against the weakness of will, as well as his proposal of the art of measurement as the salvation of our life, not only has the hedonistic thesis as a premise. These arguments also function as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the thesis itself. In this way, Valvik Haraldsen argues that Socrates' conversation with Protagoras aims at exposing the position of the sophist as both untenable and laughable: The art of measuring pleasure and pain is neither a virtue nor does it involve the knowledge needed to discover what the good is.

Cynthia Freeland's "The Science of Measuring Pleasure and Pain" expands the discussion of the art of measurement in arguing that while Socrates seems to propose such an art, it has a limited and qualified scope. In so doing, she addresses the famous argument in which Socrates denies the possibility of weakness of will (*akrasia*). The argument appears to presuppose hedonism, and scholars have debated whether it should be taken at face value. Socrates says that to save people from its unfortunate consequences, we need an art or a science of measurement. Freeland shows that even if the dialogue's imagery and language indicate that Socrates does propose an art that may measure or evaluate goods, including pleasures, this need not involve anything like a simplistic utilitarian hedonic calculus. The primary purpose of the science of measurement has instead a limited scope: just as we need reason to combat sensory illusions, the science of measurement can combat false appearances of pleasure. And although the *Protagoras* itself does not expand on the details of this science, Freeland suggests that they are possible to reconstruct, with the aid of related passages from the *Republic* and *Philebus*.

Further specifying how the *Protagoras* negotiates the borders and scope of philosophy, Gro Rørstadboten's "Turning Towards Philosophy: A Reading of the

Protagoras 309a1–314e2” analyses both Socrates’ and Hippocrates’ turn to philosophy. In the *Protagoras*, she suggests, the readers are allowed to witness both how Socrates turns into philosophy and how Hippocrates turns towards it. Rørstadbotten’s argument takes its point of departure in a detailed analyses of a set of distinct dramatic scenes: the opening meeting between Socrates and an anonymous friend; the bedroom scene, where Hippocrates, in the early morning, gets Socrates out of bed; and the courtyard scene, where Socrates awakes Hippocrates towards a recognition of his own ignorance. Not only the dramatic settings, but also the dramatic date of the dialogue is essential for Rørstadbotten’s interpretation: the dialogue takes place when Socrates is 28 years old and is thus reasonably taken to be philosophy’s first appearance in the distinctive form of Socratic questioning. As the *Protagoras* displays an important departure from sophistry and the teachings of Protagoras, Rørstadbotten argues that the dialogue marks a crucial moment in the development of philosophy.

With a similar ambition, Marina McCoy’s “Plato’s *Protagoras*, Writing, and the Comedy of Aporia” aims at showing where philosophy begins and ends. In a comparative analysis with Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, McCoy shows that Plato’s *Protagoras* plays off the genre of Old Comedy. In laying bare their many structural connections, she argues that Plato applies a variety of discursive strategies, commonly found in comedy, to undermine Protagoras’ reputation of being wise. In this way McCoy shows how Protagoras and his sophist friends are brought down from epic heights to comic lows. But, as McCoy also points out, as Socrates joins in the sophists’ conversation, he is also himself brought down. However, just as Old Comedy is both funny and serious in its treatment of urgent issues in contemporary society, the *Protagoras* is also both funny and serious in its treatment of urgent ethical and intellectual issues. It is in this light, McCoy suggests, that the dialogue’s many unsolved problems must be seen. As it discusses the unity of virtue, whether virtue can be taught or not or if hedonism has something to offer, the dialogue lingers where the problems are most crucial; and by revealing the tensions and positions at stake, the need for philosophical investigation is established and brought to the surface.

In a similar vein, Vigdis Songe-Møller’s “Socrates’ Irony: A Voice from Nowhere?” sets out to locate the position from where philosophy speaks. By investigating the relations between the notion of voice (*phonê*), the frequent occupation with place, and the notion of *atopos* (“no place” or “strange”), she offers an elucidating topology of the dialogue and its proposed positions. Songe-Møller takes her point of departure in the first words of the dialogue: “From where, Socrates, have you just arrived?” or “From where, Socrates, are you appearing?” According to Songe-Møller these words point directly to the dialogue’s leading question: From where does Socrates, the philosopher, arrive? From which perspective does he – and his dialogue partner, Protagoras – speak? According to Songe-Møller, the *Protagoras* both asks and answers these questions. In the form of an elegant portrait of how the famous sophist speaks with a foreign, or external, voice, Plato shows that he speaks from an illusionary topos. And this allows Socrates’ position to stand out: Socrates does not only speak with his own authentic voice. From the perspective of one that

does not know, this is an indeterminate topos within logos, and a point of view necessary for philosophical inquiry.

Through a discussion of three short remarks on the medium of philosophy, Olof Pettersson's "Dangerous Voices: On Written and Spoken Discourse in Plato's *Protagoras*" problematizes the simple distinction between philosophical and sophistic inquiry. In line with Socrates' warning of the dangers of sophistic teaching, Pettersson argues that the three discursive forms practiced and discussed in the dialogue – long speeches, discussion of poetry and short questions and answers – all share a common problem: They sanction a commoditized use of language. And as such they are all equally dangerous for the one who seeks intellectually authenticity. In showing how also short questions and answers are liable to this critique, Pettersson does not only question the common assumption that the *Protagoras* is designed to display a functional philosophical method. He also shows how the *Protagoras* promotes independent and autonomous thinking at the expense of premediated teachings.

Kristin Sampson's "Visible and Audible Movement in the *Protagoras*" also pursues by problematizing the difference between the rhetoric of sophistry and the dialectic of philosophy. By looking at a set of different forms of transitions from the visible to the audible, Sampson asks how the dialogue's dramatic settings are meant to illustrate and problematize the conditions of dialectical inquiry. With her point of departure in a close reading of 309a–310b and 314c–318e, Sampson suggests that important clues are to be found in a shift of focus: While the dialogue begins with a focus on Socrates' physical desire for the beauty of Alcibiades, this visual desire is soon replaced by an audible: the beauty of the words of Protagoras. According to Sampson, similar transitions are traceable throughout the text, and they mark a move away from the corporeal, toward the expression of a concern for the internal and the character or the soul. By making the beauty of sophistic rhetoric and the philosophers' care for the soul parts of the same movement, Sampson both identifies whence dialectical exchange emerge and complicates any simple distinction between philosophy and sophistry.

With a related purpose, Paul Woodruff's "Why Did Protagoras Use Poetry in Education?" also problematizes the difference between Socrates and Protagoras, and suggests that their affinities are greater than often assumed. Woodruff begins in the lengthy discussion on Simonides' poem. Here, important likenesses and differences between the philosopher and the sophist are on display. While Socrates, by parodying what he takes to be Protagoras' method, shows the absurdity of trying to find out what a dead poet intended by his ambiguous, and even contradictory, lines, Protagoras criticizes Simonides with the aim of straightening out what the poet says and to end up with a true expression of the poet's intention. According to Woodruff there is however also a profound affinity between the two: Even if Protagoras examines texts by dead poets and Socrates examines beliefs of those alive, they both agree that speakers have the power to improve their beliefs by seeing and fixing tensions among them. "If I am right", Woodruff concludes, "Protagoras is the grandfather of what Plato has given us as Socratic questioning, the *elenchus*".

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