

Asher Zachman

Dr. Lauren Nuckols

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### **Protagoras As The Corruptive Element:**

#### **An Analysis Of Sophistic Distractions And Socratic Solutions**

Because the works of Plato largely progress in dialogue format, the significance of his narrative structures can be easily overlooked. Although his characters spend the majority of their pages engaged in kinetically static dialectic, when they do change setting or dabble in any other form of *stage business*, there is usually a function of unconcealing within their performance. Throughout my analysis of Plato's *Protagoras* as a comedic narrative, I will demonstrate that the character of Protagoras is the personification of corruption, or the corruptive element waiting in the darkness for all epistemically vulnerable students of life.

In Plato's *Protagoras*, the eponymous sophist makes his first appearance as an ironic referent in Socrates' introductory conversation with *the companion*, whose inquisition into the recent activities of Socrates acts as the metanarrative backdrop of the story. Upon being asked if he has been in the "company of some wise man" (309c), Socrates ironically answers the companion, saying "Yes, the wisest of them all nowadays, presumably, provided you think the wisest of them all is Protagoras" (309d). This subtly ironic move by Socrates immediately sets up the most crucial dichotomy of the dialogue, namely that between rhetorically displayed appearance and dialectically revealed **reality**. Falling out of this conflicting divide are the personifications of corruption and enlightenment, or the characters of Protagoras and Socrates

respectively. More specifically, Protagoras represents the *singular* element of corruption scattered in various presentations throughout the world as it appears, relentlessly scheming to convince the epistemically vulnerable to follow in his rhetorical stead—to blindly put faith in his *wisdom*. In direct contrast, Socrates represents the *singular* path to enlightenment standing behind the world as it appears, relentlessly available to the vulnerable and the corrupted through genuine dialectic—radically emanating the only wisdom worthy of one’s trust.

Corruption and enlightenment both appear to be multifaceted and manifestly various, yet as Protagoras (316d-317c) and Socrates (561b) display, they are singularly dichotomous elements more akin to sodium<sup>1</sup> and gold than to two opposing faces. As a highly reactive element, sodium, ignorance, or corruption mixes with many kinds of souls in many different ways, such as poetry, religious experience, gymnastics, and music (316d-e). These various methods of concealing the one true “desired objective” of sophistry—which is personally advantageous corruption—leads not only to the deceptive notion that there are various forms of corruption but also to the more dangerous disguising of these purportedly separate forms of corruption as the purportedly separate forms of virtue (317a). Although the expansive prevalence of sodium disguises the singular essence of viciousness as a multi-faceted virtue, gold is a steady and noble metal that represents the unchanging presence of the Good, knowledge, or enlightenment that is available to all who search for it. The personal daimonion or inner voice that Socrates represents is always ready to intercede with corruption on our behalf, the student simply needs to knock on its door before daybreak.

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<sup>1</sup> Corruption is not compared to sodium in the text, yet I find it to be a useful contrast to gold, which is discussed as the true representation of virtue.

This dichotomy between appearance and reality—between corruption and enlightenment—is additionally pictured as the difference between darkness and light—between dreaming and waking. Hippocrates the curious, naive, and epistemically vulnerable student, enters the narrative stage wailing a stick onto Socrates’ door, awaking him from his slumber and briefly placing him into a hypnagogic state, which is the distinguishing mark of the philosopher (310a). Uttering the first spoken words of Socrates’ narration, Hippocrates shouts “Socrates, are you awake or asleep?” (310b). This question establishes the overarching theme explored throughout the entire dialogue and reaches past the confines of the narrative *back and forth* in a move that directly addresses the reader. As this quandary is wrestled with in the development of Plato’s arguments, the reader is forced to analyze their own state of wakefulness—*where do I fit into this narrative? Is all this an ignorant dream?* The significance of this abrupt awakening occurring “just before daybreak” lies in the fact that Hippocrates defies social norms to seek out Socrates’ guidance in the midst of a transitional period of his [Hippocrates’] life (310a-b). These are the moments when corruption can most easily take hold of a person, as they are searching for new models to idolize following the completion of their comparatively guarded<sup>2</sup> familial education (316b-c). These transitional periods can be just as conducive to enlightenment, so long as the student finds a truly virtuous teacher to idolize and adheres to the instruction of their daimonic inner voice.

The notion of darkness is further connected to Protagoras when he is said to prefer the indoors (310e and 311a), and then invites the party into Callias’ house of sophistry to conduct their dialogue (317c). In stark contrast to the isolatory reputation of Protagoras to lead his

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<sup>2</sup> This is by no means saying that all familial educations are guarded against corruption, only that a person is more easily swept away by soothsaying during their transition into adulthood.

interlocutors away from the sun, Socrates encourages Hippocrates to join him in “the courtyard here, walk about, and pass the time until it becomes light” (311a). As the sun represents absolute being, the antonymous proclivities of Protagoras and Socrates point to their respective relationships to the Good—Protagoras leads the young away from it and avoids it himself, while Socrates leads the young towards it and basks in it himself.

Now that I have highlighted this crucial dichotomy between dreaming and waking, I will showcase Protagoras’ and Socrates’ struggle for the state and allegiance of Hippocrates’ soul as an informative narrative structure in the establishment of my argument. Just after impetuously and excitedly awaking Socrates at the crack of epistemic dawn, Hippocrates unironically claims Protagoras to be “the only wise man” and bemoans his present state, as Protagoras “will not make him wise” (310d). Hippocrates is willing to trade all that he owns for a chance to hear Protagoras, since “everyone praises the man” and Hippocrates was “still a child when he visited the city before” (310e). Due to his carefully orchestrated education at the hands of his wealthy family, Hippocrates was shielded from corruption throughout his childhood, but as a young adult he now possesses true autonomy over whose instruction he entrusts his soul to. Acting as Hippocrates’ daimonion or guardian Spirit,<sup>3</sup> Socrates interrogates him about his ignorant intentions—warning him that he is preparing to “submit [his] own soul” to a sophist, who is not a “skilled physician of the soul” as Socrates is (313e). This title belongs exclusively to the dialectician—to the philosopher. Protagoras is instead proficient in rhetoric and doubly ignorant as to the immense epistemic harm that this practice elicits—in his own soul as well as his

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<sup>3</sup> There is a rich hermeneutic history devoted to discovering the true meaning of Socrates’ daimonion, which is most accurately translated as *spirituality* as opposed to *spirit* (Uebersax, 2021), yet I side with the Neo-Platonist conflation of the two terms *daimonion* and *daimon*, at least in the fashion that Socrates’ *something spiritual* is most sensibly a kind of entity often indicated by the word *spirit*.

student's. Socrates compares these skilled deceivers of the soul to ignorant merchants who do not know the effects of the purported *goods* that they praise and sell (313c-e), yet the sophist is much more dangerous in his eyes due to the fact that "learning, by contrast [to nutriment for the body], cannot be borne away in a separate vessel" (314b). Hippocrates is drawn to the corruptive soothsaying of Protagoras and his promises of phenomenal advantage, yet feels the need to involve Socrates in his approach towards the house of sophistry. As soon as Socrates agrees to intercede with Protagoras on Hippocrates' behalf, the battle between rhetoric and dialectic in pursuit of the young soul begins.

After a nasty run-in with Callias' doorman, Protagoras enters the scene as *Himself* marching underneath the portico with a legion of sycophantic followers and sophists in tow, acting as a kind of sentry to Callias' house of sophistry (314e-315b). Hippias describes the congregation of sophists in Callias' house as "the very shrine of wisdom of the Greek world, and in this, the greatest and most prosperous household in that very city" (337d)—a description that doubtlessly inspired an ironic grin in Socrates as he heard it. Luring the student and his daimonion into the lion's den, Protagoras asks if they would prefer to converse in private or in public (316b), and then proceeds to elucidate his role as a corruptive foreigner who takes no measures to hide his objective beyond the very act of disguising corruption as enlightenment, viciousness as virtue, or darkness as light. Protagoras' status as a foreigner is especially noteworthy given its implications in Plato's *polis psychology*. Foreign influence is not necessarily negative in this schema, as just States can engage in mutually reciprocal trade for the betterment of each party on the condition that their respective properties of unity and cohesion are not lost in the process. It is, however, to be engaged with caution, and foreign

persons, who represent individual thoughts in polis psychology—specifically thoughts from other States given their foreign demarcation—are to be severely scrutinized and turned away if their vision of the Good conflicts with the vision of the State aspiring towards justice. If left unsupervised, these thoughts can spread their corruption to the rest of the citizens, establish strongholds in the city (Callias’ house), and even secure political control to the end of destruction for the city’s state of justice.

It is not immediately clear whether it is most accurate to describe the daimonion as the philosopher magistrate or the divinely just foreign diplomat within the schema of polis psychology, since the State of the student is in conflict with the corruptive foreign influence either way. Because Socrates describes the daimonion as the influence of a distinct and divine something (*Apology*, 31d), however, the latter description carries the most explanative power. Diverging from polis psychology for now, I will analyze Protagoras’ Great Speech as Plato’s manifesto of corruption which provides us with the three pillars of erotic corruption, namely power, wealth, and reputation, that together form the pinnacle of phenomenal advantage, which is “sound-judgement in relation to private. . . and. . . civic affairs” to the end of being “extremely influential over the business of the city” (*Protagoras*, 318e-319a).

After mentioning his fatherly seniority for the second time, which is indicative of his metaphorically ancient existence as the corrupter of humankind, Protagoras begins his Great Speech with a poetically<sup>4</sup> gripping and lengthy answer to Socrates’ daimonic elenchos (320c). Constructing a reformulation of the Promethean creation myth, Protagoras positions *Himself* as

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<sup>4</sup> Protagoras holds that “a most significant part of a man’s education is proficiency in relation to poetry” (338e-339a). Although proficiency in exclusively just poetry plays a role in Socrates’ pedagogical schema, the corruptive kind of poetic proficiency that Protagoras is concerned with is diametrically opposed to the focus on geometrical dialectic in the Socratic education model.

Zeus the *father of gods and men* in possession of “wisdom in civic affairs,” who charitably distributes the skills of “respect and justice to humanity” in order to prevent the race from “perish[ing] completely” (322c). Following this myth is his *argument by convention* (322e-328d), wherein the teachability of virtue is argued for in light of its pervasiveness as a concept in the political and familial behavior of all citizens. 323b-c contains one of the most crucial lines in the speech, in which Protagoras states that “anyone who is not pretending to be just is insane, because it is necessary for everyone to share in it in some way or another if they are to live with their fellow men.” Protagoras’ entire argument is predicated on the fact that “all men. . . believe that everyone has a share in [civic excellence]” (323c). Nowhere clearer than here does Protagoras’ allegiance to the apparent become manifest, as his vision of the Good is based in the shadows of power, wealth, and reputation as they appear to the average prisoner, as opposed to how they really are beyond the veil of sense perception. With his deliverable promises to make his pupils skilled in rhetorical manipulation, Protagoras entices them by the same means he aims to further propagate—the desire for phenomenal advantage. The more power, wealth, and reputation that his pupils can accrue, the higher Protagoras *Himself* climbs on the pyramid of Babel. As a predecessor to Nietzschean thought, this is Protagoras’ ultimate goal—to become as god *Himself*. Embodying the left hand path in this *rock, paper, scissors* for Hippocrates’ soul, Protagoras has removed his chains and grown comfortable with the allegoric fire, donning a robe and symbolic staff to take control of the cave instead of venturing further towards the Good. Employing the staffs of poetry and rhetoric to keep the lesser prisoners fixated on his shadows, Protagoras represents the “first” (349a) and consequently paradigmatic symbol bearer—the person who comes to perfectly comprehend the illusory nature of

phenomena, yet chooses to rule and dominate with the illusory manipulation of *false ephemeral goods*, as opposed to traveling the narrow and painful path out of the cave towards the reality of the absolute Good. The primary difference then, between lesser sophists who disguise their craft as the various arts and the foundational sophist Protagoras, is that the self-ascribed *father of gods and men* recognizes the diminution of phenomenal advantage that comes with such pointless deception, and instead makes his conflation of viciousness and virtue visible to any who would follow in his stead. It is crucial to note at this point in the analysis that symbol bearers are necessarily ignorant of their own ignorance within the Socratic model—they don't know that there is truly a realm further beyond where success in civic affairs hardly constitutes a mere blink. With this in mind, Protagoras does not realize that he has disguised viciousness as virtue, corruption as enlightenment, or darkness as light, and this makes him even more dangerous than he would be otherwise. It is only through the illuminating power of dialectic that the daimonic Socrates unconceals the path towards the actual Good, and saves the youthful soul who would otherwise gladly be buried alive in the pyramid of a tyrant more powerful than they.

Following the demonstration of his comprehensive understanding of poetry as a potentially corruptive device (339b-347c), Socrates moves on with his discussions on the singularity of virtue (347c-351b, 358d-360e) and the proto-Utilitarian sketch of knowledge-based hedonism (351b-357e). Following these successful examples of the elenchos, Socrates claims aporic victory in the battle he never recognized as such (360e)—a genre-defining and heroic conclusion responsible for cementing the dialogue's categorization as a comedy. As a consequence of engaging in dialectic with an eye towards the truth as opposed



to rhetoric with an eye towards victory, Socrates concludes the dialogue having achieved both ends. Protagoras is left with nothing but shame and regret having sought so strictly after rhetorical victory, which speaks to the ultimately futile nature of the corruptive path. The aporic role reversal which finishes out the struggle for Hippocrates' soul transitions the persona of studenthood through the fourth wall to the soul of the reader, leaving them to ponder the significance in Socrates' changed perspective, or whether Socrates ever disbelieved the truth of virtue's teachability to begin with. At the very least, the enlightened teaching of virtue replaced the corrupted teaching of viciousness in the successful epistemic journey of Hippocrates, who much like the reader, is the true protagonist of the comedic dialogue. Although the Good has been preserved in Hippocrates' soul and hopefully the reader's as well, Protagoras and Socrates exit the stage to continue their missions toward "another occasion" and "that appointment" respectively (361e-362a), waging the war between emptiness and the Goodness that dared to fill it 'til the cosmos enters its "sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream" (*Apology*, 40d).

"Like the generations of leaves," this essay must too come to an end (*Iliad*), and since I have evidenced Protagoras as the personified, singular yet apparently multi-faceted element of corruption, it would be apposite to close with a call to action. Rhetoric and its corruptive influence are subtle yet expansive in the post-industrial age of technological advancement. Just as we could corrupt ourselves with our own writing all the way back when Plato wrote his *Phaedrus*, with the invention of technology we are verily facing a continuum of potential self-deception the magnitude of which no epoch has yet observed. Whether one's online presence and engagement appears to one to be value-additive or degenerative, the words of the ancients have never been more necessary to study and take to heart. Knowing thyself is not

yet impossible in the digital age, but our capacities for dialectical gnosis, especially in those who are being socialized in constant communion with their Narcissus' screen, have never been littered with so many focal obstacles to attend to. There are an innumerable quantity of symbol-bearers vying for control over our shadows—in the forms of digital advertisement, progressions of ideological extremism, as well as the very phenomenon of post-COVID social media interaction—and post-industrial prisoners are increasingly opting to escape their chains by severing their head, as opposed to allowing the daimonion to share with them the single enduring key. No matter how far it has been stifled behind the Protagorean puppet-show, the Spirit of Philosophy is always waiting at the gates of our polis' with its transformative power resting warmly beyond the horizon. The Socratic solution to Sophistic distraction will forever be to trust one's daimonion—one's sensus divinitatus—one's critical third eye—and guard the souls of those who cannot guard their own to the best of one's deontological ability. Philosophy is obligation. Obligation is compassion. Compassion is enlightenment. The ancestral corrupter will never claim the beautiful souls of the philosophers—and regarding the souls of our fellow life-students who have not yet peered beyond the veil of despair—we'll damn well try to follow in Socrates' stead.

With Peace,

-Asher

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