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ABSTRACT

Contemporary dispute among teachers of rhetoric between those who prefer the classical tradition of rhetoric and those who champion an epistemic view of rhetoric has antecedents among the disputes of the ancient Greek scholars. Some of the vital themes of epistemology can be traced back to Protagoras of Abdera, one of the two great leaders of the Sophistic movement and a pioneer of epistemic rhetoric. Comparatively little contemporary attention has been paid to his work, and there are only four or five sentences that can with any confidence be attributed to his authorship. Other evidence of Protagoras' views must be sought in the works of Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus, and Plato. While Parmenides rejected all assertions of not-being, and Socrates and Plato objectified being in a world of "ideal forms," Protagoras and his fellow Sophist Gorgius of Leontini took an opposing view. Gorgius identified flaws in Parmenidean logic and went on to demonstrate that nothing absolutely "is." In Plato's dialogue "Theaetetus," Protagoras calls upon Socrates to look beyond the surface of Protagoras' assertion that man is the measure of all things to the logos of the statement. This call to anti-logic was a particularly Protagorean approach to dialectic. A coherent dialectical method emerges from Protagorean epistemology: (1) that there are at least two opposed "logoi" in everything; (2) that it is the function and excellence of discourse to bring both out; and (3) that it can be demonstrated that there is no contradiction between the two. (SG)

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Protagorean Epistemology and Dialectic

I speak as one not knowing but rather conjecturing; but that there is some difference between correct opinion and knowledge, it does not seem to me that I am conjecturing this at all; rather, if I might say that I know anything at all (and there are few things of which I would say this), I would claim this as one among those things which I know.

Thus Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Meno* (98b). To the novice reader in Philosophy 101, he might seem to be protesting too much, bestowing too much emphasis and far too many words on a rather trivial and obvious point. But there are reasons why he speaks thus, reasons not obvious to the novice reader because they arise from the larger context of Greek philosophy in the fifth century B.C.—a context to which Plato and, typically, Philosophy 101 do less than justice. Within that context, the point Socrates makes here was far from obvious or trivial; it was radical and controversial. It would have been jumped on and hotly disputed. How, and by whom—that is my subject.

I present this matter to this audience because the ancient dispute seems to me to resemble, in several essentials, contemporary dispute within our profession. On the one hand we have the champions of the formalist tradition. Many of these are conscious and proud of their antecedents in "the" classical tradition of rhetoric, comprising Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. On the other hand, in opposition, we have what passes for a more modern school, the champions of an epistemic view of rhetoric. These tend to acknowledge antecedents only among post-Renaissance thinkers, prominently including Foucault but also Cassirer, Coleridge, Kant, and even Locke and Descartes. It is my contention that some of the vital themes of the epistemic school date back much further. Even the epics of Homer and Hesiod show some traces of them; but for now—pardon my *præteritio*—I will focus, as my title implies, on Protagoras of Abdera, one of the two great leaders of the Sophistic movement.

There are two reasons why Protagoras has not been much acknowledged as a pioneer of epistemic rhetoric. One is that his thought didn't

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"take" to the extent that Plato's did, with the result that (as I mentioned) Plato and Aristotle have become identified with "the" classical tradition in Greece. The other reason, related to the first as cause or effect or both, is that the surviving records of his thought are maddeningly scarce and fragmentary. This is a general problem with the pre-Socratic philosophers, and one of the reasons why Philosophy 101 seldom deals with them much. The fragments require meticulous examination in the original Greek in order for any reasonably trustworthy interpretation to emerge, and even that must be conjectural to a considerable degree. As Protagoras himself said of the gods in one fragment, "there are many impediments to such knowledge."

In the case of Protagoras, we have but four or five sentences that we can with any confidence attribute to his authorship. To these we can add some doxographic testimonies, most notably those by Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus. Beyond that, we must adopt the perilous expedient of relying on Plato himself. Protagoras plays a major role in two Platonic dialogues, the one named for him and the other *Theætetus*, in which Socrates makes believe that the dead Sophist's head emerges from Hades to dispute with him. Even in the former dialogue, where a much younger Socrates engages the living man, we must allow both for the poetic license that Plato enjoys, writing as a philosophic dramatist rather than as an historian, and for his decided opposition to Protagorean and other Sophistic thought. Still, Plato accords this one opponent unusual respect, even allowing him to win some rounds in my view; and that, together with the solid probability that a contemporary readership would have been reasonably conversant with Protagoras' teachings, may be relied upon to keep even Plato fairly honest in his portrayal.

Two of the fragments and much of the *Theætetus* are specifically concerned with epistemology—with the issue addressed by Socrates in my opening quotation, and one of the key issues between formalist and epistemic paradigms of rhetoric. At issue is the "copy theory of knowledge" (so called by Knoblauch and Brannon.) This is the idea or assumption that knowledge possesses truth by virtue of some more or less direct correspondence between on the one hand itself, the content of consciousness, and on the other hand a "real world" that is independent of, prior to, and external to consciousness. Knowledge is, in the classic formula, justified true belief. As such it differs absolutely from opinion, which, even if it should happen to correspond with that external real world, still lacks the essential justifying *logos* to "tether" and guarantee it (Plato, *Meno* 97d-98a). The opposing view holds that such a correspondence, between consciousness and something utterly other than itself, is finally not possible or even conceivable, let alone demonstrable.

Thus knowledge and even reality are constructs, fictions, actively constituted by the social and symbolic activities of human kind—notably in discourse, hence the "epistemic" theory of rhetoric. In this view, knowledge is entirely continuous with opinion.

The story of this issue properly begins with Parmenides of Elea. By dint of pure logic (admittedly crude, but then quite unprecedented), Parmenides abstracted a rigidly pure conception of absolute being. His method involved rejecting all assertions or implications of not-being. This new abstract logic, or "Way of Truth," as he termed it, led him to a vision—if such it can be called—of a motionless, changeless, featureless, eternal, and unitary plenum, a perfectly round and solid ball of pure is-ness.

The pure and utterly simple truth of this absolute being—that it *is*—was accessible only to pure mind, working logically, in lofty remove from the body and senses and experience. That being was in no way dependent, however, upon that knowing mind; it was all in all in itself, not contingent upon or posterior to anything at all. As for the variegated and ever-changing world of ordinary sensory experience, Parmenides relegated it to the status of a sham. This was the realm of what he termed the "Way of Seeming" or "Way of Opinion."

Though his hexameter treatise "On Nature, or That Which Is" does not survive whole, it would appear that Parmenides fixed an impassible gulf between the two. Knowledge, which has for its object this absolute transcendent reality, differs utterly from opinion, whose object is absolute illusion (Diels and Kranz [hereafter DK] 28.B.1-19; Kirk, Raven, and Schofield [hereafter KR] 241-262).

Socrates and Plato replaced the plenum of Parmenides with a curious apparatus of Ideal Forms, thus pluralizing the unitary object of knowledge. Similarly, Democritus switched the one big ball for lots of little ones he called atoms, and Empedocles came up with a theory involving four elements and two principles (KR 286-287, 406-433). Such moves were clearly necessary in order to give knowledge more than one single word to say, which was all that Parmenides had finally allowed—*esti*, "[it] IS!" But the fixed purpose remained, to guarantee true knowledge by providing it with external, noncontingent, and eternally stable stuff to be known. This provided a criterion for distinguishing truth from falsehood and knowledge from opinion. And this is precisely what Socrates and Plato were fighting for.

The two great leaders of the Sophistic movement, Protagoras and Gorgias of Leontini, argued on the other side, "to abolish the criterion" as Sextus perceptively put it. Gorgias, for his part, undertook to set the original argument of Parmenides on its head. To Parmenides' poem "On That Which Is" he opposed a composition of his own entitled "On That

Which Is Not." By the fiendishly simple device of inserting the word "not" at strategic points, he demonstrated that the great Parmenidean logic could just as well and consistently prove the exact opposite of what Parmenides had made it seem to prove. Thus there is nothing that absolutely *is*, and even if there were, we could not have any knowledge of it; and even if there were and we could, we could never communicate such knowledge to one another in any language. In a later piece, the "Encomium on Helen," Gorgias reveals the more positive side of his epistemology. All of those beliefs which are the furniture and guides of the mind are of the nature of opinion. Opinion both shapes and is shaped by discourse. All such shaping of opinion by discourse partakes of deception, at least when measured against the idea of an external real world. Objective truth is thus an absurd impossibility; truth is merely the internal harmony or consistency, the *kosmos*, of discourse. Truth is thus the artifact of rhetoric, as is opinion, with which it is finally one (DK 82.B.3 and 11; Guthrie 194; Walker 17).

Like Gorgias, Protagoras ventured into epistemology in direct opposition to Parmenides. The fundamental theme of all three is ontology at its most literal: the central term remains the verb "to be." All three are playing with its positive and negative both, anticipating Hamlet; and, like the Dane, they are especially concerned with absolute or intransitive rather than predicative or copulative usage, though both kinds are involved. Thus the fragment on the gods begins "Concerning the gods I have not the ability to know either that they are or that they are not." And thus the celebrated *homo mensura* fragment, where Protagoras says that "Man is the measure of all things," continues "of those which are, that they are, and of those which are not, that they are not."

In dealing with ancient Greek ontology, we must resist the strong temptation to dismiss it as J. S. Mill did, arguing that those fool Greeks could have spared their brains some pains had they only observed the simple distinction between existential and predicative usage of "to be"--the difference between being *per se*, that is existing, and being red or large or a man or whatever. As C. H. Kahn has argued, Mill's distinction is not only anachronistic but also simplistic, being based upon a confusion between syntax and semantic. "Predicative" usage is simply a matter of syntax, the syntax of the copula. Such usage serves alike to predicate an identity, an attribute, membership in a class, or other logical relations. (In fact, Greek syntax routinely omits the copula altogether.) "Existential" usage, by contrast, is a semantic category. And where Greek syntax leaves "to be" absolute or intransitive (as in "of those which are, that they are"), *exist* is not the only possible meaning, or even a likely one.

Instead, Kahn catalogues three distinct senses for the absolute or intransitive usage of *einai*, "to be." The first is the "veridical" sense,

by which "is" asserts of a proposition or statement that it *is true*, or of a fact or situation that it *is the case*.¹ Though Kahn himself distinguishes between these two notions, he admits that such dualism is itself also anachronistic, and that this was only one single meaning. He also construes some predicative usages as "veridical," where the copula, not being omitted, is emphatic: "Socrates *is* musical." Sometimes in this usage the predicate can even be implicit: the child's disputatious "'Tis too!" makes a good analogy.

The second sense he finds is the "durative," where "is" asserts of a person that he or she *is alive*, as in the epic "gods who are forever," or Hamlet's "to be or not to be." In more rigorous philosophic contexts, notably Parmenides, the durative "is" says of a thing that it endures stably and forever, and never was or will be unreal, or less real, or other than it is.

The remaining sense that he finds is the "locative (or locative-existential)," by which "is" means *occupies a place* or *is somewhere* or *is present*. This sense does include what we would today call existence, but with something more added or rather not yet abstracted: a definite sense of place.

Kahn does not claim that these meanings were consciously or explicitly distinguished by ancient ontologists. But all of them are in play in the *Theætetus*, in a discussion of the man-measure doctrine as advanced in Protagoras' book *Truth*; and Socrates explicitly mentions that there are at least three of them.

Predicative applications include discussions of what is or is not cold, large, white, hot, sweet, good, just, and expedient. The discussion also turns to question the locative-existential being of these qualities, bringing up such problems as whether color is in objects or in our perceptions (153e-154a). Again, Socrates quotes Protagoras as saying "What seems to each man, this also is, to him to whom it seems" (170a). This could be either locative-existential *is present*, or veridical *is true* or *is the case*.

When Socrates proposes to substitute the "secret doctrine" of Protagoras for the known one (thus signalling a specific departure from textual warrant), he is substituting "becoming" for the "being" of the text. Since these two terms are strongly associated with the opposing views of Heraclitus and Parmenides respectively—and Socrates mentions Parmenides as the sole likely dissenter to his emendation—he is unmistakably alluding to Parmenides' decidedly durative usage of "to be." Finally, he explains this emendation by saying that nothing really is, but rather only becomes, "one, or something, or of any kind." Here are three distinct possibilities that *einai* in the text apparently implies for him.¹

Confused yet? It gets worse. The complex ambiguity of the verb "to be" has abundant company in this famous sentence. The number of eminently defensible readings approaches and may even exceed the value of two to the power of the word count. "Man" (*anthrōpos*) may refer to the individual, or collectively to all human kind, or to any given city or human society. "Measure" has almost immeasurable possibilities. "Of all things" (*pantōn chrēmātōn*) may or may not limit what is measured to the predicated usefulness of useful things. Even the conjunctive "that" is not exempt; some favor "how," and it is the peculiarity of the original word *hōs* to adapt itself to whatever we make of the rest. Scholars never seem to tire of devising new readings. To pick just one egregious example, Untersteiner translates "Man is the master of all experiences, in regard to the 'phenomenality' of what is real and the 'non-phenomenality' of what is not real" (Untersteiner 42; Holland 214). Guthrie requires pages of small print just to sketch some of the possibilities in a kind of score-card (188-190). It has got to the point where a scholar will begin an article by announcing his various picks, not to defend them but just to get past the dense thicket of controversy and on to something else.

So what was Protagoras really saying in this sentence? Dare I rush in where classicists fear to tread? I do. For I cannot believe that such an intricate tissue of ambiguity arose by accident. If we were to set it up as a multiple-choice question, we would have to follow Dr. Seuss *On Beyond Zebra*, and the correct answer would be the last: "all of the above." To be sure, the overall gist of the thing remains fairly consistent throughout the numerous possibilities: reality is what we make of it. The ambiguities then serve to illustrate and demonstrate this point, since the meaning of the sentence is itself whatever we make of it.

In the *Theætetus*, the imaginatively resurrected Protagoras admonishes Socrates to look beyond the verbal surface (*rhēma*) to the *logos* of the man-measure statement (166d-e). At first glance, this admonition appears to discriminate content from form (an archtypical formalist maneuver) and to amount to something like "Come on, Socrates, you know what I really mean, so quit quibbling about the terms in which I clothe this basic idea." Such a reading implies that beneath the apparent ambiguities lies a simpler and more definite thesis. But in fact, the argument that Protagoras then proceeds to advance does not simplify, but rather complicates, the man-measure doctrine.²

A much younger Socrates had been admonished by Parmenides to take up the study of logic. Here in the *Theætetus*, Protagoras' admonition to look past the *rhēma* to the *logos* becomes in effect a recommendation that he bestow his attention on antilogic. Antilogic was a peculiarly

Sophistic and specifically Protagorean approach to dialectic. It involved the opposition of one *logos* to another, on any given case, matter, or question. Here the principle of antilogic applies to the cannily ambiguous fragment itself. When Protagoras tells Socrates to look to the *logos* of the sentence, he is directing his attention to something that constantly bifurcates.

Several testimonies outside of Plato tend to confirm this analysis, and allow us to reconstruct what antilogic meant for Protagoras. First, Diogenes Laertius calls him the first to say "that there were two *logoi* about every matter, opposed to each other" (DK 80.A.1). This is the fundamental principle of antilogic, which survives in the popular doctrine that "there are two sides to every question."³

Again, Aristotle records that he was the first to profess "making the weaker *logos* stronger" (*Rhetoric*, 1402a, =fr. 80.A.21 and 80.B.6b in DK). This has often, but quite wrongly, been rendered as "making the worse appear the better cause."⁴ Similarly hostile explanations of this profession survive unrebutted from antiquity. But the expression admits of a much more generous construction. We start with the two opposed *logoi* that are available for any matter or question. One is likely to be more powerful, more persuasive, more obvious than the other. The other then is liable to be ignored, or dismissed out of hand, so that only one is left. That would go against the whole principle of antilogic. Accordingly the weaker must be made stronger—not necessarily stronger than the other, but stronger than it was before.

Today we would call that activity revision, and hardly a dastardly deed. The overall strategy is also still with us. We can see it wherever a discourse asserts or concedes something relatively obvious, then turns around with a "but" and proceeds to take special pains on behalf of a less obvious point, running somehow counter to the first. But the relation between the two points is not flat contradiction. The discourse must assert both without being necessarily absurd. Thus the ancient devotees of antilogic, including Protagoras, affected another maxim that seems, but only seems, to contradict the whole idea of antilogic: *ouk estin antilegein*, there is no contradiction.⁵

Putting these three principles together, we can glimpse a coherent dialectical method. Protagoras held that two opposed *logoi* (at least) could be found in anything; and that it was the function and excellence of discourse to bring them both out, propping up the weaker if need be, and finally to demonstrate that really there was no contradiction between them (cf. De Romilly 182-186). It sounds almost Hegelian, with thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. It was not Hegel's dialectic, of course. But it was the prototype for Socrates' (DK 80.A.1). Like the Socratic dialectic, it uses discourse to attain knowledge. According to Plato, this

is at once the most difficult and the most important part of philosophy, involving such discourse as is "able to seek out the truth attentively by every means for the sake of knowing" (*Republic* 498a and 499c).

Where Protagoras differed from Socrates in his approach to dialectic was in rejecting objectivist epistemology, rejecting any "copy" theory of knowledge. When we examine the man-measure fragment in a way that accords with Protagorean principles, a multitude of meanings emerges, but this above all. *Anthrōpos*, as thinking and knowing subject, has a central and decisive rôle in the constitution and definition of knowledge. The statement avoids mere solipsism by proposing a sociology of knowledge along with a kind of metaphysical idealism. But gone is any such thing as an objective basis or correlative, apart from *anthrōpos*, by which we can measure and verify statements of what is and what is not. The knowledge attained through our dialectic is thus our own creation.

Notes

¹ 152d. "One" recalls Parmenides; "something" (*ti*) recalls the classic Socratic question "what (*ti*) is *x*?" which he habitually urges as preceding any other question about *x*; and "of any kind" (or "having any particular nature, qualities, or characteristics": *hupoionoun*) may refer to those questions which must yield that precedence. But the trio as such is no familiar commonplace of Greek ontology.

² Specifically, Socrates has argued that since the doctrine makes all opinions equally valid, it makes nonsense of any claim by Protagoras to be worthy of his hire as a teacher. Protagoras now argues in response that while all opinions are equally true, they are not all equally useful. The sick person's perception of wine as bitter is quite as true as the healthy person's perception of it as pleasant, but still it is better to be healthy than sick, and the physician who restores the sick to health is worthy of hire. So too when a city collectively holds certain things to be just and lawful, it is necessarily correct, but it can err in deciding what is expedient. Either way man is the measure; but while human opinions vindicate themselves as true, only consequences (to human beings) can vindicate them as useful, and one person or state can be wiser and do better than another in foreseeing and controlling those consequences. Where Socrates has gone wrong is in his habitual assumption that the words in a philosophic statement must have specific, defined, and unique meanings—that they must be transparent garments for whatever they objectively mean. Confronted with ambiguity here, he seeks to confine and neutralize it on the surface, as a prerequisite for coming to grips with and refuting a single underlying idea. Protagoras, however, resists Socrates' tactic of picking on just one sense for each term in the statement, by insisting on double meanings, not just on the surface but through and through. Thus "man" applies to the individual and to the state both, while what is measured is on the one hand truth, on the other (and in a different sense) usefulness.

³ The resemblance is admittedly rough, but, I think, real. For a more detailed discussion of antilogic, see Kerferd's chapter on "Dialectic, Antilogic and Eristic," in *The Sophistic Movement*, pp. 59-67.

⁴ The root of this accusatory interpretation seems to be Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 112ff., -fr. 80.C.2 in DK. Aristophanes targets Socrates, but clearly has him confused with Protagoras on several points. The confusion is apparent not only in this connection, but also where "Socrates" is represented as charging money, and (most specifically) as making a hobby-

horse of grammatical gender. Socrates decries this confusion in Plato's *Apology*, 19c, 23d.

⁵ DK 80.A.1, and 80.A.19—Plato, *Euthydemus*, 286b-c; see also H. D. Rankin, "Ouk Estin Antilegein," in Kerferd, ed., *The Sophists and their Legacy*, pp. 25-37, where a radically different view of the maxim is pursued, as quasi-Eleatic, and having more to do with ontology than rhetoric.

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NB: Quotations from Greek sources have been translated by the author.

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